



Name: Heidi Kazemifar Askari

Program: Doctoral Program in Organizational Leadership

Dissertation Title: Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Stress, Stressors and Coping Strategies

Committee Chair: Jennifer Locraft Cuddapah, Ed.D.

Program Director: Nisha Manikoth, Ed.D.

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I certify that I am the author of the work contained in this dissertation and that it represents my original research and conclusions. I pledge that apart from my committee, faculty, and other authorized support personnel and resources, I have received no assistance in developing the research, or text contained in this document, nor has anyone written or provided any element of this work to me.

Signed:

---

Heidi Kazemifar Askari

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Date

HOOD COLLEGE



Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Stress, Stressors, and Coping Strategies.

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the faculty of the graduate School of Hood College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Organizational Leadership

by

Heidi Kazemifar Askari

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## DOCTORAL COMMITTEE

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Heidi Kazemifar Askari find that this dissertation fulfills the requirements and meets the standards of the Hood College Doctoral Program in Organizational Leadership and recommend that it be approved.

---

Jennifer L. Cuddapah, Ed.D., Chair Date

---

Beverly Hardcastle Stanford, Ph.D., Committee Member Date

---

Nisha Manikoth, Ed.D., Committee Member Date

---

Shannon Shoemaker, Ph.D., Committee Member Date

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# Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Stress, Stressors, and Coping Strategies

Heidi Kazemifar Askari, D.O.L.

Committee Chair: Jennifer Locraft Cuddapah, Ed.D.

## ABSTRACT

Executive doctoral programs in organizational leadership are increasing. These programs are organized in such a way that students can take classes on the weekends or evenings without having to leave their jobs. With the negative impact of stress on doctoral students' well-being, academic performance, and attrition, little is known about executive doctoral students' experiences of stress in these programs. This phenomenological case study of stress, informed by 15 doctoral students and three faculty, explored doctoral students' perceptions and experiences of stress. Analysis of the participants' interviews revealed that students expected stress to be part of the doctoral program and that the stress they experienced was manageable. Findings from this study showed time, time management, balance of work, life, and study, the dissertation process, and heavy workload as sources of stress similar to other doctoral programs. Two stressors for executive doctoral students, not mentioned in other studies, were Saturday classes and the required statistics course. Challenges related to work and family and the pandemic were students' stressors outside of the program. Executive doctoral students stress impacted their well-being more than the quality/quantity of their research and their decision to leave academia. Coping strategies reported were planning and prioritizing, being mindful, exercising, and taking a break; however, participants stated that there was no universal solution for coping with stress.

By gaining an in-depth understanding of the students' perceptions of stress, as well as students' and faculties' perceptions of sources of stress and effective coping strategies, this study informs future doctoral students' understanding of stress and the program stressors so they would know what to expect when they enter programs. The study can help universities unlock new methods for managing stress or assist universities in improving existing strategies. Effective strategies have the potential to impact students' well-being, academic performance, and attrition rates. Future research can focus on comparative studies to see how the results compare to the findings in other doctoral programs. Given the different roles and responsibilities of executive doctoral students, universities, program directors and faculty should learn more about students' stress so they can better assist students in mitigating it.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

A doctoral degree is the highest degree one can earn. Starting a doctoral journey is a giant step and opens the door to a new world of opportunities, but the road to earning the degree can be circuitous and varied for different people. Some might experience stress as they strive to fulfill the expectations of the degree. The topic of stress became more relevant when the COVID-19 pandemic started. During the pandemic, everyone experienced stress in unexpected ways. There were dramatic shifts in how people worked, socialized, and studied. With the transition from face-to-face to online classes and the heavy workload, the stress was even more for some doctoral students. Their interpersonal and intrapersonal lives were impacted. Stress can adversely affect doctoral students' performance and well-being (Cornwall et al., 2019).

A combination of different factors, such as work overload, time constraints, and working on a dissertation independently and in isolation, creates a stressful climate that can affect doctoral students' well-being (Ali & Kohun, 2006). Different roles and responsibilities make juggling family, work, and academic responsibilities more complicated and can create stress. (Cornwall et al., 2019; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Literature shows that one of the factors contributing to doctoral students' stress is finding the right balance between work, life, and study (Castello et al., 2017; Martinez et al., 2013). Literature also reveals that the key to doctoral students' success is finding the balance between their personal, professional, and academic lives. Some students might feel pressured to get everything done perfectly and finish the program on time, which can add to their stress level.

To identify stress and what stresses students, Cornwall et al. (2019) claimed one needs to define it first. Different fields use different definitions for this word. Some people use terms such as anxiety, exhaustion, tension, overwhelmed, or worry to describe stress (Global Organization

for Stress, 2021). Hans Selye (1936), known as the father of stress, noted that stress has a different meaning for people under different circumstances; therefore, finding a definition that everyone can agree on might be difficult. Selye (1936) described stress as how an individual's body responds to demand or change. He said stress could also be described as a perception of threat resulting in discomfort and difficulty in adjusting. Kenneth et al. (1997) defined stress as the psychological and physiological reactions of a person to an event or situation that he/ she perceives as demanding and exceeds his/her resources to cope with stress (as cited in Baqutayan, 2015). Seaward (2021) defined stress as the inability of an individual to deal with a perceived threat to his/her mental, physical, and emotional well-being. In his book, *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process*, Richard Lazarus (1966) defined stress as a relationship between the person and the environment appraised as personally significant and as taxing or exceeding resources for coping. This definition is the foundation of the stress and coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that was used as the theoretical framework for this research. For this study, the suitable definition of stress was the definition provided by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). They defined stress as a relationship between an individual and the environment and the inability of that individual to adequately cope with a perceived demand or threat due to exceeding his/her resources and endangering his/her well-being.

A certain amount of stress is normal and can be positive (Kekkonen & Oinas-Kukkonen, 2021) and can help an individual be productive and get work done. Experiencing negative emotions, such as stress, during the doctoral journey is not uncommon (Cornwall et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019). However, when stress reaches a point that doctoral students cannot tolerate and becomes overwhelming, it can negatively impact their well-being and academic achievement (Cornwall et al., 2019). Stress and all the negative feelings might result in internal conflict

leading to students questioning whether they made the right decision entering the program (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). Stress can lead to withdrawal and attrition, affecting completion rates (Byers et al., 2014; Cornwall et al., 2019; Devos et al., 2017; Sverdlik & Hall, 2020; Virtanen et al., 2017).

Recent research has reported high-stress levels among doctoral students. In a survey conducted by Barry et al. (2019), these researchers found that doctoral students experienced more stress than those who were the same age within the general population. Due to stress, only 40-50% of doctoral students are likely to complete their degree successfully, particularly in disciplines such as humanities and social science (Byers et al., 2014; Wollast et al., 2018).

Most studies on stress have focused on college and undergraduate students, and not many have focused on the graduate or professional student population (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). With the negative impact that stress has on doctoral students, research has overlooked topics that are relevant to their well-being or social experiences (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Students' experiences with stress depend on personal factors as well as their environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pyhältö et al., 2012). Besides exploring the negative impacts of stress on well-being, academic performance, and attrition rates, understanding how graduate students cope with stress and what universities can do to assist them to manage stress is critical (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007) for the following reasons:

1. Doctoral students who graduate and complete their degrees are vital to their institutions and countries (Lange et al., 2011). Doctoral students' successful completion can impact their university's reputation and financial standing. Students' success can be a key indicator of a university's success rate and how that institution performs (Gill & Burnard, 2008). As future researchers, these students play a crucial

role in a country's development, either by the roles they will play in society or by adding to and increasing the knowledge of others with their research (Confait, 2018).

2. Doctoral students' attrition from the programs means loss of time, effort, skill, and finances for the students and the school they attend (Maher et al., 2020).

Therefore, to avoid the negative impacts of stress, students require effective coping skills and social and institutional support to help them manage stress (Cornwall et al., 2019; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013). One of the supporting strategies that some doctoral programs provide is giving doctoral students the unique experience of studying in a cohort environment. Students work together towards an academic goal and provide each other with emotional and social support (Bagaka's et al., 2015). Conditions in a cohort environment help increase students' self-efficacy and resilience to stress (Castro et al., 2011; Ozbay et al., 2007). Being in a cohort can provide students not just with social support but with encouragement and the reassurance they need to succeed. A cohort can help create a meaningful relationship with peers on both professional and personal levels. Cohorts in doctoral programs can help enhance collaboration, responsibility, and timely completion (Bista & Cox, 2014). They can also impact the students' social and psychological development. Other than the psychological and social benefits of a cohort, it can help increase students' learning motivation, overcome challenges, reduce stress, and promote success in completing the doctoral program (Bagaka's et al., 2015). De lang et al. (2011) also state that working with peers in a group can help ease students' anxiety and provide social and intellectual support and knowledge production. However, for some emerging leaders, the journey can still be accompanied with stress. With doctoral students being at risk of developing mental and physical health problems leading to attrition and poor academic performance, many researchers concur that doctoral students' well-being requires more attention

(El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Pain, 2017; Pappa et al., 2020; Sverdlik et al., 2018). With a lack of substantial literature on executive doctoral programs, Freeman and Forthun (2017) claimed that more case studies related to executive doctoral programs are needed to understand more about students in these programs.

### **Problem Statement**

Some schools have started offering executive programs in higher education to accommodate working adults who would like to pursue a doctoral degree and move beyond their current roles without leaving their careers (Freeman & Forthun, 2017). These programs offer classes on weekends or evenings while students stay in their current positions. Executive degrees in higher education are a relatively new phenomenon in the United States. There is little to no information about these programs' benefits and/or limitations (Freeman & Forthun, 2017) or how students experience stress and what these programs' stressors are. Executive doctoral students move between their personal, academic, and business world. These students juggle various responsibilities and have different roles which require time, energy, and effort. As working adults in leadership positions, being in a program that is condensed, taking back-to-back classes every semester for 3 to 4 years, working on the weekdays, attending classes on the weekends or evenings, using weekends to catch up with the assignments, along with many other responsibilities, can be stressful for many students and can impact successful degree completion (Martinez et al., 2013). Over the past 50 years, approximately 50% of doctoral students in North American institutions dropped out of their programs (Litalien & Guay, 2015; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018). The attrition rate in online doctoral programs is even more alarming—about 50-70% (Rigler et al., 2017). Understanding more about doctoral students' stress and stressors is essential since doctoral students are vital assets to the universities

and their countries and being under stress can affect students adversely in various ways. As contributors to the knowledge base (Wang et al., 2019), doctoral students must prepare original research on an academic, professional, and advanced level. Yet, stress can impact their academic performance (Cornwall et al., 2019) and the overall quality and quantity of their research (Levecque et al., 2017). Doctoral students' mental and physical well-being can be impacted as well (Cornwall et al., 2019). Doctoral students' well-being is important; it shapes and is shaped by the experiences students have while they are in their programs (Pyhälto et al., 2012; Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). And finally, being under stress can impact duration and completion time, or it might lead to students' decision to withdraw from their program of study (Cornwall et al., 2019; Jairam & Kahl, 2012) which is a loss of talent, skills, money, effort, and resources for both the students and the schools they attend. Confait (2018) postulated that doctoral students' decision to quit means a loss of human capital and knowledge for the universities and the countries. And all this loss is on account of the contributions doctoral students can make to the pool of research and the roles they can have later in society. Doctoral students' experiences in their programs are complex, and there is still much more to explore and understand about their experiences.

A look at the literature related to doctoral students shows a lack of substantial research on doctoral students' experiences with stress while in the program (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Research also shows that higher education executive doctoral programs are under-researched (Freeman & Forthun, 2017). According to these researchers, up until 2017 their study was the only one related to executive doctoral programs with the purpose of providing awareness of common delivery methods. Since then, there has hardly been any more research on doctoral students' experiences in executive doctoral programs. Therefore, more research on students' experiences with stress and how they cope with stress is needed.

## **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework means using a theory to explain an event and helps guide research endeavors (Tamene, 2016). Maxwell (2008) compares a theory to a spotlight that helps light the path and draw attention to particular events or phenomena being studied. The theoretical framework that was applied to this study was the transactional model of stress and coping, which was originally developed over several years by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This theory has evolved from research in the 1960s and 1970s and has been revised and updated over time. This theory is applicable to this study due to its focus on the person-environment relationship, cognitive appraisal in managing stress, and the coping process. The student-environment setting is central to this theory. The interaction between the individual and the environment and how they manage a stressful situation can help conceptualize the complexity of stress and how students deal with it. Due to the subjective experience of an individual with stress, reactions to stress are different since the impact of stress is determined by how people perceive it (Cornwall et al., 2019).

Applying this framework to the study makes sense considering that many doctoral students face various challenges and might experience stress in their learning environment. Doctoral students' stress can be due to work, life, or school. To avoid the negative impacts of stress, coping strategies are essential (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In response to a stressor, doctoral students will evaluate the severity of the stressor. If it is deemed challenging or harmful, a secondary appraisal will take place to examine what coping strategy can be helpful in managing that stress. Central to this model are stress, appraisal, and coping. When the scholarly community does not support students' needs, it might create friction between the doctoral students and the faculty or program directors. This friction can lead to students' stress, which can

impact their well-being (Pyhälto et al., 2012). Students' interactions with peers and the faculty play a central role in promoting well-being or being stressed and their decision related to quitting their programs of study (Mechanic, 1962; Pyhälto et al., 2012). Research shows that cognitive factors, such as self-efficacy, mindfulness, resilience, and social support, that are present in the doctoral student's learning environment can decrease stress and promote well-being (Lazarus, 2003, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1985, Weinstein et al, 2009) by providing the individual to process the situation with more ability and willingness (Weinstein, 2009).

Different factors can impact doctoral students' experience with stress. Some researchers believe that the support doctoral students receive from faculty and the interactions they have with peers can impact doctoral students' stress level, their well-being, and their decisions to stay or leave academia (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Mechanic, 1962; Pyhälto, 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Research on the impact of mindfulness, resiliency, and self-efficacy on university and doctoral students' stress and coping reveals that mindfulness, mindfulness practices, resilience and self-efficacy are each linked to lower levels of stress and better coping strategies (Bandura, 1997; Barry et al., 2019; Freire et al., 2019; Lazarus, 2003; McCann & Davis, 2018); McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015). Literature related to resilience shows that stressed individuals plan different activities to manage their stress. Castro et al. (2011) reported that resilient students have a high level of overall achievement in school. Mindfulness, resiliency, and self-efficacy will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

## **COGNITIVE APPRAISAL**

How doctoral students cope with stress depends on their cognitive appraisal of the stressful situation and how they interpret a situation or event in relation to their personal well-being. Evaluating the situation to see what is happening to them and how it might endanger their

well-being can impact stress. Doctoral students' personal and cognitive factors such as self-efficacy, resiliency, goals, values, demands, commitment, constructive thoughts, and beliefs, along with environmental factors such as novelty, ambiguity, social networks, previous life experiences, and predictability of a situation and resources, are part of the appraisal (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1985). Individuals' coping and social resources impact the evaluation of stressors (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Mindful individuals are less likely to appraise their daily challenges as being stressful (Weinstein et al., 2009). Appraisal plays a key role in how intensely an individual reacts to stressors, and through this cognitive process meanings are attributed to events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Perception plays a significant role in the transactional model of stress and coping since different people may have different reactions to stress and attribute different meanings to it, even in the same environmental context. There are two processes involved in any cognitive appraisal, which are known as primary and secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

### **Primary Appraisal**

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note that primary appraisal involves judgment of the situation to know if there is any harm or threat with respect to the values and goals one holds. They also reveal that in the primary appraisal, meanings are attributed to different situations and events, which can be positive, irrelevant, or stressful. A stressful appraisal can be harmful, threatening, or challenging. Threat refers to potential harm.

### **Secondary Appraisal**

Secondary appraisal refers to coping options and resources. When the situation is known as harmful, threatening, or challenging, secondary appraisal takes place and involves a cognitive process to see what can be done. This is when the individual identifies and evaluates coping

strategies (Folkman et al., 1986). In the context of doctoral programs, coping strategies are the actions that doctoral students take in a particular situation to reduce their stress.

Primary and secondary appraisals take place virtually simultaneously and help individuals understand the meaning and significance of an event and its relationship to well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For a doctoral student, stress is the relationship between the student and the environment he/she is in and anything that poses a threat to accessing resources that are helpful in dealing with that threat or challenge (Silinda, 2019).

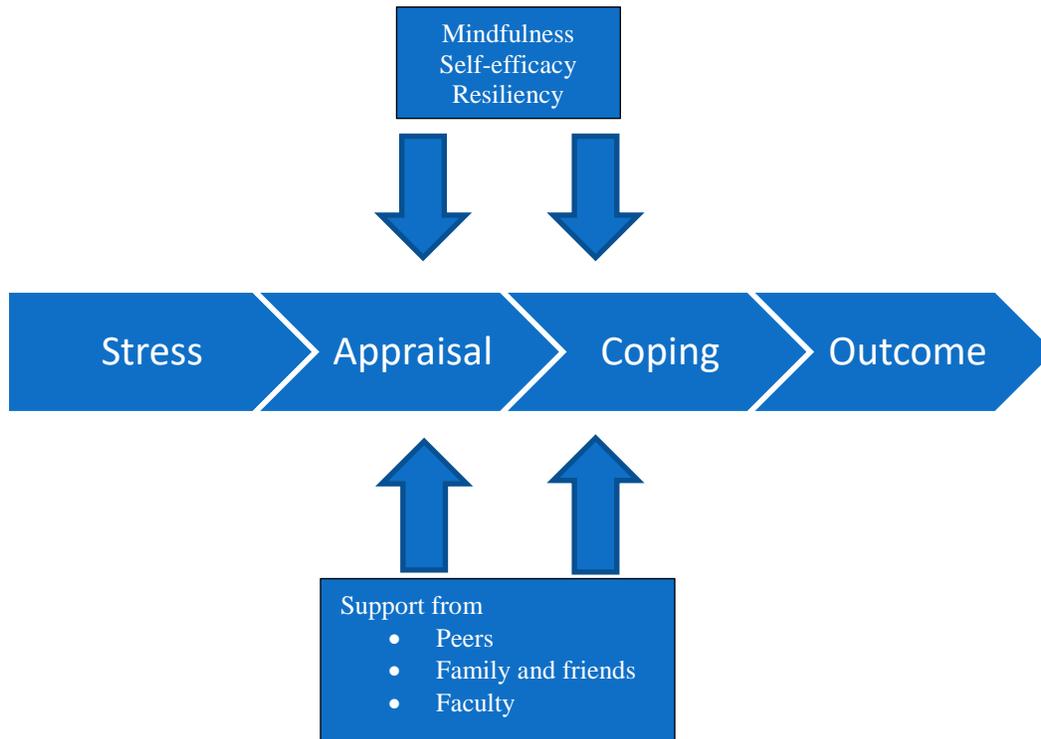
### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is a system of concepts that help inform the research (Maxwell, 2013). This framework helps explain what researchers intend to study by using graphics or narratives of the key concepts and factors that help support the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, it serves as a guide for both the researcher and the readers to know more about what is going on with the phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2013).

Figure1 represents a conceptual model based on the transactional model of stress and coping presented by Lazarus and Folkman. This graphic shows a framework that focuses on appraisal and assessments to evaluate a stressful situation. The transaction depends on the impact of the stressor that is mediated by the assessment of the situation and the available coping resources. Cognitive factors such as self-efficacy, resilience, mindfulness, and an individuals' social network can promote well-being and decrease stress by their impact on appraisal, and coping (Lazarus, 2003; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1985; McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015; Weinstein et al., 2009).

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework- Internal and External Factors Impacting Stress*



### **Statement of Purpose**

Given that stress impacts doctoral students' mental and physical well-being, academic performance and can lead to students' decisions to withdraw from their programs of study, the purpose of this qualitative case study (Merriam, 1988) was multi-fold. First, it was to explore to understand the perceptions and experiences of the stress of doctoral students who studied in an executive cohort program. Second, it was to investigate and perceive students' perceptions of sources of stress and the type of coping strategies they discerned to be useful in managing stress.

And third, it was designed to understand faculty members' perspectives on stressors and effective coping strategies for their doctoral students.

### **Research Questions**

Given the three purposes of this research, the study used a phenomenological case study design to understand doctoral students' perceptions of stress, faculty, and students' perceptions of stressors and to explore helpful coping strategies. The following research questions helped guide the study:

RQ1: How do executive doctoral students describe their experiences of stress and specific stressors?

RQ2: How do executive doctoral students cope with their perceived stress?

RQ3: How do doctoral faculty describe students' stressors, and how do they perceive students' coping?

RQ4: What do doctoral students and faculty suggest as effective coping strategies to improve the experiences for doctoral students?

### **Overview of Research Methodology**

A phenomenological case study allowed exploration of the multidimensional problem of stress in the context of an executive doctoral program. It helped me understand the nature of the participants' experiences. When exploring a central phenomenon, qualitative studies, according to Creswell (2009), will maximize the richness of the data. For this study, I used a phenomenological case study research design that helped to better understand a certain situation or event that was problematic (Merriam, 1988). Using a qualitative case study involved providing an in-depth inquiry into the case (Yin, 2012). Merriam (1998) views a case as a bounded system, "a unit, person or program around which there are boundaries" (p. 27). Using a

case study allowed me to focus on the boundaries of this qualitative study: stress, stressors, and coping strategies related to a group of students who were in an executive cohort-based program for 3 years.

Yin (2012) stated that every case study begins with the determination to obtain a thorough understanding of a single, specific case. For this study, the program explored was an executive doctoral program in organizational leadership in a Mid-Atlantic region. To gather students' thoughts on stress and stressors, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 doctoral students in an executive doctoral program in organizational leadership. I also interviewed three faculty members to understand more about sources of stress and the strategies faculty found effective to help students manage stress. Collecting data from participants with different views and perspectives provided significant findings since it allowed an in-depth investigation of the research questions. This case study helped reveal aspects of stress phenomenon only understood from an in-depth exploration with a relatively small group of participants (Patton, 1987).

I utilized phenomenology within the qualitative research study to understand the thoughts and perceptions of the participants. Adding a phenomenological lens to this case study incorporated students' perceptions of this lived experience of stress as realities in understanding their words. The qualitative phenomenological approach helped uncover meanings related to stress.

### **Context**

The research setting for this study was an executive doctoral program in organizational leadership at a liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic area. The doctoral program at this college serves working adults who are already in leadership positions, so they earn their doctoral degrees

without giving up their full-time position or having to move to distant locations. Students who enter this program are from different professional backgrounds such as healthcare, business, education, military, government, and other professional settings.

Students are required to hold a master's degree, write two leadership essays, submit a written research project sample, and participate in a panel interview as part of the application process. Classes are typically held all day on Saturdays, and the course work is for 3 years. Weekend classes allow students to remain in their work positions, which often require long administrative hours. Each year, beginning in the late summer/fall semester, a new group begins, and the peers become a cohort of 15-20 leaders who take coursework and study alongside one another. The program is designed to prepare emerging scholars to be transformational leaders in their organizations.

One of the requirements of a doctoral program is the dissertation. As leaders and working professionals, executive doctoral students are asked to write their dissertation on topics that will help improve problems of practice. The dissertation is the final requirement for completing their degree. The dissertation is composed of five chapters which are the introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and the discussion of the findings. Writing the dissertation involves doctoral students choosing a topic they are passionate about and that can make contributions to knowledge. The topic should have enough data and literature available (Useem, 1997).

The college has graduated its first three cohorts, and, at the time of this study, there were three cohorts in the doctoral program. Given the condensed time frame, the intensive weekend coursework schedule, the substantial amount of time and effort needed to attend to work, school, and life issues, can be demanding and can lead to stress.

### **Researcher Positionality**

At the time this study was conducted, I was a doctoral student in the executive doctoral program of the school under study; therefore, researcher bias was a concern. Since I had some of the same experiences related to stress, the stressors of the program, and coping, I acknowledged my biases and assumptions. My positionality as a doctoral student in the executive program I was studying meant that I had to remain vigilant as a scholar-practitioner. I needed to bracket my assumptions, thoughts, and cultural background and consider when these were influencing research design, data collection, or analytic procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I could not ensure impartiality; the goal of qualitative research is not this (Patton, 1999). Rather, bracketing would allow me to set aside my personal thoughts and beliefs and question and challenge myself and the study as much as possible. In this process, I thought more about and strived to be more insightful in data collection and analysis. I will discuss biases further in Chapter 3; however, I endeavored to keep an open mind when I conducted this study that sought to understand doctoral students' stress-related experiences, ideas, and perspectives.

### **Significance of the Study**

Despite the significant contribution doctoral students make to the pursuit and construction of knowledge, research on their experiences relevant to the stresses they encounter while in doctoral programs has been overlooked (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Stress remains a problem for many doctoral students, and its potential consequences might be serious for some of them. Stress can lead to attrition (Cornwall et al., 2019; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018) and can impact the quality/quantity of students' research output (Levecque et al., 2017) and their well-being.

Colleges and universities can impact students' success path and provide them with a supportive community to help them persist in the program (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) and manage their stress. Students' critical judgement and how they can contribute to knowledge is what some universities focus on (Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004). The fact that students are under a lot of stress is neglected. Stress can have negative effects on students' well-being (Kekkonen & Oinas-Kukkonen, 2021; Keye & Pidgeon, 2013), their health (Martinez et al., 2013), and the quality and quantity of their research (Levecque et al., 2017). While the average time to complete a degree for a Ph.D. candidate in North America is about 5 to 8 years (Hunter & Devine, 2016), the students in the executive doctoral program in this case study had almost half that time to complete their program and earn their degree. The time frame, the heavy workload, different responsibilities and roles, and the pressure to finish on time might be why some students got stressed. Doctoral students' inability to manage or cope with stress is one of the reasons for leaving their program of study (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Hence, understanding students' perceptions and experiences with stress and exploring the strategies that help reduce stress and support the educational goals of the doctoral students can inform support services for them (Pifer & Baker, 2016).

Findings from this study can be significant in different ways. Learning about stress, stressors, and coping strategies might be helpful for doctoral students who are already in leadership positions to help them thrive more with less stress in their personal, professional, and academic lives. The findings from this study can inspire other higher educational institutions to initiate practices for minimizing students stress and helping them find ways to cope with stress. Using the findings from this study, universities can start improving the existing strategies they have to help students reduce stress more effectively. Obtaining in-depth knowledge of doctoral

students' thoughts on stress and their reflections on strategies that are helpful in reducing their stress can lead to understanding more about students' experiences with stress. Faculty and students' thoughts on stressors and coping strategies might ultimately help improve doctoral students' experiences of stress. Less stress can improve their well-being and their academic performance and might help decrease attrition rates. This study can provide prospective students with a positive experience to understand what to expect when they enter an executive doctoral program. It can also add to the limited research on executive doctoral students. And finally, the study can inform the doctoral program under study of its strengths and areas to strengthen regarding assisting students with their stress. Learning more about doctoral students' stress can provide students with a positive experience while they are on their doctoral journey (Cornwall et al., 2019).

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

Maxwell (2013) believes that in qualitative research, the researcher deals with an abundance of ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and meanings. While dealing with all this and conducting the research, the researcher might face issues that are not in his/her control and can adversely impact the result of the study. It is important that the researcher be aware of these issues, which are known as limitations (Price & Murnan, 2004). These researchers believe that limitations should be acknowledged by researchers as they can be a threat to the external validity of a study.

Several delimitations and limitations apply to this study. This study was a phenomenological case study, and the participants were selected purposefully. Only participants selected from the executive doctoral program, which is the leadership program from a college located in the Northeastern region of the United States, were considered for this study. Therefore, findings might not be reflective of doctoral students and programs in other regions

and disciplines. It is important to replicate the study with other groups of doctoral students in different places and programs (Pappa et al., 2020). Because the participants were students and members of the college, one other possible limitation might have been the participants' unwillingness and reluctance to express their thoughts and perceptions freely and accurately. Unintentional biases of the interviewer during the data analysis and interpretation might have been another limitation of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There might be biases that I was not aware of in the research. More information related to the delimitations and limitations of the study will be provided in Chapter 5.

### **Definition of Terms**

***Attrition:*** Attrition, according to Merriam-Webster, is a reduction in number. But in the context of higher education, Google defines it as the number of individuals who leave a program of study before it is finished.

***Doctoral Cohort:*** In educational doctoral programs, according to Bista and Cox (2014), the doctoral cohort is a group of about 10-25 students who are in the same program of study who work together and share their experiences and are working together towards a mutual goal. A cohort has a supportive structure.

***Coping:*** Lazarus and Folkman (1987) defined coping as any response to a situation or event that is deemed threatening and allows the person to adapt to that situation. Coping will change behavior or cognition and will help manage the situation successfully.

***Coping Strategy:*** Any strategy used by the doctoral students or the faculty to help alleviate a challenge or a problem.

***Doctoral Students:*** Any individual who is enrolled in a doctoral program and works toward getting his/her degree (Google Dictionary).

**Executive Doctoral Programs:** Doctoral programs that are designed for working adults.

**In-Person Doctoral Program:** Any form of instructional and learning programs that occurs in person (i.e., face-to-face) and in real time between teachers and doctoral students (Google Dictionary).

**Organizational Leadership Programs:** Programs that provide business and organization team leaders with the skills, knowledge, and tools needed to move up in their leadership positions in their organizations and guide them to become more effective leaders.

**Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is the process of an individual responding to situations consciously and being aware of each moment to know where he/she is and what is happening, without over-reacting or being overwhelmed (Łoś et al., 2021).

**Resiliency:** Resiliency is an individual's ability to recover from difficult or tough situations and successfully adapt to the environment. It is the ability to thrive despite facing any adversity (McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015).

**Self-efficacy:** Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), is an individual's ability to be in control of any event that might affect his/her life. It can provide a foundation for well-being.

**Stress:** Stress has also been defined by scientists in different fields with each providing a definition particular to their discipline. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined stress as “a relationship between a person and the environment that is appraised by the individual as exceeding his/her resources and endangering his/ her well-being.”

**Well-being:** Well-being or health, as it is common to say, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) (1948), is “a state of complete physical, mental or social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

**Working Adult:** In the context of higher education, Kazis et al. (2007) defined working adults as “Students who tend to be older, work more (full-time), attend school less, have more family responsibilities compared to their peers who are mainly students” (p. 9).

### **Summary**

Doctoral students are contributors of knowledge to the research world. With the research they conduct, they help identify and solve problems. As doctoral students, the workload, deadlines, and the different roles they take as students, parents, employees, and researchers (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Schmidt & Umans, 2014) may become stressful. Stress can negatively impact doctoral students by affecting the quantity and quality of their work, their engagement and motivation in their studies, the time they spend on research, and their well-being. Stress might force some students to drop out of their program. For all the reasons mentioned, it is essential to ensure that doctoral students are not negatively impacted and that they are able to continue with the same commitment and motivation they had as they first entered the program.

Chapter 1 provided the key aspects related to the problem statement and was followed by the purpose, the significance of the research, the methodology, and the theoretical framework of the study. Table 1 provides a summary of Chapter 1. An overview of the theoretical framework and the methodology were also provided, which will be explained in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

**Table 1***Chapter 1 Summary*

Area	Summary
Problem	Stress can negatively impact doctoral students' well-being, academic performance (quality and quantity of research). It can also lead to attrition which is a loss of time, skills, and finances for students and their universities (Maher et al., 2020). There is lack of substantial studies on doctoral students' experiences with stress (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Studies on executive doctoral students in executive doctoral programs are limited (Freeman & Forthun, 2017). There are no studies no executive doctoral students' experiences related to stress.
Purpose of the Study	1)To explore and understand the thoughts and experiences of stress of doctoral students in an executive cohort program, 2) to examine and learn students' thoughts about sources of stress and the type of coping strategies they believe are useful in managing stress, and 3) to understand faculty member's perspectives about their doctoral student's stressors and the effective coping strategies for their doctoral students.
Significance	<p>Despite the significant contribution doctoral students make to the pursuit and construction of knowledge, research on their experiences relevant to the stresses they encounter while in doctoral programs has been overlooked (Sverdlik et al., 2018). With doctoral programs in Organizational Leadership expanding and leadership programs preparing leaders for challenging leadership roles and positions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this study can</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• help doctoral students who are already in leadership positions thrive more in their personal, professional, and academic life</li> <li>• inspire other higher educational institutions to improve or initiate practices for coping with stress or improve the existing ones to help students reduce stress more effectively.</li> <li>• help understand more about stress, stressors and coping strategy in this doctoral program which can help improve doctoral students' wellbeing, their academic performance, and help decrease attrition rates.</li> <li>• help students understand what to expect when they enter an executive doctoral program.</li> <li>• inform the doctoral program of its strengths and areas to strengthen regarding assisting students with their stress.</li> <li>• enable an enjoyable time completing the doctoral program (Cornwall et al., 2019).</li> </ul>
Methodology	A Phenomenological case study, using a phenomenological approach, semi- structured interviews with 15 doctoral students and 3 faculty members.
Theoretical Framework	Doctoral students' learning environment can make the difference between promoting success or resulting in stress and withdrawal (Pyhältö et al., 2012). With the importance of context of a doctoral student's learning environment on stress levels and his/her well-being (Hunter & Devine, 2016) and the constant interaction between the doctoral students and their learning environment (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), the most satisfactory model that can help explain the relationship between the doctoral students and their learning environment is the transactional model of stress, with the student, his/her peers and the faculty as part of the learning environment.

Area	Summary
Contribution to practice	<p>With doctoral students being known as the backbone of the research world Wang et al, 2019). and the impact that stress has on doctoral students, understanding doctoral students stress and their coping strategies can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• impact student’s mental, physical, and emotional well-being.</li> <li>• impact the quality and quantity of doctoral students’ work (academic performance).</li> <li>• impact attrition rates in Doctoral programs.</li> <li>• help students thrive in their personal, professional, and academic life.</li> <li>• help the college in this study to understand its limitations and strengths in dealing with students’ stress, and learn about the existing stressors, and find new, and effective coping strategies.</li> <li>• initiate practices to help doctoral students cope with stress.</li> </ul>

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters: Chapter 1, Introduction; Chapter 2, Literature Review; Chapter 3, Research Methodology; Chapter 4, Findings and Analysis; and Chapter 5, Discussion of Findings. In the first chapter, I presented an introduction to why stress could be a problem for executive doctoral students in organizational leadership programs resulting in negative impacts on students’ mental, physical, and emotional health and leading to attrition when stress becomes unmanageable. The study’s purpose, significance, methodology, and limitations were discussed in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I will present a literature review related to stress, stressors, attrition, and coping strategies. The theoretical framework for the study is included in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 includes the methodology, which comprises the research design, data collection, participants, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical issues, and the role of the researcher. In Chapter 4, I will provide the findings of this phenomenological case study. Chapter 5 will include a discussion of findings related to stress, stressors, and coping, followed by the delimitations/limitations of the study. Chapter 5 will conclude with the implications for research and practice and the conclusion of this study.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Doctoral studies are filled with different experiences, and stress is one of the most common experiences (Pappa et al., 2020). Various personal and environmental factors play a role in creating stress for doctoral students. In most studies, students' opinions about their doctoral experiences and their personal journey do not go beyond technical and academic descriptions of their programs (John & Denicolo, 2013). Some studies only talk about students' challenges without any suggestions on how to deal with them. Given the fact that doctoral students who will be future leaders are under intense pressure with their time and energy (McGee et al., 2019) and the fact that different factors contribute to their stress, it is vital to understand how their universities respond to students' experience of stress (Cornwall et al., 2019). With the important goal of leadership programs in preparing students for effective leadership positions in professional settings (Dunlap, 2006), there are hardly any studies related to executive doctoral students' experiences with stress in organizational leadership programs or the role that faculty, program directors, and peers can play in shaping those experiences. To this end, a qualitative case study of doctoral students' perceptions of stress, as well as faculty and students' perceptions of stressors and coping strategies would help gain more insight on this topic.

In this study related to stress, the first purpose was an exploration to understand the doctoral students' thoughts and perceptions of stress. Investigating to understand students' perspectives about sources of stress and the type of coping strategies they believed were useful in managing stress, as well as learning about faculty members' perspectives about their students' stressors and coping efforts, were the other two purposes of the study. The literature review in this chapter was organized into the following categories: literature review search, doctoral programs, stress, common stressors, doctoral students and stress, social support and cohort,

attrition, coping, the theoretical framework, the transactional model of stress and coping, and stress in different stages of the doctoral program followed by the conclusion. The relationship between these concepts will be discussed later in this document. The importance of mindfulness, self-efficacy, and resilience as cognitive coping strategies for stress will be explored as well. Not all stress is harmful; sometimes, it helps one stay focused and get work done (Selye, 1956). For this study, I focused on negative stress (distress) because, in most studies related to doctoral students' experiences, negative impacts of stress are pointed out more than the positive impacts of it.

### **Literature Search**

For this study, I searched many peer-reviewed articles, journals, and books. I also researched documents through the college online library. Google Scholar, EBSCO host, ProQuest dissertation database, JSTOR, Eric, and PsycINFO were the databases I used for this research. Not all studies and their findings related to doctoral students or stress were applicable to this study. Empirical studies related to stress, peer and faculty support, and coping strategies, with a specific focus on doctoral students, their well-being, academic performance, persistence, and attrition as well as studies and articles that were peer-reviewed in scientific journals were used for this study. Literature related to “graduate students” was considered only if it pertained to doctoral students or discussed stress and coping strategies. It is worth mentioning that some of these studies were on doctoral students in Ph.D. programs or medical students but were relevant, as they talked about everyday stressors in doctoral student programs. Some of these studies were conducted in different countries, in various geographical regions, and on other doctoral programs but were in English and still applicable to the research. Two of the studies were on undergraduate students, but due to similar methodology and/or the framework and being related

to stress and coping, they were used for this study. As much as possible, the focus was on recent studies. Still, depending on relevancy and the significance of the article and its relation to the research and the topic under discussion, the dates of some sources are more than two or three decades old, particularly literature related to stress and coping. The key search terms in this study were: *stress, stressors, doctoral/Ph.D. students, graduate students, attrition, coping and coping strategies, and well-being*. Other terms related to these concepts searched were *cohort, resilience, self-efficacy, and mindfulness*.

### **Doctoral Programs**

Postgraduate education or doctoral education is known as the third cycle of higher education. According to Noble (1944), historically, the first doctoral degree was awarded in Paris in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Yale University granted the first Ph.D. degree in the United States. Harvard University was the first to present a professional doctorate in education (EdD) in 1921.

Professional doctoral programs grew, and from 1993 to 2003 the growth became even more visible (Maxwell, 2003). The number of students entering these programs were on a rise. Many students who are business professionals see them as an alternative to Ph.D. to obtain the doctoral qualification (Fink, 2006). Although most doctoral programs' selection process involves selecting bright and intelligent students, many of these students leave their programs of study in their first-year due to struggling in developing a balance between work and school requirements, which create stress (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Despite significant transformations in doctoral and Ph.D. programs and studies over the years, there are still some issues that impact doctoral students' educational experience. One of the common challenges that many doctoral students face, which requires prompt attention, is their experience with stress (Pappa et al., 2020)

The executive educational model began in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Besides a degree in education and business, a variety of other fields offer the executive graduate degree. An executive doctoral program is designed for working adults. These types of programs allow those pursuing a doctoral degree to stay in their current positions while, at the same time, furthering their career prospects (Freeman & Forthun, 2017). Non- traditional doctoral programs take about 3 to 3 1/2 years to complete and consist of three stages: the transition, candidacy, and completion phases.

In more traditional Ph.D. programs, students often receive stipends for serving as teaching and research assistants as well as tuition waivers which help to defray the cost of education. But most students in executive doctoral programs work full-time and are either self-funded or receive tuition reimbursement through their employer. Gill (2014) noted that most executive doctoral programs, particularly DBA, the Doctor of Business Administration, have the following characteristics:

- They enroll mainly part-time students.
- Stipends are rare, and students cover their own expenses (using personal savings or loans).
- They are (sometimes) offered in a blended form (face-to-face and online).
- Students proceed and progress together in a cohort.
- Students can finish the program in about 3-4 years.

### **Stress**

The word stress found its way into the English language in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and the definition has been evolving. Most studies related to stress in university students are mainly on college or undergraduate students (Oswalt & Riddock, 2017). However, the available research

conducted on doctoral students in the United States and in different countries report high levels of stress in doctoral students. Looking at studies on doctoral students in different programs, from past to present, clearly elucidates that students' experience with stress is not a new concept in the literature. Still, a closer look shows there are hardly any studies related to executive doctoral students' experiences, particularly with stress.

Whether the studies have been on students' well-being (Mechanic, 1962; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Sverdlik et al., 2020), performance (McGee et al., 2019), or attrition (Devos et al., 2017; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Sverdlik et al., 2018), stress has been named as a contributing factor. Drawing from recent literature on students' attrition from doctoral programs reveals that the prevalence of stress (anxiety or exhaustion or both) in academia has been a problem for decades and plays a significant role in a doctoral student's decision to leave the program (Cornwall et al., 2019; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Maher et al., 2020; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Sverdlik & Hall, 2020; Wang et al., 2019). Some studies also reveal the impact of stress on well-being (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Sverdlik & Hall, 2020).

Pyhältö and colleagues (2012) conducted a survey on 669 Finnish doctoral students from the Faculty of Arts, Behavioral Science, and Medicine in Finland which focused on students' perceptions of well-being and the problems they faced during their doctoral studies in different phases of the program. The results of the study revealed higher levels of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion in doctoral students who decided to leave the program. Academic pressures, too many responsibilities, financial issues, work-life-study balance, and all the different roles that a doctoral student has all create stress (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Stress management and finding

ways to cope with stress are needed to promote students' well-being and minimize attrition (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Waight & Giordana, 2018; Wisker & Robinson, 2018).

Some stress is expected during the doctoral process (Sverdlik et al., 2020). Martinez et al. (2013) and Ali and Kohun (2006) noted that due to the demanding nature of the doctoral program and various challenges, many students experience stress at all levels. Nevertheless, literature shows different views on the importance of understanding stress and stressors in different phases of doctoral programs. Pifer and Baker (2016) believed in the importance of students and faculty understanding and becoming aware of each phase of a doctoral program's challenges. Sverdlik and Hall (2020) also noted the necessity of more research into exploring the challenges of students during each phase of the program to understand what the challenges in each phase are and how institutions can provide support during each phase. However, Cornwall et al. (2019) reinforced the importance of knowing more about stress and stressors in the early stages of the program to prevent attrition. In two separate studies done by Russell-Pinsen and Harris (2019) and Bazrafkan et al. (2016), the researchers stated that the dissertation writing process is the phase students are mainly stressed more than any other phase of the program. But the study and findings from Russell-Pinsen and Harris are mainly on non-native English speakers (L2), and the study conducted by Bazrafkan, and his fellow researchers was on doctoral students in the medical field outside of the United States. Therefore, not having a homogenous group of students makes it difficult to point out which phase of the program is most stressful.

Sverdlik and Hall (2020) are one of the few researchers who provide the reader with more insight in their article related to doctoral students' stressors and the impact of different phases of the doctoral program on students' stress and well-being. In their exploratory study on 3,004 doctoral students from 54 different countries recruited internationally through social

media, they investigated how progress through the program stages influenced well-being. They also examined how course work, comprehensive exams, and the dissertation phase impacted stress and self-efficacy. For their study, they used online surveys that measured well-being and motivation. As for stress, a 10-item strain scale, along with a 5-item satisfaction life scale, were used to measure students' stress. Their study showed students were highly stressed during the comprehensive exams and the dissertation writing phase. The results of their study showed the stress students experienced was due to working independently and a lack of structure and support. As students make progress and advance in the program, tasks become more demanding and more unstructured, and they start working more independently, which can be stressful for students and can impact their well-being. Doctoral students were found to be least stressed doing the coursework which, according to Sverdlik and Hall (2020), might be due to the tasks being more structured and organized. There is also the element of having more interaction between the students and the instructors which points to the importance of social support.

### **Common Sources of Stress**

Completing a doctoral program is quite challenging for students, both mentally and emotionally. This population experiences the negative effects of stress while on the journey (Corner et al., 2017; Maher et al., 2020). Some familiar sources of stress among doctoral students have been mentioned in the literature related to doctoral students (Acker & Hacques, 2015; Corner et al., 2015; Kekkonen & Kukkonen, 2021; Maher et al., 2020; Russell-Pinsen & Harris, 2019; Waight & Giordano, 2018). Based on findings in the literature, stressors can be different, ranging from heavy coursework, comprehensive exam, the dissertation process (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020), problems with faculty, peers, advisors, tight deadlines (Schmidt & Umans, 2014), a limited amount of time and lack of sleep (Martinez et al., 2013; El- Ghoroury et al., 2012),

feeling lonely and isolated with no social support (Ali & Kohun, 2006), to environmental or internal perceptions of an individual which leads to exhaustion and anxiety (Shahsavarani et al., 2015). As for students' social environment that creates stress, the topic that has been the focus of many studies has been the student-advisor relationship/student-supervisor for Ph.D. students (Corner et al., 2017; Devos et al., 2017; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Maher et al., 2020), and the committee selection. Advisors can be a source of support or stress for students. Virtanen et al. (2017) conducted a study on 40 doctoral students in biological and environmental sciences in Finland. The interview included questions on students' experiences during their doctoral journey and their experiences with their supervisors. Besides the results revealing stress during the doctoral journey, their analysis demonstrated that advisor/supervisor relations can be connected to feelings of stress and lead to disengagement from the program. Issues such as lack of emotional support from advisors or being too critical on the feedback provided to students could be a few reasons to be stressed.

The implementation of technology in higher education has revolutionized the way we teach and learn. Space and time are no longer a problem, but there are some problems involved with using technology. At the time of the study, as COVID-19 shifted classes to an on-line platform, new stressors emerged for students. In a study by Kekkonen and Oinas-Kukkonen (2021), they introduced a unique stressor that had not been mentioned in previous studies. This stressor is known as technostress, which is the inability to cope with technology in a healthy way. Once the pandemic started, classes shifted from face-to-face to online, and students, including doctoral students, had to trade in-person classes for computer screens, and many became more involved with technology. Checking emails constantly, doing interviews online, learning how to use different applications or particular programs, and software such as

Blackboard (course management software), Zotero (research management program), Endnote, RefWorks for organizing references, SPSS for statistics, data analysis programs such as NVivo, Microsoft Office 365, new platforms such as Zoom for meetings and class, and many other computer-related tasks can be stressful for many doctoral students.

The perception of stress depends on how one defines it (Cornwall et al., 2019). It also depends on personal factors such as one's values, beliefs, and goals in life, as well as environmental factors such as how novel, vague, or challenging an event or situation is (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This might be why students' experience with stress is different throughout different programs. Schmidt and Hansson (2018) noted that internal factors (such as motivation, goal, and values) and external factors (such as program structure and design) can provoke stress in doctoral students. After analyzing 163 empirical studies on doctoral education, Sverdlik et al. (2018) concluded that doctoral students' experiences and academic success are related to seven factors which include internal factors such as motivation and passion, academic identity, and writing skills as well as external factors, which are financial problems, supervision, a student's personal/social life, and departmental structures.

Students' experience with stress in different stages of the doctoral program can vary depending on the stage of the program they are at. Pifer and Baker (2016) and Sverdlik and Hall (2020) pointed out the importance of finding out the challenges students face through each phase and stage of the doctoral program. This might help understand the support structures students need during each phase and stage of the program. Pifer and Baker also believed that faculty could employ strategies that can impact students' experiences in positive ways. Sverdlik and Hall believed more qualitative studies using different data collection methods on different doctoral program phases are needed to understand more about students' well-being and stress.

Cornwall et al. (2019) conducted research on first-year doctoral students to find out stressors at the early stages of the doctoral program. In the research conducted by Cornwall et al. (2019), the researchers simply identified stressors in the first-year doctoral students at the University of Otago in New Zealand. Their study (analysis from qualitative data on a questionnaire) showed that most of the stressors are similar to those found in other related studies 20 years before, although they did report a few unique stressors related to financial concerns and anticipation of stress regarding the student-supervisor relationship. These researchers believe knowing about stressors early in the program is beneficial for students as it will minimize the negative effects of stress on well-being. Byers et al. (2014) conducted a separate study on second-year doctoral students and found that for many doctoral students, the main source of stress is finding a balance between academic life and all the other obligations students have.

Knowing about stressors in general, according to McGee et al. (2019) who studied Black doctoral students in engineering, might also be helpful in preventing students from the imposter syndrome, which is felt early in the program and is known as one of the factors creating stress and causing attrition. Imposter syndrome in doctoral students is believing that academic success is not because of their abilities but just mere luck (Sverdlik et al., 2020). It is crucial for students to believe they are competent to finish the program, and their success depends on them and their self-efficacy (Sverdlik et al., 2020).

### **Doctoral Students and Stress**

Research related to stress in students and their experiences with stress in doctoral programs has been a topic of interest in some peer-reviewed articles. These articles either directly discuss stress or mention stress as one of the negative experiences related to doctoral

programs (Castello et al., 2017; Corner et al., 2017; Martinez et al., 2013; McGee et al., 2019; Sverdlik et al., 2020). Various definitions of stress have been provided in recent and seminal literature with no uniform definition. Cornwall et al. (2019) notes that to properly identify stress, it has to be defined. With various definitions of the word and the fact that stress depends on personal, institutional, and environmental factors, this study will focus on the definition provided by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). These two researchers stated that stress is the transaction between a person and the environment. It is an imbalance between internal and external demands and depends on the individuals' available resources which can be cognitive, social, or behavioral. This means that stress resides not just in an individual or the environment alone but is a combination of the two and depends on the interaction between them (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1991). Stress in doctoral students is high (Pyhälto et al., 2012). It is about 2.4 times higher than the general population who are highly educated (Levecque et al., 2017), and this rate should be a concern for universities. Therefore, stress needs attention before it negatively impacts students. With the interruptions that COVID-19 created for many doctoral students, particularly those in the last phase of their program, this number might have been even higher due to interruptions in their dissertation. Having interviews and data collection methods postponed or held online could have affected timely completion and the quantity or quality of their research, leading to stress.

Sources of stress in different doctoral programs across different disciplines have been studied. Across all these different situations, stress remains an issue. In some of these studies, more attention has been placed on stress and well-being in doctoral students in medicine and law than on those in fields such as social sciences and humanities (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Wollast et al., 2018; Yousaf et al., 2016). With differences in the structure,

design, and delivery mode of doctoral programs in different countries, a comparison is even more complex.

### **Social Support/Cohort and Stress**

Bista and Cox (2014) defined cohort as a group of students, between 15-25, who enter the program together, proceed and take courses together, and finish approximately at the same time. The cohort model was developed in the United States due to the high rate of students' attrition from doctoral programs (Bagaka's et al., 2015). The cohort can be a supportive group where students can benefit from variations of students' perspectives and help each other learn how to deal with stress and understand how "to embrace leadership roles and responsibilities in their professional communities of practice" (Dunlap, 2006, p. 20). Students can learn from peers to see what they do and how they juggle the demands of research, academic work, and family so they become less vulnerable to stress. A cohort can help students socialize and get support from other students who might share the same line of thought or be introduced to a multitude of other different perspectives (Bagaka's et al., 2015).

Literature shows that one of the effective strategies in helping students succeed is providing social support for students. This can be achieved by matching students with other peers who have gone through the same process and have had similar experiences (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). With the importance of socialization, doctoral students can benefit from being in a cohort. They can interact, share their experiences, and work towards a mutual commitment together. The cohort model can help students persist and complete their program and can be effective in increasing socialization (Bista & Cox, 2013; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014). The structure of the cohort and the planned courses might be effective in decreasing students' stress and anxiety levels (Bagaka's et al., 2015). Bagaka's et al. found that

being in a cohort helps students understand their own experiences and interactions with peers who might have been in a similar stressful situation and can provide them with a source of social support.

Byers and colleagues (2014) researched 10 purposefully selected groups of doctoral students enrolled in a qualitative research methodology course at a public university in southeastern Texas and showed the importance of a cohort and social support. These students were selected from a cohort of doctoral students to help understand the stressors that impact doctoral students and the coping strategies they used to manage the stress. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used. To obtain a unique perspective from the participants, the questions were co-constructed by students and co-instructors. The goal was to understand and share the common experiences of doctoral students regardless of their program of study or other demographic factors. The results of the study showed that most doctoral students did rely on their friends and peers in the cohort for emotional and social support. While some relied on sources of support outside the cohort such as a family member or friend. The result of this study was based on the experiences of doctoral students who were at the beginning of their second year which makes it difficult to know whether it would be applicable to other phases of a doctoral program, particularly during the completion phase where students work independently and manage their time as they are writing their dissertation.

### **Literature on Attrition**

Doctoral students' stress has an outsized influence on attrition. The literature on doctoral students and attrition indicates that students' decision to leave the program is not a new topic for researchers in different countries. In most of these studies, which have applied either a quantitative/qualitative or mixed-method approach to research on doctoral students, various

components related to students' attrition from their programs, at different stages, have been identified and pointed out (Cornwall et al., 2019; Devos et al., 2017; Kennedy et al., 2016; Santicola, 2013; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Virtanen et al., 2017; Wisker & Robinson, 2018; Wollast et al., 2018). According to many of the researchers, one of the factors that leads to doctoral students' decision to withdraw is stress. Stress can negatively impact completion rates (John & Denicolo, 2013). According to literature, students' decisions that lead to attrition can be related to the students' internal factors such as motivation, goals, beliefs, or the institutional (external) factors such as program characteristics, or a combination of both (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Different programs, different academic disciplines, and various fields of study have different attrition rates. The literature shows that humanities and social sciences have higher attrition rates (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Wollast, 2018). One of the factors related to doctoral students' attrition from their programs, according to Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) and Jairam and Kahl (2012), is stress. Research on doctoral students' attrition points to stress, along with feelings of social isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Cornwall et al., 2019; Wisker & Robinson, 2018) in different stages of the doctoral program, particularly during the dissertation process (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Bazrafkan et al., 2016; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), as factors that drive nearly half of the doctoral students to drop out and not finish the program successfully (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

Interactions between doctoral students, the faculty, and their peers, and the support they receive from faculty, peers, or their university, impact students' well-being and their decision to complete or withdraw from their doctoral program (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Pyhalto et al.,

2012). Students' reactions to stress, according to Mechanic (1962), also depend on students' relationships with peers, faculty, and the learning environment (social support/emotional coping). Doctoral students' learning environments can make the difference between promoting success or resulting in stress and withdrawal (Pyhältö et al., 2012).

With the importance of the context of doctoral students' learning environment on stress levels and his/her well-being (Hunter & Devine, 2016) and the constant interaction between the doctoral students and their learning environment (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), the most satisfactory model that can help explain the relationship between the doctoral students and their environment is the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). With various components of this model being present in the students' learning environment and being discussed in the study, such as cognitive factors (self-efficacy, mindfulness, and resilience), social factors (social support), and behavioral factors (coping strategies), the transactional model of stress and coping sounded as a useful framework to understand doctoral students' perceptions regarding stress, stressors, and coping strategy. As active agents, doctoral students can change the impact of a stressful event by using their available resources.

Students' learning environments can affect stress levels and vary according to academic disciplines (Gardner, 2010). The transactional model of stress and coping defines stress as "a relationship between a person and the environment that is appraised by the person "as harming, threatening, or challenging when it exceeds his/her resources and endangers his/her wellbeing" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). The model was later updated by Folkman in 2008, where meaning-focused coping was added to the problem- and emotion-coping (Folkman, 2008). To understand the transaction model of stress, the first step is to understand the process that links the individual to the environment (Dewe et al., 2010). In the transaction model, stress is considered a

process. In this process, there is constant interaction between the individual and the environment. The impact of a stressor can be modified depending on an individual's coping strategy (Silinda, 2019).

Based on the early studies conducted by Selye (1936), Lazarus and Cohen (1977) used the term stressors in place of stress stimuli. These two researchers identified three types of stressors: a) major stressors that affect many people, such as natural disasters, pandemics; b) major stressors that affect a few people, such as divorce; and c) daily hassles. For many students, daily hassles or, in some cases stressors such as divorce, separation, or losing a family member, can impact their stress level.

According to the transactional model of stress and coping, an individual constantly evaluates and assesses stress in their environment. Once the individual appraises something as threatening, challenging, or a hindrance, the coping process will start. The stressed individual will either manage the emotions they feel or will address the stressor by trying to balance the demand with the perceived resources. The outcome of the coping process can be favorable, which will result in positive emotions, unfavorable or unresolved, which leads the individual to find further coping strategies to deal with the stressors (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### **Transactional Model of Stress in Literature**

In reviewing the literature on doctoral students' experiences, John and Denicolo (2013) found that most studies of doctoral students were not based on any recognizable theoretical framework. In a systematic literature review of 17 articles by Schmidt and Hansson (2018), most published after 2010, they found that different theoretical models have been used to describe doctoral students' experiences with stress and their well-being. Theories such as the leader-

advisor theory show the important role an advisor has in students' success, the self-determination lens is another theory that explores students' motivation to persist with their program, or the broaden-and-build theory of emotions to explain doctoral students' well-being.

As for the transactional model of stress and coping, different fields and disciplines have used this model as their theoretical model to show how a variety of stressors such as mental or physical health challenges (Sinha & Watson, 2007) and lack or loss of social support (Vaux, 1988) can impact people differently because of the coping strategies they apply. Only a handful of studies in the literature have applied the transaction model framework to understand stress and the importance of coping in doctoral students. So far, in the literature review search, Yousaf and his fellow researchers (2016) were the only ones using this theoretical model on doctoral students, but this was in business at a Malaysian university. Denovan and Macaskill (2013) used the transactional model of stress and coping, but their study was on undergraduate university students. And even though Silinda (2019) uses this model to explain the stress students experienced during the process of writing the dissertation, the study is on students pursuing a master's degree in Africa. The other study known to use this model was conducted by Dwyer and Cummings (2001) with university students in Canada.

### **Coping and Stress in the Transactional Model of Stress Framework**

Stress has been a problem for students in the past, and it is still a problem now. Dwyer and Cummings (2001), who studied stress and coping in university students two decades ago, concluded,

Treatment of stress in university students needs to focus on helping them establish coping strategies that are effective. Universities need to develop educational strategies and health

promotion initiatives to help students learn more about their sources of stress and how to deal with them before they become unmanageable. (p. 218).

With stress still being a problem among many students, coping strategies are needed to minimize the negative impacts of stress. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) noted that being able to cope with stress is correlated with success in the doctoral program, which shows the importance of coping strategies in this population. An important factor related to doctoral students' well-being is their coping ability (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Various coping mechanisms may be adopted by doctoral students to manage stress.

Problem-focused coping is one of the efforts that an individual takes to improve a situation by creating change and trying to alter the source of stress. This type of coping is what most doctoral students apply when they are stressed (Martinez et al., 2013; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Peer relationships and social support are also discussed in the literature as effective ways to minimize stress in this population (Cornwall et al., 2019; Schmidt & Umans, 2014). Emotion-focused coping is centered around the individual's feelings by trying to use them to reduce negative responses when one is exposed to stress.

Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) note that doctoral students' coping and their persistence to stay in their programs are related to two important factors, which are student-related and institutional factors. Some personality traits such as constructive thinking and self-efficacy can impact our coping style in managing stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping depends on several factors such as duration, intensity, and the number of stressors as well as the individual's previous experiences in dealing with stress and whether a person has good social support (Papathanasiou et al., 2015). Lazarus (1966) emphasized that, in a stressful situation, focusing on coping and understanding what, why, and how of the stressful situation and the

coping strategy is helpful. Coping, according to Lazarus, is a process that involves "ongoing efforts in thoughts and action to manage specific demands that are overwhelming" (p. 8). Part of coping with stress for doctoral students might be changing behavior and using techniques that fit their individual needs and knowing about the resources that are helpful to cope with stress. With the importance of coping in doctoral students, some studies only aim to provide a relationship between the stressor and stress without providing doctoral students with an effective strategy that would assist them in their journey. Cornwall et al. (2019) suggested that to find effective coping strategies for the early stressors in the program, more research is needed to understand these stressors' effects and their impact on doctoral students.

### **Stress and Coping in Doctoral Students**

Entering the doctoral program is a huge commitment with many challenges and stressors. Stress is subjective, and the impact of stressors are different depending on doctoral students' perceptions of it. Therefore, understanding students' thoughts on stress and the cause of their stress, as well as how they cope, is essential to help them succeed (Yousaf et al., 2016). A doctoral student's well-being depends on their coping ability, which is necessary for managing stress (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

Being in a cohort and interacting with peers provide a sense of inclusion and alleviates stress (Lang et al., 2011). Mechanic (1962) used interviews and observations to examine stress and coping strategies of 23 doctoral students in a non-cohort-based doctoral program. His study showed that students who lacked communication skills and did not interact as often showed higher levels of stress. With his research, Mechanic (1962) pointed out the critical role of social support in coping with stress. His study also showed the importance of the resources an individual has, which impacts the ability to manage stress.

More than a decade after Mechanic conducted his research, Holahan (1979) directed a quantitative study using a questionnaire survey with 377 female doctoral students from different disciplines. One of the areas he measured was stress. He used a four-item scale to measure stress related to school and outside of school life. Central to this study was the idea of stress being an interactive function, the importance that support is needed, and the type of academic department. In post-graduate education, faculty can provide students with the proper academic support. Faculty can communicate with doctoral students to give them a sense of belonging and provide them with emotional support when they feel that students are stressed (Hunter & Devine, 2018; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Virtanen et al., 2017; Waight & Giordana, 2018).

Another study on stress and coping strategies was done by El-Ghoroury et al. (2012). In this quantitative study on 387 graduate students (54% doctoral students), these researchers examined stress and coping strategies and their impact on the students' wellness and well-being. Using a survey, they wanted to understand the barriers to wellness activities by examining graduate students' stress, stressors, and coping strategies. Coping strategies included support from peers, family, and exercise. The stressors were pressure related to time and money. The results showed higher levels of stress among psychology doctoral students. El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) revealed programs and universities have a key impact on stress, coping strategies, and addressing the negative impacts of stress to students' wellness. But due to the design and the quantitative nature of the research, the authors had no way to match the stressors, coping, and the barriers that existed in coping. With the subjective nature of stress, students' perceptions of stress could not be measured either.

With different stressors in different stages of a doctoral program and the importance of coping skills to manage stress, Byers et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative case study on doctoral

students at the beginning of their second year. This was a study of a cohort at a public university. The purpose of their study was to understand the challenges doctoral students had during their doctoral journey and the strategies that students utilized in coping with stress. The study was useful in finding that doctoral participants needed support to maintain their academic and personal well-being. Byers and her fellow researchers showed that two main stressors for doctoral students are multiple roles and a heavy workload (Byers et al., 2014). It is difficult to have multiple roles as an employee, student, child, or parent, and maintain a healthy work-life balance (Castro et al., 2017; Martinez et al., 2013). This is consistent with the findings of Schmidt and Uman's work (2014) on female doctoral students in Sweden, who claimed that finding a balance between different roles and responsibilities as a mother is difficult. Having students talk to peers, friends, and faculty members about what they are going through and creating a balance between work, life, and study can help doctoral students reduce stress (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Martinez et al., 2013).

Looking at the literature related to stress, coping, and doctoral students, regardless of the qualitative or quantitative nature of the study or which stage the students were in the program, shows one common factor as an effective element in coping with stress, which is support (Hunter & Devine, 2018; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Virtanen et al., 2017; Waight & Giordano, 2018). Support can come from friends, peers, family, or the faculty at different stages of the program. Peer support is important, and John and Denicolo (2013) reported the topic of peer support is the focus of many of the studies done on doctoral students in the United Kingdom.

## **Stress in Three Stages of Doctoral Program**

Different factors, such as field or program of study, type of funding, financial problems, the institution where one studies, can contribute to the stress level of doctoral students (Devos et al., 2017). The phases and stages of a doctoral program vary in the type of stressors they present. It is notable that some challenges and stressors are not related to any particular stage of the doctoral program but might rest upon personal or professional relationships and interactions (Pifer & Baker, 2016). Literature includes studies about doctoral students in different countries and in different disciplines, which makes comparing the studies complicated and laborious (Cornwall et al., 2019; Janta et al., 2012). With different individuals having different perceptions regarding stress, there might be other factors impacting students in their doctoral journey apart from the ones mentioned in the literature so far.

### **First Year**

The first year, better known as the entry or transition level, is accompanied with getting acquainted with the program and adjusting to the life of doctoral studies. A student's first year is accompanied with lots of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the structure of the program and expectations of graduate school. Students may have limited knowledge of what is involved academically and socially. The adjustment process, along with other personal or institutional factors, make some students feel stressed and overwhelmed. Some empirical studies related to doctoral students' well-being have focused on students' concerns related to their competence or the imposter syndrome, which might be a source of stress for some students (Byers et al., 2014; Cornwall et al., 2019; Sverdilk et al., 2020). Students keep asking themselves whether they have made the right decision entering the program (Cornwall et al., 2019).

## **Second Year**

As students move to the second year, the candidacy level, and advance to higher stages of the program, the workload gets heavier and the deadlines become tighter (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Students may start to work more independently, and their competency develops (Hill & Canceicao, 2020). Less interaction with peers, lack of social support, working on the dissertation alone and in isolation, and heavy workloads are some elements resulting in stress for doctoral students during their second year in the program (Byers et al., 2014).

## **Third Year**

Successful completion of the final year of the program leads to the attainment of a doctoral degree (Ali & Kohun, 2006). One of the requirements of many professional doctoral programs is writing a dissertation, which allows students to make a unique contribution to the research world. The completion phase requires students to work independently on their dissertation and seek advice from the advisor whenever needed which puts a lot of pressure on the students and is a stressful process for many doctoral students (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Bazrafkan et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019). It requires students to have good research and writing skills. To write the literature review, it is important for students to know how to dive into a vast pool of research and navigate various articles in order to choose from a variety of literature and find the ones related to their study. Students must know how to connect to their own research what they find in the existing studies and theories so they can address real-world problems in a scholarly manner. Having supportive advisors who can walk the students through this phase, providing guidance and promoting students' confidence, is of great advantage to the student (Hill & Canceicao, 2020) and might help reduce stress.

All the various experiences in these three stages make doctoral students more stressed than the aged-matched general public (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Different countries have different research that used both qualitative and quantitative components to try to describe the stress and anxiety their students experience (Bazrafkan et al., 2016; Levecque et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019). Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) state that academic factors, followed by social and emotional factors, can create stress among many doctoral students. Wang et al. (2019) noted there is still more stress in doctoral students than in any other profession or occupation.

Based on the literature review, some of the everyday stressors for students in doctoral programs can be summarized as

- lack of time and problems in time management, being under pressure to finish the program on time;
- lack of finances, and in case of Ph.D. students, especially in humanities and social sciences, not having enough funding for research;
- problems in balancing work-life-study, learning how to create a balance between personal, professional, and academic life when students start the program, and through different stages of the doctoral program-each having unique challenges;
- feelings of guilt doctoral students experience either because of the time and attention taken away from their significant other, children, parents, or anyone they care about or because of the imposter syndrome (i.e., lack of self-esteem and confidence) believing they are in a doctoral program due to luck;
- fear of the unknown, uncertainty, ambiguity and learning how to adjust, not knowing what to expect or what the program expectations are;

- lack of social support/change in social support/working in isolation, the doctoral programs might force some students to create a change in their social life from family to peers or vice versa, which may affect their support system and lead to stress;
- heavy workload and tight deadlines;
- student-advisor relationship; and
- the dissertation process and variables related to the dissertation.

Table 2 provides a summary of doctoral students’ stressors found in the literature.

**Table 2**

*Common Stressors Among Doctoral Students*

<b>Stressor</b>	<b>Studies</b>
Lack of time/time management/ insufficient finances/financial constraints	Cornwall et al. (2019); El-Ghoroury et al. (2012); Martinez et al. (2013); Sverdlik et al. (2018); Yousaf et al. (2016)
Balancing work, life & study	Castello et al. (2017); Cornwall et al. (2019); El-Ghouroury et al. (2012); Martinez et al. (2013); Pifer & Baker, 2014; Byers et al. (2014)
The feeling of guilt/imposter syndrome	McGee et al. (2019); Sverdlik et al. (2020); Byers et al. (2014)
Uncertainty about the program/fear of the unknown and learning to adjust	Devos et al. (2017); Hockey (1994); Yousaf et al. (2016)
Lack of social support/ change in social life circle, isolation	Ali & Kohun (2006); Bagaka’s et al. (2015); Byers et al. (2014); Castello et al. (2017); El-Ghoroury et al. (2012); Pifer & Baker, (2016); Sverdlik et al. (2018); Wang et al. (2019)
Academic responsibilities/ heavy workload; tight deadlines	Cornwall et al. (2019), El-Ghoroury et al. (2012); Schmidt & Hansson (2018)
Student-advisor relation	Ali & Kohun (2006); Bagaka’s et al. (2015); Corner et al. (2017); Hockey (1994); Hunter & Devine (2016); Mechanic (1962); Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012)
Dissertation process	Ali & Kohun (2006); Bazrafkan et al. (2016); Pifer & Baker (2016); Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012); Sverdlik & Hall (2020)

## **Helpful Factors in Decreasing Doctoral Students' Stress**

As doctoral students progress in the program, the responsibilities and demands of their programs keep changing. Moving to the higher stages of a doctoral program means less structure, and for students it means becoming more isolated and more stressed (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). With the high number of doctoral students under stress, it becomes more essential to find ways to support this population (Barry et al., 2019). Research shows that one of the factors that enhances students' success and reduces their stress and anxiety is mindfulness and mindfulness interventions (Barry et al., 2019; McCann & Davis, 2018; McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015). Sverdlik and Hall (2020) discuss another factor that contributes to doctoral students' success, known as self-efficacy. Social support has been found to promote well-being. It is identified as a coping strategy for students (El-Ghoroury et al, 2012). Having a support network can buffer the effects of stress (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). In the following sections, research on mindfulness, self-efficacy, resilience, and social support will be presented to understand their importance in dealing with stress.

### **Mindfulness**

Students enter the doctoral programs with little knowledge of the expectations to inform their doctoral experiences (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Students are exposed to different demands and tasks which can impact them. One way that doctoral students can cope with stress is to be mindful. Mindfulness means focusing one's full attention, being aware of the present, and having unbiased thoughts and emotions (Buchanan, 2017). It is a self-care practice that has been shown to reduce stress (Barry et al., 2019). Keye & Pidgeon (2013) define mindfulness as a skill that impacts a person's coping with stressful events by being aware of the situation. It helps an individual manage their thoughts and emotions to control stressful situations. Mindfulness

interventions can decrease stress and anxiety (McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2018). Mindfulness has been linked to promoting well-being and resilience (McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2018). Barry et al. (2019) examined the impact of mindfulness practice on stress level of 82 doctoral students at a research institute in Australia using questionnaires, surveys, and interview questions. Participants were divided into two groups (one control group and one intervention). The intervention group was provided with a CD with mindfulness awareness activities and were asked to use it over an 8-week period as soon as the pre-trial questionnaire was completed. They had to keep a record of the activity. The control group was given an empty CD with nothing to do. Both groups had to answer two questions related to stress and any support they had received to manage their stress. The result showed the significant amount of impact mindfulness had on stress reduction in the intervention group.

With a large number of doctoral students reporting stress-related health concerns, mindfulness is considered effective in decreasing stress and improving mood. It provides improvement in stress-related issues such as anxiety in adults and university students (Greeson et al., 2014). According to Creswell and Lindsay (2014), mindfulness allows an individual to monitor and be aware when one is faced with challenges and stressors. In the process, the individual may appraise the situation and apply coping strategies as needed. Literature confirms that mindfulness can positively affect well-being and health and reduce stress (Warnecke et al., 2011; Weinstein et al., 2009)

### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation and was first suggested by Bandura (1997). In Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, the individuals' perception of their capabilities is a crucial determinant of success. In relation to students' stress,

self-efficacy is students' belief in their ability to successfully manage stress. Self-efficacy plays a crucial role in the appraisal and coping process. Self-efficacy has been the topic of interest in different national and international studies with interests in different grades, from preschool students to those with a bachelor's degree, but the number of studies becomes very limited when self-efficacy is related to graduate students, particularly doctoral students (Overall et al., 2011). As for doctoral students' self-efficacy in the program, Sverdlik and Hall (2019) noted that students in the first and second phases of the doctoral program have less self-efficacy than students in their final phase. Students' self-efficacy increased as they progressed in the program. They claimed this was because students learn how to work independently and become more self-reliant. With doctoral students' concerns related to their competence in their program and in writing the dissertation, self-efficacy can play an important role in contributing to their willingness to conduct the research. (McCann & Davis, 2018).

Bandura's self-efficacy framework in relation to a person's ability in a particular domain is impacted by a) practical experiences in that domain, b) the experience of observing others, c) explicit verbal phrases or lack of it, and d) the emotional state of the learner. Self-efficacy and an individuals' well-being are related. According to Villada et al. (2017), self-efficacy helps doctoral students regulate their cognitions and emotions when facing a stressful situation. Self-efficacy can influence individuals' well-being through the evaluation of stressful events or situations and through coping approaches when they are stressed (as cited in Freire et al., 2019; McCann & Davis, 2018). In a study related to self-efficacy and stress conducted in Spain, a total of 1,402 undergraduate university students in all degree programs participated. These students were part of a cohort, and the results showed that self-efficacy played a key role in stress appraisal and promoted the selection of good coping strategies and well-being (Freire et al.,

2019). Colleges and universities can use interventions to help students discover their values, resources, and motivations to promote students' self-efficacy in order to reduce stress.

In the context of doctoral research, Sverdlik and Hall (2020) used the term research self-efficacy (based on the definition provided by Forester et al., 2004) and defined it as being able to accomplish any task that is related to conducting research. Sverdlik and Hall said that doctoral students' self-efficacy depends on their relationship with faculty and can improve by the support they receive from them, which emphasizes the importance of social support.

### **Resiliency**

For doctoral students, resiliency means acquiring the learning skills that help them become more confident and determined to succeed in the program despite all the responsibilities and demands they have in their lives (Mowbray & Halse, 2010). According to Kekkonen and Oinas-Kukkonen (2021), resilience to stress varies from one person to the other, but resilience is a significant factor in the success drive of a doctoral student (Valdez, 2010). The former researchers noted that social support plays a role in improving doctoral students' resilience.

Resiliency is activated when one is stressed. High levels of resilience and mindfulness are linked to lower levels of stress (McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015). Two important resiliency traits for a student's success are social and personal factors (Castro et al., 2011). Resilient students keep going despite any challenge they face. Resiliency is about learning new skills and knowing when to apply those in challenging and tough times by changing perspective and behavior (Pulley & Wakefield, 2001). With all the different roles and responsibilities that a doctoral student has, resiliency can help with balancing them. Resiliency is multidimensional and changes with time, context, age, gender, and cultural origin. It helps a student to achieve success despite challenges and adversity (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). In a study related to doctoral

students' success, Castro et al. (2011) claimed that one of the best places that can assist graduate and doctoral students to develop resiliency is the university setting. Faculty and educators can examine factors that impact students' well-being, build students' self-concept, and show unconditional positive regard.

McCray and Joseph-Richard (2020) investigated factors associated with resiliency in those who complete their doctoral studies. The researchers interviewed 11 Ph.D. students at a United Kingdom university for about an hour and asked them to talk about their success and their experiences during their doctoral journey. For their interview, they used prompts such as experiences during the program, challenges, and their coping strategies. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. After analyzing the data, they discovered that learning when and how to use personal, environmental, institutional, and professional factors, separates the completers from those who drop out. The important point in this study is the impact the learning environment, such as the faculty and peers, can have on becoming resilient. It is important to note that the study by McCray and Joseph was conducted on Ph.D. students who were not part of a cohort.

### **Social Support**

Reaching out for social support is one way people respond to a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It can be an effective way for some people to deal with stress. Doctoral students' social support network is comprised of their family, friends, faculty, the peers in the cohort, and, in some cases, their co-workers. The support students receive is important in degree completion and can be either in the form of emotional support or professional support. Students can have someone they can talk to and vent or they can have someone who can provide them with guidance, advice, and assistance or both (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

## **The Gap in the Literature**

Although the term *doctoral student* had been used in many of these studies, most of the studies included students in traditional Ph.D. programs. These programs differ from executive doctoral programs in funding, research, and structure. Many of these studies were in different countries and focused on different doctoral programs. Most studies did not include students from all stages of the doctoral program. There was hardly any study related to executive doctoral programs. Most studies on doctoral students' challenges, coping, and well-being used a quantitative approach to measure stress and find the barriers to their well-being; not all the studies applied a qualitative methodology. Stress and sources of it vary in different phases and different stages of a doctoral program. Besides the importance of social support, many of the studies did not mention other types of support or strategies that faculty could provide. Therefore, the literature lacks information and recommendations on stress and coping strategies that students and faculty in executive doctoral programs can provide. To examine stressors in different phases of doctoral programs, it is important to include students from all stages of the program in the study. By exploring students' lived experiences of stress and examining students' and faculty members' thoughts on sources of stress and the effective coping strategies for dealing with stress, this study tried to fill the gap in the literature concerning executive doctoral students in organizational leadership. Additionally, by having in-depth interviews with the doctoral students and faculty, both students and their instructors had the opportunity to express their thoughts related to this phenomenon.

## **Summary**

The literature review was a critical presentation of studies related to doctoral students and factors related to attrition, stress, and coping in doctoral students. In most of the studies related to

doctoral students, stress is mentioned as a factor that impacts students' well-being and their decision to engage or disengage from the program. The studies emphasized that sources of stress vary across different programs, different phases, and different countries. Cornwall et al. (2019) stated that besides a few stressors, many of the stressors found in his study were the same as those found in other studies 20 years ago. While Cornwall et al. concentrated on first-year students, Byers et al. (2014) conducted their study on second-year doctoral students and mentioned a few more stressors such as problems in adjusting to a program and students' questioning whether they have made the right decision. In other studies, the last phase of the program, the dissertation writing phase, was pointed out as the most stressful for students (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). With different programs having different designs and structures, reaching a uniform decision on the main sources of doctoral students' stress becomes somewhat complicated.

There are few studies that cover the importance of self-efficacy, resilience, and mindfulness of doctoral students and the impact on stress. In most of the literature pertaining to doctoral students, support has been shown to play an important role in degree completion, whether the support is interaction with peers or support from family, friends, faculty, or advisors. Support has been mentioned in various literature related to doctoral students as an important factor in persistence in the program, but there is little information on the type of support that students need. Some studies were conducted outside of the United States, and each of the studies were on different doctoral programs. Some studies talked about the need for interventions to reduce the students' stress but did not mention the type and timing that the interventions should be provided to the students. Thus, most of the literature found on stress, coping, and attrition was related to Ph.D. students in different countries and programs, which have various structures and

lengths, so it is not clear how the relevant literature found can be applied to executive doctoral students, particularly the executive doctoral students in this study who take classes on the weekends and work during the week. Table 3. provides a summary of studies on stress, coping, well-being, and attrition.

**Table 3**

*Summary of Main Literature Reviewed*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Byers et al. (2014)	To investigate doctoral students' perceptions about the challenges that they encountered while in a doctorate program	USA	Qualitative	Second-year doctoral students
Bagaka et al. (2015)	To explore doctoral program practices and features that enhance doctoral students' success	USA	Qualitative/ Quantitative	Doctoral students in leadership and lifelong learning, learning and development, policy studies, counseling psychology, and school administration
Castro et al. (2011)	To identify those factors related to women's academic success	USA	Qualitative	A Ph.D. counseling doctoral cohort/ woman in a doctoral counseling program
Corner et al. (2017)	To understand how supervision activities are associated with lack of well-being, such as burnout, and completion of the studies among doctoral students	Finland	Quantitative	Swedish-speaking doctoral students in social science, art, and humanities
Cornwall et al. (2019)	To identify early stressors in doctoral students	New Zealand	Qualitative Online Questionnaire	First-year, full -time Ph.D. students

<b>Study</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Devos et al. (2016)	To compare the experiences of doctoral students who competed or quit their PhD	Belgium	Qualitative	Ph.D. completers vs non-completers
El- Ghoroury et al. (2012)	To examine stressors, coping strategies, and barriers to the use of wellness activities	North America	Quantitative	Psychology graduate student
Hunter & Devine (2016)	To better understand the antecedents of doctoral students' emotional well-being, and their plans to leave academia	Nine countries	Qualitative/ Quantitative	Doctoral/Ph.D. students in different fields
Martinez et al. (2013)	To explore the doctoral students' experiences in relation to their school-work-lives	USA	Qualitative	Ph.D. students
Pappa et al. (2020)	To understand the perceived sources of stress in doctoral training of international students and how their scholarly identity is involved when responding to stress	Finland	Qualitative case study	International doctoral students
Pifer & Baker (2016).	To overview the challenges of doctoral education		Review of literature from 2000-2015	Ph.D./Doctoral studies
Pyhalto et al. (2012)	To examine the problems that doctoral candidates face during their doctoral studies as well as students' well-being in relation to their studying engagement	Finland	Quantitative	Ph.D. students from the Faculties of Arts, Medicine, and Behavioral Sciences
Rigler et al., 2017	To explore current literature for doctoral attrition and persistence	USA	Critical review of 79 studies	Doctoral students

<b>Study</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Spaulding-Rockinson-Szapkiw, (2012)	To examine persistence factors associated with the successful completion of a doctoral degree in the field of education	USA	Qualitative	Doctoral students in Education
Sverdlik et al. (2018)	To understand the doctoral experience focusing on students' physical, psychological, and emotional well-being & to find challenges faced in graduate education.		163 empirical articles on doctoral education reviewed and analyzed	Ph.D. Students
Sverdlik et al. (2020)	To investigate the role of social and psychological factors in the well-being of doctoral students.	Canada	Quantitative	Ph.D. students
Sverdlik & Hall (2020)	To examine whether doctoral program phase (coursework, comprehensive examination, or dissertation phase) influenced doctoral students' well-being levels (stress, depression, program satisfaction, and illness symptoms) and motivation (self-determined motivation and self-efficacy)	54 countries	Quantitative	Doctoral level and Ph.D. students
Virtanen et al., (2017)	To find the causes of doctoral students' disengagement from their doctoral studies in the biological and environmental sciences.	Finland	Qualitative	Doctoral students in Biology and science
Wollast et al. (2018)	To find factors associated with the rate of doctoral degree completion in universities	Belgium	Quantitative	Ph.D. students in all disciplines

### CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The experiences gained during the doctoral journey and the types of stressors each student has during their education are different which makes understanding the process more complex. The intentions of this research were multi-fold. First, it was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences related to the stress of doctoral students in an executive cohort program. The next purpose of the study was to investigate students' thoughts on sources of stress and their coping strategies. And the third purpose of conducting this research was to learn about faculty members' perspectives on their doctoral students' stressors and effective coping methods for their doctoral students. Study findings might help provide students with a better understanding of what to expect when they enter a doctoral program and provide them with a more positive experience to improve their well-being and academic performance. It can also impact attrition rates. The findings could also provide schools with new measures of coping or help them improve their existing practices for dealing with stress. Finally, the results may help the college in this study to understand its limitations and strengths in dealing with students' stress to make their journey more enjoyable.

Findings from this study can benefit executive doctoral students so they can thrive in their personal, professional, and academic life. For this study, I employed Merriam's (1988) case study approach to explore an in-depth understanding of the stress issue in an executive doctoral program. Merriam (1988) views a case as a unit that has boundaries. In this study, the boundaries of the case were the experiences of stress and coping strategies of students in an executive doctoral program while they were on their doctoral journey.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) claim that with case studies happening in a bounded system, the researcher can combine other methodologies to help focus the research. Due to the specific

interest and focus on students' perspectives of stress, stressors, and coping, and to better understand the meaning of students' experiences with the stress phenomenon in this 3-year program, a phenomenological lens was applied. In phenomenology, as Creswell (2009) noted, participants "describe the meaning of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (p. 57). Phenomenology is a form of inquiry that seeks to understand the lived experiences of humans. It is a systematic approach to how people experience a phenomenon, find themselves in the world, and make meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology sounded useful to obtain more knowledge related to participants lived experience with stress and to identify the key stressors, the impact of stress on students, and how they strived to manage. In view of the fact that this study was context-dependent, a phenomenological case study approach helped reveal unique data related to the lived experiences of participants in an executive leadership program at one university.

The findings from this study were helpful in learning about the stress and stressors of executive doctoral students in an organizational leadership program. These findings were beneficial to understand what kinds of strategies and approaches could be put in place to help reduce the negative impacts of stress on doctoral students. In this Chapter 3, I describe the research design, the setting and context of my study, my role as researcher, and the participants. Data collection instruments and procedures for students and faculty, data analysis, ethical issues, and trustworthiness are also discussed.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do doctoral students describe their experiences of stress and specific stressors?

RQ2: How do doctoral students cope with their perceived stress?

RQ3: How do doctoral faculty describe students' stressors, and how do they perceive students' coping?

RQ4: What do doctoral students and faculty suggest as effective coping strategies to improve the experiences for the doctoral students?

I used a phenomenological case study approach to capture the essence of the participants' experiences with stress and coping in this program. A phenomenological case study helped highlight the purpose of the study, and since the approach to the study was context-dependent, using this approach allowed the students to share their valid, authentic, and honest experiences. This method also allowed me to understand students' stress in the program by better understanding how they perceived and talked about this phenomenon and how they shared their experiences with others (Patton, 2015).

### **Case Study Approach**

In qualitative research, a case study is one important strategy to learn about one specific case and not any other case or general issue (Stake, 1995). Case study is a popular research design in social science. Different researchers have provided different definitions for a case study. Stake (1995) defines it as the study of a system that is unified, while Yin (2009) believes it is "a method to understand a real-life phenomenon considering relevant contextual conditions" (p. 1). Merriam (1988) views a case study as a method of inquiry that requires an in-depth examination of a program, event, or activity. Merriam defines it as the empirical study of a bounded system which can be a single person, group, program, or organization and examining the interaction of various factors that is set forth by the available sample. One fascinating aspect for qualitative researchers is how people make meaning of the world and their experiences.

Therefore, for this study, I employed the case study design of Merriam (2002) as it complements Yin's and Stake's characteristics of qualitative research design.

One of the defining features of a case study is being able to bound or delimit the case (Merriam, 1988; 1998). A case study, according to Merriam (1988), is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process or a social unit” (p. xiii). The distinctive properties of a case study, according to Merriam, are as follows: First, it is particularistic (by focusing on one specific person, event, program, or situation). Second, it is descriptive (provides a rich, thick description of the phenomenon being studied). Third, it is heuristic (elucidates the readers' understanding of the phenomenon being studied). A phenomenological case study was a proper method for this study as the case sought to focus on the phenomenon of stress in this specific program and answer the how and what questions related to the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2014). It helped frame how I investigated this phenomenon (stress in an executive doctoral program) in this particular program in this instance.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is rooted in the lived experiences of people, using their words and perceptions related to a particular phenomenon and finding meanings and making sense of that phenomenon from those who have experienced that event (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1994) stated that phenomenology is the first method of knowledge as it begins with things themselves (p. 41). Phenomenology is not just a research methodology used by qualitative researchers, but it is also a philosophy that was developed by the German philosopher, Husserl (1859-1938), who is also known as the father of phenomenology—a science of consciousness. Husserl regarded experience as the fundamental source of knowledge. He

claims that at the heart of phenomenology is the discovery of the true meaning of a phenomenon and getting to its essence and believes in the notion of natural attitude. Phenomenology involves epoche or bracketing in order to grasp every essence of a phenomenon or event (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl is credited with establishing a rigor in the development of knowledge through the elimination of supposition and capturing experience in its most primal essence without any interpretation, explanation, or judgment (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) believed phenomenology is concerned with wholeness and looking at a system through multiple angles and perspectives until a unified vision of the experience is obtained. Phenomenology, he added, is rooted in questions that provide a direction and focus to meanings and in themes that sustain an inquiry, awaken further interest, and account for our passionate involvement with what is being experienced (pp. 58-59). The phenomenological aspect of this study focused on and honored the unique lived experiences of each participant. The phenomenological approach was a suitable approach for this study as the research design aimed to obtain in-depth insight of participants' lived experience of stress.

### **Research Design**

Understanding participants' interpretations of their lived experiences at a particular time and context is what a qualitative researcher is interested in (Merriam, 2002). The phenomenon that was the focus of this study was stress. The goal was to unravel the doctoral students' experiences with stress while they were in the program and trying to make sense of their stress by using their own stories. Lazarus (2006) maintained more qualitative studies related to stress and coping strategies are needed since qualitative studies help with a deeper understanding of the stressors and coping behaviors that respondents used. This helps provide the researcher with information which might be overlooked in quantitative studies (Mazzola et al., 2011). But even

quantitative studies and findings become more meaningful when the researcher also pays attention to the respondents' personal experiences and the details (Mazzola et al., 2011).

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a detailed view of the stress phenomenon in this executive doctoral program which was bound by time and context was needed. I applied a case study design. Understanding the phenomenon of stress was best achieved through participants' perceptions of their lived experience since, in phenomenology, "perception is the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52). I also had a passion for understanding the phenomenon at a deeper level; therefore, phenomenological case study was the best approach for my study. This approach allowed me to examine the unique lived experiences and the impact of context and how the participants made meaning of it (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, one executive doctoral program in organizational leadership was selected, and the following features were taken into consideration as I conducted this phenomenological case study:

- Participants had experienced or had knowledge of the phenomenon (stress).
- Participants were executive doctoral students.
- Participants were sought from across the different phases of the program.
- Semi-structured interviews were the main means of data collection.
- Data from the interview were triangulated using Kilpatrick and Cantril's (1960) Self-Anchoring Scale activity, vignettes, and sentence completion.
- My positionality was monitored through researcher journaling and bracketing of my own biases as a doctoral student in the same program as the participants.

## **Setting and Context**

There are many students who wish to attend university part-time, either in the evenings or the weekends, in-person, or online, without having to leave their positions at work. More and more universities are offering executive doctoral programs, on-line, or in-person, using a cohort model to accommodate these students. The rationale behind the cohort model is to decrease attrition rates and increase leadership and research skills (Bista & Cox, 2014). The organizational leadership program in this study applies a cohort model consisting of 15-20 students who have different educational and work backgrounds. Classes were held on Saturdays for 3 years, but with the disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the classes were held on-line for almost 2 years. Four cohorts run simultaneously each year in this setting—one first year cohort, one in its second year, a third in its third and final year of coursework, and a fourth in its dissertation defense and graduation year.

## **The Researcher's Role and Positionality**

In quantitative studies, rules, formulas, and numbers are used to increase the quality of the data. Nevertheless, qualitative studies rely on texts, words, and the researchers' capability to apply words and concepts. The credibility of the study depends on the researcher, who is the main instrument (Patton, 2015). The researcher, as the main inquirer, has to provide sufficient details of the data collection as well as the data analysis process which will allow others to judge the study. There will be different roles and responsibilities that a researcher will have to fulfill when they are conducting qualitative research.

It is essential to discuss my identity as a researcher and my intentions in conducting this study. As an executive doctoral student in organizational leadership and as a student whose native language is not English, I was in the process of completing my doctoral degree, with this

dissertation focusing on stress, stressors, and coping strategies of doctoral students. I was living the experience I was studying. My personal goal in conducting this qualitative research was to have a meaningful study. I was in the program for more than 3 years. As an individual responsible for fulfilling responsibilities in different roles, I had and still have my own struggles and experiences with stress. With the demanding nature of doctoral programs and high levels of stress among doctoral students, I intended to use doctoral students' experiences and their words to find effective coping strategies that could help reduce stress. Apart from understanding students' experiences with stress and knowing the stressors of the participants, my professional goal in conducting this study was to help doctoral students find measures that were effective in coping with stress. I was also interested in getting the faculty member's thoughts on the stressors of the program and what they viewed as effective ways to deal with stress. I thought the study might be able to help doctoral programs improve the support structures they have or assist them to unlock new measures so their future doctoral students could avoid the negative impacts of stress as much as possible.

As a doctoral student in organizational leadership, my journey had not been a smooth sailing. My first year in the program was filled with a sense of imposter syndrome (Sverdlik et al., 2020) and the feeling of incompetence. I kept feeling that I was in the program due to luck. As I progressed in the program, the stressors kept changing, but stress was still a problem due to the workload, time, assignment overlap, tighter deadlines than the previous semesters, comprehensive exam, starting the dissertation process, learning how to form a committee, and working with the advisors that were still some of the challenges I had. Talking to other students in my cohort helped me find ways to manage my stress to a certain degree. This is not to say I was completely stress-free, but the tips were helpful to keep me moving in the direction that

would lead to my destination. As a doctoral student and as the instrument of this study, I had to be aware of the impact of my decisions and my biases on the findings.

In conducting this research, I attempted to avoid being biased and strived to stay away from what Maxwell (2013) called selecting data that fit my (the researcher's) goals, theories, or preconceptions. As much as possible, I tried to bracket my perspectives on the phenomenon of study by writing my thoughts and assumptions in a journal, taking notes, and journaling those thoughts and assumptions. Moustakas (1994) notes that the biggest challenge in epoche is being honest with ourselves and allowing whatever is before us to present itself so we may see it in a completely new way with fresh, open eyes. Having a researcher's journal was a helpful way to make all notes related to the research and assisted in bracketing my ideas, thoughts, and assumptions. This journal was used to express personal feelings and reflections. It was useful to reflect on them before I conducted interviews. This helped me limit my presumptions related to stress, stressors, and coping strategies. It was also a valuable tool to write about anything that I observed before, during, and after each interview. I wrote about how I felt and how each interview started and ended and how participants reacted during each interview. Keeping my personal experiences separate from data collection was more difficult than I thought. But in the data analysis process, it helped me bracket my personal thoughts and assumptions related to stress, stressors, and coping strategies and assisted me to avoid tainting my study

### **Participants**

Qualitative samples tend to be purposive (Miles et al., 2014). Purposive sampling is the most common type of sampling since it allows the researcher to select participants who have experienced and have knowledge of the phenomenon and can provide the researcher with rich data. To locate and select the participants and the number of informants needed, a researcher

needs to use their own judgment based on the purpose of their study (Patton, 2002). The sample should include purposefully selected individuals who share a common experience and will help generate detailed patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). This selection also depends on the qualitative design that a researcher wants to use (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In a description of phenomenology, Creswell and Poth (2016) point to Polkinghorne's (1989) suggestion that a sample size of 5-25 is sufficient for a phenomenological study. Bartholomew et al. (2021) claimed that articles and additional texts of phenomenology by Moustakas (1994) and Van Manen (1990) do not point out any specific number of participants. Mapp (2008) claimed that sample size can be difficult to predict in phenomenological research and believes that sampling should continue until saturation is achieved. For this study, I complied with Creswell's rubric (2007) indicating five to 25 individuals as an appropriate sample size of participants who have direct and applicable experiences and perceptions with the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, for this study, I selected 15 doctoral students and three faculty members, and data were collected until it became repetitive which was the point of saturation.

My goal was to understand the perceptions and experiences of doctoral students with stress and strategies students used in different stages to help reduce stress. Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicate that in qualitative studies purposive sampling of the study participants and the site is one way the researcher can effectively address and understand the problem under investigation. The criterion that governed the sampling in this study, besides stress, was the doctoral program at the university under investigation, which is an executive doctoral program in organizational leadership. Choosing a purposive sample of students who had knowledge and experienced the phenomenon was one way to ensure the topic was relevant to that sample and it could be explored in-depth (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

Due to the nature of the topic and the study's design, the study's sample size was collected purposefully, and maximum variation was taken into consideration. The sample size was collected intentionally in hopes that it would reach the saturation point (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For this study, the sample was 15 executive doctoral students from the six cohorts who were in pursuit of a doctoral degree. With the impact that faculty have on students' experiences in doctoral programs, three faculty members of the college were also part of the study. There is only one doctoral program at this university with a total of 14 courses that students are required to complete. Due to ethical issues that might have arisen, faculty who were part of my committee were not considered participants in the data collection.

In order to address the research questions, several criteria needed to be met to make sure the population selected would be able to provide data related to the phenomenon under study. As much as possible, maximum variation was taken into consideration for selection of the student sample. First, for including diversity and being able to identify the common patterns that were embedded in the diversity (Patton 2015), the sample included students:

- who had knowledge and experience of the phenomenon,
- were from the six cohorts at the university under study,
- were full-time or part-time students,
- were of different genders/race/nationality/ethnicity/marital status, age, and
- were of different parental status.

Students who participated in the study received a thank you note along with a \$5.00 Starbucks gift card which I mailed to them. Faculty received a thank you email.

## **Data Collection Instruments and Procedures**

The first and most important step in any qualitative study is understanding a particular population or a specific topic of interest better (Dickens et al., 2016). The focus of this study was getting an in-depth understanding of the experiences of doctoral students in an executive doctoral program with stress and how they made sense of it.

For this case study on stress, data collection took place in semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 15 doctoral students and three faculty members on Zoom (with only one student interview on campus). The aim of the interviews was to get to “the underlying meaning of statements to develop themes about and the description of the phenomenon” (Clark & Creswell, 2014, p. 239), which in this study was stress. Semi structured interviews were selected since, as data collection tools, they were helpful in exploring students and faculties’ experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. To complement the semi-structures interviews, enrich the data, and diminish biases, I used other methods to collect data and to obtain more information related to stress, stressors, and coping skills. Using different data collection methods allowed the strength of one data collection method to compensate for the weakness of the other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To mitigate any researcher bias, I collected data from multiple participants. This enabled me to look at data from multiple perspectives and to consider the stress phenomenon in more than one way which helped diminish the potential of viewing the data from just one perspective (Denzin, 1989). The data sources I deployed to collect data for this study were the Self-Anchoring Scale activity (Kilpatrick & Cantril, 1960), vignettes, and sentence completion. What follows is detail about each data source.

## **Interviews**

Patton (2015) believes that every interview is an observation for both the participant and the interviewer. Interviewing requires skills to know what to ask and how to listen. Interviews help provide the researcher with a detailed description of events to understand and learn what people perceive and how they make meanings of their experiences (Weiss, 1995). The interview questions were an opportunity to get more detailed responses. To get the participants' views and opinions and to enter their world, I conducted all interviews, except for one, on Zoom. I had different interview questions, which were clear, open-ended, and included probes to get more in-depth information. Some probes were verbal, such as “go on,” and “explain in more detail,” or non-verbal such as facial expressions or silence. Listening carefully was also important because when participant used a key word, I would use the key word as a prompt and ask them to provide more explanation on that term. In rare cases that the participants sought approval or disapproval of their statements, I redirected them to the questions without expressing any opinion.

In order to better understand doctoral students' experience with stress and to get a comprehensive account of the participant's experience with it, the interview included an informal interactive process (Moustakas, 1994). In conducting all the interviews, I tried to build rapport with the participants to get the best result from the interviews. Students' semi-structured interviews were followed by collecting additional data through a vignette as well as a self-anchoring scale activity.

## **Vignette**

Alexander and Becker (1978) stated that a vignette provides reliable measures of participants' opinions in research. As an adjunct to other data sources, I used a vignette in my first interview protocol. When a vignette is used in addition to interviews, they assist in obtaining

additional information related to the phenomenon being investigated (Skilling & Stylianides, 2020). Sampson and Johannessen (2017) also note that real-life vignettes can help elicit rich, detailed comments in discussion of sensitive matters rapidly and effectively. For doctoral students, I created a vignette based on common challenges of doctoral students found in studies related to doctoral students' experiences with stress. For this study, the purpose was to collect more information on doctoral students' experiences with stress and the strategies that helped them manage stress in a certain situation.

After my interviews with the students, based on the participants' responses. I created a vignette for the faculty participants which was based on reality from what I had learned and heard from the doctoral students in this study. The vignette for the faculty members included four questions related to how faculty could assist students cope with stress.

### **Self-Anchoring Scale Activity**

At the end of the second interview, I used a modified version of the self-anchoring scale activity, by Kilpatrick and Cantril (1960) as another data source for the doctoral students. The activity was a rating instrument in which respondents defined and chose the anchors themselves based on their perceptions of stress. To start the activity, I asked each doctoral student to describe the characteristics of an ideal doctoral program and the worst program in terms of stress. Once the students were done describing a worst and an ideal program, I asked the participants to rate their stress level. Each participant had to rate their current, past, and future stress levels on a scale of 0-10 with zero representing no stress at all and 10 representing highly stressed. Once the rating was done, I asked each participant follow-up questions to explore and understand the reason(s) behind their rankings and the differences that existed between the rankings.

## **Sentence Completion**

As another adjunct to the interview questions and the vignette, I added sentence completion as the final activity on the faculty interview protocol. In this activity I read two sentences and asked the faculty to use their own words or phrases to complete the sentences. Sentence completion was a useful activity to compliment other methods. This activity can help support data that has been obtained through other techniques (Sacks & Levy, 1950).

## **Interview Protocol for Doctoral Students**

Doctoral students in this study were part of a cohort. There were three cohorts taking coursework at the college at the time of the study (Cohorts 4, 5, and 6), and students from Cohorts 1, 2, and 3 had already graduated. To get the perspective of the doctoral students who had been in the program, I sent an email to all current doctoral students and graduates to ask for their participation in the study (see Appendix A). Once I received a response from the students, I selected 15 doctoral participants, and I provided them with the option to have their interviews either on Zoom or face-to-face. All but one participant requested Zoom platform. Prior to each interview, the participant received a consent form which they had to read carefully, sign, and email back to me (see Appendix B). As soon as the participants signed and returned the consent form, I emailed the demographic information sheet (Appendix C) to the students to complete. Demographics, such as age, marital status, occupation, number of children, cohort, and industry were collected before the first interview. I asked the interviewees to provide me with the best day and time for their interviews so that I could email them the Zoom link. To protect the participants' identity and for confidentiality reasons, I asked each participant to choose a pseudonym prior to their interviews. Each participant took part in two separate interviews which were 3 to 7 days apart. Due to one participant's work schedule, we had to schedule the

interviews a day apart from each other. To avoid confusion, for each participant, I saved the time and the date of the interviews on Google Calendar and on my iPhone in addition to writing them on a separate sheet of paper along with participants' names and email addresses. The data collection started with the semi-structured interviews and the vignette mostly focused on the topic of stress. To put the participants at ease and help them feel comfortable, I asked a neutral question at the beginning of each interview. I then moved to the questions related to stress while adding probes for clarification as needed to deepen my understanding.

The interview questions were pre-arranged so participants would know what to expect. I had the first interview with the students using the interview protocol related to stress. There were eight interview questions that I sent to the participants in advance so they would have time to look at and consider their responses. The questions were followed by a vignette with three questions, which the students had not received in advance (see Appendix D). Three to 7 days after the first interview, depending on the participants' schedule and availability, I conducted the second interview, which was focused more on coping strategies (see Appendix E). The second interview consisted of seven questions that I sent to the student prior to conducting the interviews.

At the end of the second interview, for doctoral students, I included the Self-Anchoring Scale activity (Kilpatrick & Cantril, 1960) with five questions (see Appendix E). This activity was not provided to students in advance. Students were asked to express the characteristics of both the most ideal and the worst doctoral program in terms of stress. As they talked, I took notes and wrote their words on a sheet of paper. Then I asked the participants to rate their stress level at the present, in the past, and in the future, with 0 being *stress free* and 10 meaning *highly*

*stressed*. When the rating was over, I asked the participants to explain their reasons behind the ratings and the differences that existed from past to present and present to future.

Participants interviews were between 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted over a two-month period. After each interview, I expressed my gratitude to the participants for their time and participation.

### **Interview Protocol for Faculty**

Given the important role of faculty in the students' learning environment and the impact they can have on students' stress levels, I sent an email to all the faculty members to request their participation in the study (see Appendix F). Only three doctoral faculty responded to the two emails sent to them. I sent the faculty consent form to the three faculty to read, sign, and return (see Appendix G). Once I received the signed consent forms, I set an interview date for each faculty.

The interview for the faculty consisted of 11 interview questions which they received prior to the interview date. The first two questions were warm up questions. After asking the semi-structured interview questions, I read a vignette to the faculty which they had not previously read. The vignette was followed by four questions related to the stress experiences of the doctoral students in the study. The interview concluded with two sentence completion activities. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes (faculty interview protocol can be found in Appendix H). Prior to submitting the interview protocol to the Institution Review Board (see Appendix I), all interview questions were sent to the committee chair for review and feedback.

The demographics for the participants, the two doctoral student interview protocols, the faculty member interview protocol as well as the alignment matrix chart (see Appendix J) for the

research questions can all be found in the appendices. The interviews were recorded with consent from all participants both in writing and verbally before the interviews. The questions, emails, consent forms, and the demographic sheet were all submitted to the Institutional Review Board for approval prior to conducting any interviews.

It was vital to make my participants feel relaxed without feeling pressured during the interview, so we chatted for a few minutes before the interview. During the interviews, I took notes in the event anything went wrong with the recordings. I also wrote my experience related to each interview once I finished recording on Zoom. After the interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed on Otter ai, the recordings and transcriptions were deleted from Zoom and Otter ai to maintain confidentiality.

### **Pilot Study**

After the IRB provided the approval and gave permission to proceed and to ensure the suitability and the language of the research questions, the interview questions were piloted for feedback. For the pilot study, the interview was conducted as described in the protocol. The pilot study provided the opportunity to make sure the wording was clear and concise, and the timing of the interview was appropriate. Each interview was between 30–45 minutes. The pilot interview with one doctoral student and a faculty member were recorded on Zoom and transcribed on Otter ai. The pilot study was designed to ensure the questions were clear and broad and would result in collecting sufficient data from the participants. After each interview, I asked the participants to provide their feedback and inform me of any flaws or weaknesses related to the interview questions and the activities. The pilot study was helpful in identifying the adjustments that were needed to the Self-Anchoring Scale activity and the questions related to

rating their stress in this activity. None of the participants nor any of the data from the pilot study were used in the main study.

### **Data Analysis**

Flick (2013) noted that the outcome of a research depends on data analysis which has several goals. One of the aims of data analysis is to describe a phenomenon in detail, which might, “be the subjective experience of an individual or a group of people” (Flick, 2013, p. 5). Creswell and Creswell (2018) compared data analysis to peeling an onion since there are different steps in the process. The data analysis process involves taking the data apart and putting it back together. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested putting the data together into smaller themes to organize, sort, and find what was needed in the pool of collected data.

The purpose of gathering data from the interviews, the vignettes, the Self-Anchoring Scale activity, and the sentence completion activity was to triangulate the responses from the data sources to better understand the perceptions of the participants related to stress. Data were collected until I reached saturation which meant until the data related to the interview questions became repetitive and participants had no further information to add. In analyzing the data, I followed the six-step process recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018) which were:

- **Step 1.** Preparing and organizing the data for analysis. After collecting the data from the interviews, I transcribed, organized, and prepared the data so I could analyze it.
- **Step 2.** Reading and getting familiar with the data. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested, reading the data provides the opportunity to get a sense of the data collected. To learn more about the information that was gathered, I read and looked at the data several times to develop a strong comprehension of the data and to

understand the meaning behind it. It helped locate any data related to stress, stressors, coping strategies, and factors that were helpful in coping with stress.

- **Step 3.** Coding the data. I used the data collected from different data sources to extract meaningful data related to the interviews and the research questions by using participants words and phrases which I highlighted. The theoretical framework of the study also helped guide the data analysis.
- **Step 4.** Reviewing the codes, putting them in categories, finding and generating themes. In this step, I reviewed the codes to eliminate the unnecessary ones. Based on the similarities in concepts or idea, I organized and grouped them into categories and looked for connections between the codes and the research questions to eliminate the codes that were not related.
- **Step 5.** Interrelating and representing themes. Some themes, as Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested, are expected and easy to find. They are based on what is found in the literature. Surprising codes are the ones the researcher did not anticipate before the study. Unusual or interesting concepts are those that the reader discovers and is interested in.
- **Step 6.** The final step was writing a summary of the findings and making an interpretation.

After recording each interview on Zoom, I transcribed the data on Otter ai. I then printed out the interview transcripts and started organizing the information collected from all four data collection methods. I asked the participants to confirm the study findings for accuracy. I used charting, organized the data, and started analyzing and making sense of the data by using the

transcribed texts to find meanings, patterns, and themes related to stress, sources of stress, and coping strategies.

The first step in the analysis was to read each transcript carefully to get a general understanding of the information and the perspective of each participant (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With the protocol and research questions in mind, I started highlighting patterns related to them. I used the participants' transcribed responses to chart and code the data. I used the participants' own words and phrases. For example, interview question 10 was, "*What is/was the most stressful aspect of pursuing a doctoral degree?*" In developing my codes, I started figuring out what things fit together by looking for repeating patterns. I read the participants' responses and highlighted words and phrases that could be used as codes for the questions, for example, words and phrases such as "time," "the stress of time," "available time," "not having enough time," and "not finding time." After I coded the transcriptions, I used a chart to identify patterns within the codes and to determine which codes could be combined. Then, the patterns were compressed into themes. For example, "not finding time," "stress of time," and "not having time" were combined as they are all related to the theme "lack of time and time management." To ensure the themes were consistent, I did a final review of the data. The data analysis was an ongoing process and required continuous reflection of the data and moving back and forth between different steps in the process. Once all charts were completed, I summarized the themes that emerged based on what the participants had shared with me (see Appendix K). The final step was organizing the charts according to the research questions and finding the concepts related to each research question. Table 4 displays the relation of questionnaire items to the research questions.

**Table 4***Research Question and Data Collection Matrix*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Questionnaire and Activity Items</b>
RQ1: How do executive doctoral students describe their experiences of stress and specific stressors?	Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q10, Q13, Q17 Students' Semi-structured interviews Self-Anchoring Scale activity
RQ2: How do executive doctoral students cope with their perceived stress?	Q12, Q14 Students' semi-structured interview
RQ3: How do doctoral faculty describe students' stress and stressors, and how do they perceive students' coping?	Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q8, Q11 Faculty semi-structure interviews Q12 vignette for Faculty Q16, Q17 Sentence Completion
RQ4: What do doctoral students and faculty suggest as effective coping strategies to improve the experiences for doctoral students?	Q9, Q11, Q12, Q14, Q15, Q16 Students 'interview questions- Self-Anchoring Scale activity Q 7, Q8, Q4, Q10 Faculty Interviews Q13, Q14, Q15-Faculty vignette Self-Anchoring Scale activity

*Note:* Question 1 in students' first interview and questions 1 and 2 in faculty interview were warm up questions. Question 18 in students' interview and Q11 for faculty were added in the event participants needed to add additional info they had forgotten to mention during the interview. Q17 was for doctoral students who had graduated or were in completion phase.

**Ethical Issues**

As a qualitative researcher, my goal was to understand the participants' experiences in relation to stress through interviews with the doctoral students and, in this process, ethical issues could be present during the study (Berg, 2001; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Punch, 2005; Sieber, 1998, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To protect the participants in my study and promote trustworthiness, it was required that I point out and write about the ethical issues related to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As mentioned previously, each participant received a consent form to read and sign. The consent form described for the respondents the purpose of my research, the information that would be collected, any identifiable risks, and the way data would

be collected and used. Participants were assured that the information would be used for the sole purpose of conducting the study and that their names would be kept confidential by using a pseudonym they had chosen prior to the start of the interview. All this information was given to the participants prior to the first interview. After the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and printed, due to confidentiality, they were all deleted from Zoom, Microsoft office Word, and Otter ai.

I strived to build a rapport with the participants to gain their trust and make them feel comfortable, as suggested by Creswell (2018). The first questions of the interviews were warm-up questions to make the participants feel at ease. My relationship with my participants was solely a working partnership (Weis, 1994) and mainly to collect data. All participants were treated equally.

### **Trustworthiness**

To persuade the readers that the findings are worthy of attention, they have to be trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba introduce the four criteria for trustworthiness: dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability. To establish the dependability of my research, I conducted a pilot study with two people. They were asked to comment on the interview questions, vignettes, and other data collection sources to ensure the questions were clear. (Miles et al., 1994). Before the interviews, my chair conducted an expert review to assess the questions for clarity and conciseness.

To ensure credibility, the findings of the research should make sense to the participants and the readers (Miles et al., 1994). I explained my positionality as the investigator and provided a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study (Shenton, 2004). I applied member

checking and provided each participant the opportunity to check the findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To ensure the results of the findings were the experiences of the participants and not my preferences, I deployed data triangulation since using only “a single source of information could not be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective and incorporating different sources helped validate cross-check findings” (Patton, 1999, p. 244). Maxwell (2013) also recommends using triangulation, feedback, and rich data to increase trustworthiness. Multiple participants with different perspectives assisted in alleviating researcher bias of seeing data from only one point of view (Denzin, 1989). The study methods and procedures were described in detail so that future researchers can replicate the study. Moustakas (1994) claimed bracketing out individual experiences should be as objective as possible. To show I was self-aware of my personal assumptions and to increase confirmability (Miles et al. 1994), I also used a reflective journal. The reflective journal included my thoughts and assumptions to help clarify my biases and eliminate them from the study as much as possible. This journal also provided the steps I took before, during, and after each interview and provided a transparent audit trail. All data related to the study were retained and secured in a safe place and deleted from the computer.

The findings of this research are specific to a small number of participants in an executive doctoral program. Shenton (2004) suggested it is not desirable to demonstrate that findings from qualitative research apply to other populations or situations since qualitative research findings often relate to a small sample of individuals (Maxwell, 2008). This sample is a purposefully selected group (Patton, 2002) rather than a random sample. Therefore, Miles et al. (2014) stated that the transfer of a study’s findings to other contexts depends on how persuasive a case the researcher can make so that it resonates with other individuals in other sites or time.

Kennedy (1979) attested that a researcher should not be concerned with generalizing since “generalizability would be made by the reader who is trying to apply the findings to his/her own situation” (p. 672). The findings from the different data sources in this study include detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation to allow the readers to properly understand and compare the instances of the phenomenon provided in the research findings with those that emerge in their real-life situations.

### **Epoche/Bracketing**

The word *epoche* has its root in Greek and means avoiding judgments which, according to Patton (2002), means staying away from our everyday assumptions and not looking at events and situations through our everyday lens but through a new framework. All my biases, preconceptions, and assumptions had to be blocked (which is almost impossible to completely bracket) to accurately interpret a phenomenon,

With phenomenology research being associated with emotions and feelings, I, as the researcher, had to set aside personal feelings and look at the experience from a different angle. As a student who had experienced stress throughout the program, I had an awareness of some sources of stress and have my own perceptions and assumptions. Part of my effort in conducting this study was to do my best to be impartial and withhold my biases, assumptions, and desires from interfering in the study by “shifting attitude” and looking at stress through a lens that is different from mine (Patton, 2015, p. 575). I did my best to follow Moustakas’s (1994) advice which was to set aside my everyday knowledge and assumption and understand the phenomena under investigation. In this process, I:

- took the data back to the participants and had them review the transcriptions [Lincoln and Guba (1985) claimed this is an important technique for establishing credibility and validating the correctness of the data and findings];
- had a follow-up-interview, emailed students, or met on Zoom for additional explanation and more information (to elicit sufficient detail and to minimize the risk of misinterpretations);
- used triangulation in data collection (by not relying on one method of data collection and finding other sources of data collection methods that helped support the interpretations);
- checked for alternative explanations (As a researcher, I had to scrutinize the data and check the accuracy of data by comparing the interpretations with interpretations in similar settings or in other studies to see if there were alternative explanations, possibilities, and trends); and
- Wrote and acknowledged all my assumptions and thoughts related to data collection and analysis in a journal.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 provided an overview of the research design, data collection method, instruments, and data analysis. In the next chapter, the findings from the analyses are organized and presented with illustrative participant quotes. Finally in Chapter 5, the study's findings are interpreted based on the research questions, and the delimitations, implications for research and practice, as well as the study's conclusion are offered.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research questions based on the analysis of the data collected. The data for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews, vignettes, a Self-Anchoring Scale activity (Kilpatrick & Cantril, 1960), and sentence completion. Fifteen doctoral students and three faculty were selected to participate in the study. Sharing the participants' stories and lived experiences of stress and the results obtained from the research could be helpful for future doctoral students. Each doctoral student had two separate interviews that were 3-7 days apart and were conducted on Zoom. Before the interviews, each participant chose a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. In the first interview, doctoral students answered open-ended questions about their perspectives and stress experiences. The interview was followed by a vignette. In the second interview, the questions were focused more on students' coping strategies. A Self-Anchoring Scale activity (Kilpatrick & Cantril, 1960) concluded the second interview questions to allow respondents to evaluate their status regarding stress by using numerical representations of it.

In this chapter, I present the findings of this qualitative study. I describe the data analysis method I used and the findings from the data that were collected. The study was designed to achieve three purposes:

- to understand executive doctoral students' lived experiences related to the phenomenon of stress during their doctoral journey,
- to investigate and understand the doctoral students' perceptions of the stressors related to the program and identify their coping skills, and
- to understand faculties' perceptions of sources of stress and the effective coping strategies for their doctoral students.

After I collected the data through one-on-one interviews with the students and faculty members and through other data collection methods, I transcribed the data and analyzed each transcription separately according to the research questions. Then, the data were reviewed together to provide a holistic response to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do executive doctoral students describe their experiences of stress and specific stressors?

RQ2: How do executive doctoral students cope with their perceived stress?

RQ3: How do doctoral faculty describe students' stressors, and how do they perceive students' coping?

RQ4: What do doctoral students and faculty suggest as effective coping strategies to improve the experiences for doctoral students?

I conducted two interviews with each doctoral student. I also conducted a separate interview with each of the faculty members. Before conducting the main interviews, I had a pilot study with one doctoral student and a faculty on Zoom. The pilot study was a good practice to learn how to apply the interview protocol and where to make the necessary changes such as reframing the questions in the Self-Anchoring Scale activity.

### **Interview Experience**

With the fear of COVID-19 still lingering, all participants, except for one doctoral student, chose to have the interviews on Zoom rather than in person. Depending on the participants' schedule and work hours, I sometimes conducted four interviews in one day, each one lasting between 30 to 45 minutes. During each Zoom interview, I tried to listen carefully and at the same time study the participants' faces and attitudes. This proved to be slightly difficult as I had to take notes and listen at the same time. What made it more difficult was seeing only their

faces on the screen. When participants' responses to the questions were not clear enough, I had to use prompts and keep asking questions to elicit more information so they could clarify and elaborate on their responses. In cases that I felt the responses were still not clear enough and needed more clarification, I would email the participants, or we would schedule and meet again on Zoom to clarify the grey areas. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if they wanted to add any additional information or share any important thoughts they had forgotten to mention.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study included 15 doctoral students and three faculty of the college. Table 5 displays the demographic information of the doctoral students who participated in this study. Most of the doctoral students were full-time employees with an age ranging of 30-60 years old. Many of the participants were female doctoral students. Most of them had children. While many participants had adult children who were living independently and away from the family, some participants had younger children. Flexibility of work schedule varied among participants.

**Table 5**

*Doctoral Students' Personal Demographic Information*

<b>Participant Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age in Years</b>	<b>Full-Time/Part Time</b>	<b>Work Schedule Flexibility</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Industry</b>
Kati	White	3	F	36-40	Full-Time	Not Flexible	0	Healthcare
Ralph	White	2	M	56-older	Full-Time	Flexible	0	Education

Participant Pseudonyms	Race	Cohort	Gender	Age in Years	Full-Time/Part Time	Work Schedule Flexibility	Number of Children	Industry
Granger	African American	6	F	56-older	Full-Time	Not flexible	1	Public Sector
John	White	2	M	56-older	Full-time	Flexible	3	Business
Hank	White	5	M	41-45	Full-Time	Somewhat flexible	3	Business
Tony	White	2	M	36-40	Full-Time	Flexible	3	Procurement
Jane	White	5	F	36-40	Full-Time	Not flexible	1	Education
Monique	African American	5	F	51-55	Full-Time	Not flexible	1	Education
Sophie	White	6	F	36-40	Full-Time	Somewhat flexible	0	Research
Eleni	White	1	F	56 - older	Part-time	Somewhat flexible	0	Business
Audrey	White	4	F	30-35	Full-Time	Flexible	0	Healthcare
Lidia	White	1	F	51-55	Full-Time	Somewhat	1	Education
Anna	White	3	F	51-55	Full-Time	Flexible	2	Business
Kari	Hispanic	4	F	46-50	Full-Time	Not flexible	3	Education
Teddy	White	4	M	30-35	Full-time	Not flexible	1	Education

*Note:* There were only three faculty who participated in this study, and given the small size of the program, in order to protect their identity and confidentiality, no demographic information is shared.

One of the data collection methods I used for the students was a modified Self-Anchoring Scale activity at the end of the second interview. In this activity, I asked the participants to provide some characteristics of both an ideal doctoral program and a worst doctoral program in terms of being stress free versus stressful. The words of the participants are outlined in the first two columns of Table 6. The first column shows the characteristics of a worst doctoral program that is very stressful. The second column describes an ideal doctoral program.

The third column is the students rating of their stress level at present, in the past, and future. For this activity, I also asked the doctoral students to rate their stress levels at different points in time, at present, in the past, and future. The Self-Anchoring rating scale ranged from 0 to 10, with 0 representing no stress and 10 representing a high stress level. After the ranking, I asked the students a few follow-up questions to explore the causes behind the ranking and the differences that existed between present and past and present to future rankings.

**Table 6**

*Participants' Responses on the Self-Anchoring Scale Activity*

Participants	The Worst Program		Ratings for Past-Present-Future		
			Past	Present	Future
<b>Tony</b>	Too hands on	Not too hands-on	10	4	3
	Not knowing who to talk to (No communication)	After work or weekend classes			
	Day classes				
<b>Lidia</b>	Professors are not on the same accord with the vision	Professors in accord with the vision of the program	5	5	5
	Professors that don't understand the vision	Flexible			
	Inflexible in timeline	Having assignments that are woven into the objectives of each course			
	Not responding to the working-individual life circumstances				
<b>Anna</b>	Virtual,	Weeknights	8	5	5
	Having no interaction	Cohort style			
		Having independent time			
<b>Ralph</b>	Lack of support	A supportive program –	5	8.5	6
	Program with Bureaucracy	A part-time program			
	A program that does not care if students graduate				

Participants	The Worst Program		Ratings for Past-Present-Future		
<b>Granger</b>	No support services	A program with a tech	9	7	5
	Not Flexible	advancement in technology.			
	Not appreciating students	Cohort style to build			
	Not aware of student struggles	relationships			
	Not providing access or being current with technology	Good Reputation			
	Overpriced	One that is affordable			
	Not providing quality content				
<b>Audrey</b>	Unstructured	Motivating and self-driven	8	6	2
	Lack of expectations				
<b>Eleni</b>	Physically, emotionally, and verbally abusive	Students are recognized for their abilities and what they bring to the program	8	3	3
	Not having any respect for students	One that shows what the possibilities are			
	Your voice is not listened to				
<b>John</b>	No boundaries or no directions	Very high structure	2	2	1
	No structure	Diversity of student			
<b>Hank</b>	No respect for working students	Allowing students to apply talents and skills to create knowledge	8	6	8
	Not flexible	Provides support			
	Not mindful of students' time	Considers you as a person			
		offers financial assistance	0	8	8
<b>Monique</b>	Isolation	A program that aligns itself more to students' working lifestyle			
<b>Teddy</b>	A program advancing their own interests	Allowing students autonomy to pursue areas of interest to them	2	5	5
	Using students as tools	Professors care about students			
		Students feel cared			
		Not treated as numbers or used			
		Faculty get along with each other			

Participants	The Worst Program		Ratings for Past-Present-Future		
			Past	Present	Future
<b>Kari</b>	A program that is disconnected	Each class is a piece to a	6	5	0
	A program that you don't feel valued or heard	bigger puzzle (connected) Timely feedback			
	A program with a lot of change, a lot of rigidity	Professors would be accessible			
<b>Jane</b>	Lack of support, Minimal communication	Availability of the instructors and program directors	1	5	5
	Unavailability of the program director and instructors, Virtual	Communication Motivation			
	No collegiality	Supportive instructors			
		Understanding students and their situations			
		Flexibility In-person /live instruction			
<b>Kati</b>	Disorganization	Organized	9	5	1
	Lack of communication	Structured			
<b>Sophie</b>	Not being flexible, Teachers not spending time with students	A program that allows meeting up with advisors every semester	4	4	4
	no communication	being comfortable in the physical space			
		program with resources flexibility			

Some participants' responses revealed common characteristics related to the worst or an ideal program. Some common keywords indicated that an ideal program should possess the following characteristics:

- It should be supportive and help students successfully finish the journey.
- It should be flexible in the timeline expectations and understand the doctoral students' work and life situations.

- An ideal program should value and respect the students for who they are and not just as “a body in a seat.”

Based on the data obtained from the first interview, using participants’ own words and phrases, participants reported their main common stressors were lack of time and time management, finding the balance, the dissertation process, heavy workload, and stressors related to work and family. Two specific stressors for the executive doctoral students in the study were Saturday classes, which involved giving up the weekends, and the statistics course. The following sections describe findings relating to each research question. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, I used pseudo names that the participants had chosen prior to the interviews. To indicate direct quotations of participants, I used italics and single spacing.

### **Doctoral Students’ Perceptions of Stress and Stressors**

The first research question explored participants’ perceptions of stress and stressors related to the executive doctoral program. Participants used different terms to express their stress and how they felt. Terms such as *rollercoaster*, *whirlwind*, *marathon*, and *rigorous* were some of the words the doctoral students used to characterize the stress of the program. Kari, who was in the completion phase of the program, talked about the stress of the journey stating there were lots of ups and downs and periods of high and low stress. She used the term *rollercoaster* to describe her stress in the program and said,

*I feel like it's a roller coaster. There are really highs where you're extremely stressed...you are up at night, and...you feel like you're getting the sweats. So, there are these high points, but then it comes down, and then there are these points you sit and wait.* (Kari)

As a doctoral student in the first year of the program, Granger used the words *rigorous* and *exhausting*:

*It's rigorous. I'm trying to think of something else because it's a little more than rigorous. But the one word I'll use right now is rigorous.... It is exhausting since stress has a physical reaction in my body which freezes me up and inhibits my performance.* (Granger)

Hank, a second-year doctoral student at the candidacy level, compared being in the doctoral program to being in a race and used the term *marathon* to describe his stress in the program:

*It's a marathon. It just feels like you're in this race running a marathon.*

For Monique, who was also at the candidacy level, the stress in the program was *real*.

Some other doctoral students described the program's stress in performing tasks such as *finding priorities* and *constant readings*:

*In one word, I would say real. And in a sentence, the stress is real.* (Monique)

*The stress was in deciding what was more important to focus on at the moment. The competing priorities I had were time with my kids, quality time with my wife, work, home responsibilities, and my mental health.* (Tony)

Sophie reported that stress was in the *constant readings* and the fear of falling behind.

*The constant reading. I am worried I am going to fall behind. I've had people advise me that when you're in a doctoral program, you should be reading your texts, like twice.* (Sophie)

Although students used various metaphors to describe stress, most doctoral students believed that, due to the demanding nature of a doctoral program, stress in any doctoral program, as well as an executive doctoral program, was expected and manageable.

*Of course, it's going to be stressful, [gaining]anything good is stressful. Everything is stressful because you're trying to do something you've never done. It's a growth experience. And with any growth comes stress.* (Eleni)

*Completing a doctorate is a stressful experience, no matter how brilliant the candidates are.* (Lidia)

*The program, of course, is high stress, but it is stress that I expected.* (Kari)

*I think the course is challenging. I think it's reasonably challenging. I personally would not attribute the word stressful, though. I think it's manageable. I don't know one sentence (to describe stress), but I think it's manageable.* (John)

*...manageable. I think that especially our program is so well managed, every step is supported. And it's very, very clear.*" (Teddy)

Teddy and John were the only participants who reported not being stressed in the program.

*I did not find the course stressful... I didn't experience any significant stress.*" (John)

*I might be an outlier in this. I don't really get stressed out easily, to be honest. You can call it anxiety. I've been supremely on top of getting all my assignments done.* (Teddy)

Using the vignette to understand more about stress and stressors, Teddy expressed the reason behind being stress-free.

*"I was not stressed because I had the time necessary to give to the program."* (Teddy)

As students who had successfully completed the doctoral program, John, Eleni, and Lidia believed that sometimes the stress the doctoral students experienced was self-induced. They stated to minimize the negative impacts of stress, students need to avoid doing more than what they are required to, and they should limit the time and effort for the tasks they are given. At the end of his interview, John added,

*.... I think a lot of it is, to a degree, self-inflicted, and I think the faculty could help the student or students by tackling this early and getting them to get the students to work on what is required and not create some mammoth paper that's taken 26 hours. When we should spend two or three hours.* (John)

*Understanding that you have to limit your time and not invest more in any given task than it needs. You know, once you polish the apple, it's shiny. It's not going to get any [more]shiny, right? It's done.* (Eleni)

*I think my eagerness to be perfect, my perfectionism, my ignorant eagerness to easily balance my life, my family, my own self, and my social-emotional well-being as well as being a full-time leader in my job ...serving the community and my church you know... were my self-imposed stressors of having to get this done, I got to do this. I was my own*

*mountain and in creating my own stress, because I always wondered I was not spending enough time with my family.... (Lidia)*

*I think a lot of people bring stressors with them (Tony)*

In response to how stress in the program has impacted them, some participants stated that the stress from the program has had an adverse impact on their well-being.

*Sometimes I get headaches and a bit fidgety as my mind is constantly racing and thinking of how much I need to get done. I sacrifice exercise and do not move as much as I should. (Granger)*

*I tend to get flustered, and unfortunately, can take it out on others.... because sometimes if I'm super focused on something, it just gets to be so overwhelming, and then I tend to internalize it, I don't want help from other people. (Kati)*

*I remember feeling tired a fair amount of time. (Ralph)*

*We spend a lot of time together on a Saturday and people get tired from the workweek and the stress (Hank)*

With her busy work schedule and school, Eleni stated she was *exhausted*.

*I was exhausted, I mean, completely exhausted. And so that's why I made the choice to cut way back (my work). (Eleni)*

For Hank, it was thoughts of quitting. Back-to-back classes and the amount of work became so stressful that in his first year in the program, Hank had considered dropping out.

*Coming through the summer, particularly in the fall, those last two classes, I was the grumpiest I've been. I felt the most in doubt. Last fall. Again, I did consider postponing or dropping out. I am glad I didn't.... This semester, I feel like I have direction. There was a point last fall where I was just feeling rudderless. And my tank didn't have any fuel left in it. (Hank)*

Not everyone believed that the impact of stress was negative. For some doctoral students, such as Anna who had graduated from the program, stress did not always equate with negative experiences. She referred to the stress in the program as challenging but in a positive way. Stress provided an opportunity for her to balance her various responsibilities by planning and prioritizing.

*.... the program, in general, was challenging, which I liked, I mean, in a good way. I guess maybe challenging me to juggle and prioritize....*

The adverse impact of stress on her was related to her research methodology selection.

*I was originally going to do mixed methods research because I really wanted to do some quantitative analysis. And I just said, no, I'm just doing qualitative. (Anna)*

### **Lack of Time and Time Management**

A common theme coming from more than half of the participants talking about sources of stress regardless of what stage of the program they were in, was *lack of time and time management*. Ralph said, *Time is a big theme and finding time in a doctoral students' busy schedule and learning how to manage it is stressful*. Many other students referred to lack of time and the pressure to finish on time as a challenge and a source of stress. As students in the transition stage, Granger and Sophie noted,

*When I have a project, I like spending some time thinking about where I can go, what else I can look at. And so, you know, if you don't have a whole lot of time to get it done, you really have to knuckle down. (Sophie)*

*To make time is the concern for me right now. The challenge I have is time. (Granger)*

As a student in the candidacy phase Monique stated,

*So, time is a stressor as well, because you want to finish when you can, but you also want to do a quality job. So, time, money, the isolation, all those can be definitely big stressors. (Monique)*

And time was even a stressful issue for Audrey who was in the completion phase.

*My main source of stress in the program would have been finding time to do it all. (Audrey)*

Lack of time, not the assignments, was what made things difficult and stressful for Hank who was in the candidacy stage.

*I would say 99% of the stress is related to time management. It's finding the time and the energy to give your best to one more goal to one more thing. And...that's been about it. I*

*don't find things we do is that difficult, as long as you have the time to sit and put the time into the research and reflecting, thinking, processing, and creating.... (Hank)*

Tony believed that no matter how intelligent or smart the students were, lack of time created stress.

*I knew I had the capabilities to do any of the assignments that were presented to me. You know, I made it into the program. I'm an intelligent person. I've got a master's degree; I've got a bachelor's degree. I did fairly well for myself in a number of areas, so I knew I could do it. It was just a matter of having the time to do it. (Tony)*

### **Work, Life, and School Balance**

One significant source of stress for most doctoral students, in all stages of the program, was the struggle to balance work, life, and study. Most participants were full-time employees with little to no flexibility in their work schedules; therefore, maintaining a healthy balance between their academic, personal, and professional life had been stressful.

*Finding time-making that clear delineation to create that balance.... My work, life, and school balance. I am still struggling to find out, what does it look like? (Granger)*

Doctoral students believed that finding the right balance while striving to meet all the deadlines at work and school and trying to make time for family and friends, along with all the other challenges in life, had been quite stressful, particularly for those students who had various responsibilities and roles.

*It's hard to find the balance when everything's due within a couple of weeks. (Sophie)*

*Needing to meet others and professors or things like that during the workday.... makes it difficult to kind of coordinate with my professional duties. (Audrey)*

In Lidia's description of her stress and stress level, using the Self-Anchoring Scale activity, she explained her frustration in finding the balance among different tasks.

*And then just the balance I think.... Sometimes stressors were all those competing life experiences, along with coursework at the same time as I was doing research. (Lidia)*

As a principal at an elementary school during the pandemic, a new mom, and a student, Jane stated that the added stress came from *having and managing too many responsibilities* and trying to balance it all.

*..... So, all the added hours and the time to complete my doctoral program requirements have been difficult at times, especially with being a...mom. Managing the time that takes to complete all your assignments with your personal life and professional [life]. (Jane)*

### **The Dissertation Process**

One of the stressors identified by many doctoral students in this study was the dissertation process. Different elements contributed to doctoral students' stress in this phase. Some of the stress participants experienced during the dissertation process were attributed to different factors related to this process. Co-ordinating the committee and their timelines, academic writing, editing, learning, and adapting the APA were some stressors related to the dissertation process reported by participants. But the main stressors related to the dissertation for these executive doctoral students were finding a topic and writing like a scholar.

### ***Topic Selection***

Doctoral students revealed that one of the most important decisions they had to make while on their doctoral journey was choosing a topic and sticking to it. Identifying and choosing the right research topic that would be interesting and compelling was a big challenge for students and was reported by most students and faculty members, in this study, as being stressful. During the faculty interviews and the sentence completion activity,

Related to the issue of the dissertation topic, some students also added,

*One of the common highly stressful situations is the selection of your topic and subject matter. (John)*

*.... you hear other students' topic. And they say a very nice topic title, and you're like, my gosh, that's so much more interesting than my topic. ...and that's very intimidating when you don't have a topic yet. (Ralph)*

*The most stressful was trying to land and develop a dissertation topic. (Tony)*

*I think kind of the writing of the proposal time. When you're narrowing down your topic, you're writing your lit review. That piece to me is pretty stressful because I just remember thinking, I don't know what I'm doing. And I just thought, you know, that was a really big feeling of overwhelm. (Kari)*

Like Granger, Sophie was also in the first year of the program. She, too, thought that finding a topic was stressful.

*Currently, the most stressful thing to me is I don't know what I want to do my dissertation on. (Sophie)*

During the Self-Anchoring Scale activity, Kari revealed that her stress level increased as she got closer to the final chapters of her dissertation. For many of the participants, the dissertation stage was the most stressful part and for various reasons.

*It was the last homestretch, but it was stressful in an exhilarating, exciting, and passionate way. Right? You are now making meaning out of your passion. You are now making meaning out of the data.*

*The last part (only) because of the timeline of the dissertation. (John)*

*I have to say, towards the end. It was writing the paper. (Ralph)*

*You know, it's really the third and final year. (Anna)*

As a faculty, Dr. Jerry also stated the last phase was stressful because:

*Well year three you it's not like you're just working on your proposal and your thesis, you're also doing coursework.*

But For Katie and Audrey, the transition stage (first year) was the most stressful because of not knowing what to expect and too much anticipation.

### ***Scholarly Writing***

Writing is an integral part of any doctoral program, yet academic writing was difficult for some of these doctoral students. Granger was a doctoral student in the first phase of the program

and had not started the dissertation process yet. She stated that writing as a scholar was not her strong suit.

*The writing and the expectation, and the strong emphasis on APA .... I struggled with it, and I still struggle with it to some extent. (Granger)*

Doctoral students who were in the process of writing the dissertation believed writing the dissertation was different from all the other writings as there are different components related to it.

*I guess if I had to call it down to one thing, it's the writing of the dissertation. Right? Like at the end of the day, it's the big project at the end. And all the little parts that go along with it. (Kari)*

*This writing is not the writing that you would normally do. And you have to understand that. So, just understand that working on a doctoral program, working on your doctorate, your dissertation, the writing is totally different (from)any other writing you've ever done. (Monique)*

*The most stressful was at the very end... I was at that last push to be done. And all the back and forth with editing the entire dissertation. (Kati)*

For John, Anna, and Katie, the stressors of the dissertation were related to the committee, their personal timelines, and the timelines (deadlines) provided by the program.

*I'll say stressful.... were the timelines of the committee? And in dissertations.... there's nothing I could really do about it, I could try and push them all up, push, and pull them. But if I was waiting for the committee, I was waiting for the committee! (John)*

*There was stress in terms of the lack of organization with the timeline for the end process, for you know, finishing up a dissertation and submitting things. So that was stressful because I was determined.... I wanted to be one of the first ones done. And finding out at the last minute what the timeline was to get everything submitted so that I could actually finish and be done to get my degree by September, that was a huge stressor. (Katie)*

*Being told that we had hard deadlines, and then not getting the feedback that we needed to be able to meet those deadlines. (Anna)*

## Heavy Workload

Most participants reported heavy academic workload, such as readings, writings, and numerous presentations and projects, as a source of stress. With time being an issue for most doctoral students, given all the other responsibilities and roles they had, the amount of work and the deadlines were problematic and stressful for students like Jane, who noted,

*We had three large assignments to do all within two weeks. So it was hard to get all of that work done at once. (Jane)*

*I realized that being in a doctoral program, is a lot of reading and writing. Two things that I enjoy, you know, under normal conditions. (Granger)*

*At the end of the semester, last semester, we've been doing a lot of reading of course, and we've been doing a lot of notes taking, a lot of papers. (Sophie)*

*You have to read so many different articles, study other people's work, and synthesize that there are a lot of moving pieces at this point. (Monique)*

During the vignette activity, Tony stated that he would wake up early so he could meet the deadlines.

*I can't tell you how many times I would just wake up before class and write a 20-page paper that day, and then hand it in. (Tony)*

The heavy workload included group projects and too many presentations, which became a source of stress for some participants. Some students mentioned what made group projects stressful was having to do most of the work while others did a minimum amount of the work. Anna, a graduate of the program, and Sophie, a first-year doctoral student who did not have any children while in the program, said their sources of stress came from too many presentations, readings, and writings.

*Just the amount of work and taking away your personal life..., we had to do a presentation every single class, a ton of readings. I mean, it was a lot.... I think it's valuable to have team projects and to be able to do that. I was just paired with people who just didn't do the work or didn't have the time. (Anna)*

*And at the very end of the semester, we just had like, project after project after project and all these papers due....and it was just like go time. It was just that you had to get all this stuff done. And I think that was really stressful for me. (Sophie)*

## **Unanticipated Findings**

The semi-structured interviews were helpful in having students talk about their personal experiences of stress and stressors related to college, their work, and their family. However, including the Self-Anchoring Scale activity and the vignette with the students as another data collection source added to the richness of the data related to stress and stressors. The semi-structured interviews, the Self-Anchoring Scale activity, and the vignette revealed some stressors that were specific to the executive doctoral program.

### ***Saturday Classes***

One of these unique stressors was related to Saturday classes requiring students to give up the weekends. Students stated they could not relax or spend as much time with family and friends as they did before they entered the program.

*I hardly ever saw my family (on weekends) because any personal time I had was on research, and writing, and assignments. (Anna)*

*I remember people in our cohort, very stressed because they were missing their kids' Saturday championship baseball game or something.... (Eleni)*

*I think the largest thing is the three-year commitment of your going to lose your Saturday. (Hank)*

*Just to be absent, you know, for eight to 10 hours every Saturday for three years.... That Saturday commitment is huge, profound. (John)*

During the Self-Anchoring Scale activity, when describing his stress level and rating his stress, Ralph revealed that Saturday classes were a source of stress when he was in the program, but now that he has graduated, he feels relieved and less stressed

*Yes, right now just in my regular life and my work life and all that I'd say probably about [my stress] is a five.... I got my time back but also time on the weekend. (Ralph)*

With work on the weekdays, weekends are the only time students can focus on their studies. Participants explained how they divided the work on the weekends to catch up and get things done.

*Saturday, that was my workday. I knew that between eight and 11 pm. I was able to work. I didn't have other responsibilities at that moment. That's where I could work. I knew that on Sunday, I could block out four or five hours every single Sunday and just work. (Teddy)*

*Sunday, I try to spend at least eight hours, you know, just doing schoolwork, just to get caught up. (Granger).*

*We have a study group on Sundays, a study group that meets at the library in the same local area that I live. (Monique)*

For those who had graduated, not having to attend classes on the weekends was a relief. Anna's rating and discussions during the Self-Anchoring Scale activity revealed that having the weekends back and being able to spend more time with family and friends was a good reason to be less stressed.

*Now [It's less stress], I can balance family time. I mean, I basically hardly ever saw my family because any personal time I had was on research and writing and assignments.... And so, I spend a lot more time with family ...and friends as well. There is some more social time.*

Ralph also found it a relief to have his Saturdays back and stated,

*Now, the weekend freedom helps take away from the stress of my regular life. So, think about the program, in my mind you add in the extra stress, you also have less time to decompress. (Ralph)*

### ***The Statistics Course***

One of the stressful experiences shared by many of the doctoral students and echoed by the faculty members was related to statistics and the statistics course. Being out of school too

long and trying to learn statistical concepts, the terminology, the logic behind it, and how to apply statistics to research were all difficult for many of the doctoral students. Katie, who had graduated from the program, expressed her frustration with statistics by stating,

*One thing that caused me a huge amount of stress was statistics. I had avoided it my whole...educational journey, I avoided it my Bachelor's, my master's. So, knowing that I had to take statistics, I thought I was going to die. (Katie)*

*Actually, working through the statistics for my quantitative dissertation was a major stressor. (Eleni)*

*Yeah, it's not my cup of tea. I still don't really get it.... the large difference in the students' abilities.... there were pockets of people that could have higher-level conversations and pockets of people that really couldn't contribute at that level. And that was difficult, because we slowed down, you know, in some areas, and not in others. Then, it didn't make a big difference to me until we got the statistics. And it was like, I'm not getting this because of something else. And you're slowing me down so much because they're not even getting the underlying thing here. So, I was struggling, because I never was able to get the time and the attention and the levels that I needed to feel comfortable with. (Tony)*

*And I think in a program where you've got something like a statistics class if you have somebody who's right there, who's able to answer all your questions and be able to be like, you're fine. (Sophie)*

*I don't think that the actual tasks of the doctorate were overly taxing or overly challenging. I don't think that the course assignments, with the exception, maybe I could see statistics, being challenging for some folks. (Teddy)*

*.... all of this statistics, heavy, heavy statistics, and I've been taking statistics classes, and you know, my master's programs since, like 1993-1994, to just be thrown into that. And, and it was never something that I really comprehended. I've always had trouble with statistics. So, for me, I felt that that was just too hard and too heavy. (Anna)*

*Students need to get to a certain level of comfort in logic, math and probability, and statistical concepts. that for many of them, they seem to have developed, unfortunately, a personal bias against some of those areas. And so, trying to just break them out of that and convince them that yes, you can do this. I think that's one of the biggest challenges. (Dr. McKinley)*

## **External Stressors**

According to some participants, the stress they experienced was not solely related to their academic setting. Some stressors stemmed from doctoral students' work and life events and the different responsibilities they had. The prevalence of the pandemic accentuated stress for some participants.

### ***Work and Family***

The doctoral students in this program were adults most of whom worked full time. Some had little to no flexibility in their work schedule. Different factors outside of the doctoral program related to their jobs and family such as losing a job, changing careers, traveling for work, experiencing the birth of a child, having an illness, taking care of an elderly family member prevented some doctoral students from persisting and, therefore, created stress. According to many of the participants, work and family-related issues had been stressful. Trying to be a responsible and caring parent, partner, or child and meeting the deadlines at work, college, and many other responsibilities had been a source of stress, particularly during the pandemic. Tony said his dedication to work and family and not being able to focus on school was challenging,

*The things that pulled me away from doing the assignments were...dedication to family and employment.*

During the Self-Anchoring Scale activity, when he rated his stress level, he pointed out his main source of stress and added,

*When I was in the program, the stress mainly came from my work life, and I hit 10 a few times I probably stayed around a seven or an eight, the majority of the time [in the program]. (Tony)*

Katie mentioned during her interview and the Self-Anchoring Scale activity that issues related to family and health were a source of stress. She explained how the conflict between her

job, her school, and COVID, in addition to her family issues, contributed to her high-stress levels and her high ratings of her stress level.

*I had two different surgeries while I was in the program.... I was dealing with some stress with my family because my dad had lost his job.*

*My stress level was probably an eight or nine because I was dealing with work, COVID, on top of trying to get all the stuff done. (Kati)*

For Anna, it was work that caused stress,

*...pre-pandemic, I was traveling six to seven days a week, delivering training all over the U.S. and Canada. So, I was on the road constantly. And so that was a huge stressor.*

For Monique, it was a combination of work, family, and college. Being in the program was like working a full-time job while taking care of an elderly family member.

*With my son...at home, a lot of things going on and trying to manage things that, doctoral program becomes a second full-time job. It literally becomes your second full-time job.*

### ***The Pandemic***

With COVID-19 spreading, the pandemic became an additional stressor for many people, including doctoral students. Remote learning took the place of in-person classes. Virtual classes and no interactions with peers were difficult for Audrey.

*I think one of the biggest stressors I have experienced was just the lack of connection. You know, obviously, COVID makes it hard.*

College assignments and challenges at work and home amid the fear of the pandemic were an added stress for Monique, Kari, and Katie.

*My job is a stressor. I'm taking care of my elderly mother-in-law.... She's moving into our home with us, that is a stressor, the pandemic is a stressor, dealing with the stresses of the pandemic, dealing with just work in general. And the various stresses come from working inside of school system. (Monique)*

*I couldn't control for a pandemic, I couldn't control for things that were going on with my kids, I couldn't control for my health.... I couldn't control those kinds of things that are outside, and you have to roll with that. You know, I remember when my child got*

*COVID, and it was in the initial stages of the COVID pandemic.... I had assignments to do well. I knew I had to get my assignments done. But my mind was not focused on my assignments, my mind was focused on my kid that had COVID, and I am four hours away from her. So, it's those kinds of things that, I think for me, caused me the most stress.*  
(Kari)

*COVID was definitely a big stressor because I was working more hours than I normally do. I was dealing with all of that in the midst of trying to collect data and still dealing with class work.* (Katie)

### **Students' Coping Strategies**

The second research question examined doctoral students' interventions and coping strategies that were helpful to manage the stress they experienced at home, college, or their workplace. I expected the students and faculty members to mention just a few coping strategies, but most doctoral students provided a plethora of positive coping strategies they used in different situations when they felt stressed. Many were flexible in their coping strategies depending on the stressful situation they faced. In the following sections, the most popular strategies that were identified and used by many of the participants will be described.

#### **Planning and Prioritizing**

One of the cognitive-based coping skills used by many participants was active planning. By planning and prioritizing, the doctoral students decided on the importance of the tasks, the order, and time they needed to allocate to each task at work, college, or home. This helped students to stay on task and make sure time was used in the best possible way. Practices, such as writing a list of things to do and planning and prioritizing tasks based on their importance and urgency, helped alleviate the doctoral students' stress levels. So, instead of avoiding their personal, professional, and/or academic responsibilities, these doctoral students oversaw their duties by being in control.

*I prioritize what has the most weight. I Plan and try to figure out the time it will take for me to complete those things.* (Audrey)

*I schedule everything. I am a planner. I look ahead and see what my schedule looks like. Look at your schedule and figure out when you are working, when your schoolwork is, and when you have your downtime. (Anna)*

*I think overall planning really helps lay out what I have to do and how, when I can devote time to doing one task or another, doesn't always work out. But at least I feel like, in my head, I've got a plan. And that really helps me a lot. (Eleni)*

*I plan in my agenda what days I'm going to get what assignments done. This has been helpful for me. Just having that clear picture of this is what I'm going to do this and the days I need to do it. (Jane)*

*I think making a plan to reduce the energy draining things is important to do. (Ralph)*

Kari, who is quite a planner, believed that not having a plan or schedule creates stress.

*I know there are a lot of people in my cohort that are very comfortable doing things last minute. I am not. If you see my calendar, everything is planned out. And I have, like, start this assignment here, have a draft by here. Everything is very well planned out because I can't leave things to the last minute to allow myself to get overwhelmed or stressed. Not letting things back up .... I live by my Outlook calendar privately as well. (Kari)*

But planning was not always written down. For Sophie, it was a mental picture of what she had to do.

*I'm making lists. And, and checking them all step by step. Sometimes the lists are just in my mind. (Sophie)*

## **Being Mindful and Mindfulness Practices**

For some students, being mindful and mindfulness practices, such as praying, slowing down, taking a deep breath to increase present moment awareness and engagement, were among some factors that helped reduce stress.

*I am a firm believer in prayer... Mindfulness, you know, just meditating, thinking about the situation, but not perseverating. (Monique)*

*Pray... It seems to just help put me in a place, and to be able to operationalize what I'm up against, and then manage it [stress]. (Lidia)*

*Take a breath, slow down, those types of things. So mindfulness, for sure is important to me (Audrey).*

*When you're in these longer races, you must be cognizant of making sure that you're entering it with enough strength to come to complete, but also that you're managing your energy reserves and replenishing yourself along [with] the race in such a way that...you can finish to your best ability. You don't want to burn yourself out. So, I think it's being mindful of those challenges. (Hank)*

*I think it's all how you look at the situation. (Granger)*

*Asking myself, is it in my sphere of control? And then if the answer's no, okay, so what can I do if I have no control over this? Then what should be my next steps and identifying what I should do. (Monique)*

### **Exercise, Sleep, and Nutrition**

The executive doctoral students reported that exercising had been an effective way to alleviate the stress of the program. Physical activity was one of the ways students avoided the negative impacts of stress. Activities such as walking, hiking, swimming, or going to the gym were among some of the ways students tried to fight off stress.

*Exercise is definitely my stress release. (Jane)*

*The second thing I do after I do my prayer group is exercise for at least 30 minutes, 20 to 30 minutes every single day. (Monique)*

*I make a point at something, either walking, going to local YMCA. Going to my gym, and swimming. (Ralph)*

*Take care of yourself. Keep up the exercise routine.... one thing that I enjoy doing to relieve stress is exercising. (Granger)*

*Manage the impact of stress through movement whether it is exercise or walk. (Lidia)*

*Going for walks and carving out time for me. (Teddy)*

*If I need to destress, I can just go home .... go on a hike with my dog. (Sophie)*

While some doctoral students talked about the benefits of being active, Eleni, Kari, and Ralph believed in the benefits of sleep and nutrition as well as exercise.

*There are things that I need to do for me, you know that they may relieve stress, but they also feed you. They give you good stuff inside. And that helps keep your stress level down, too. I mean, all the usual stuff, you have to make sure that you've got enough time for sleep and exercise and good nutrition. (Eleni)*

*I really try to monitor my sleep and what I eat.... So, I think the biggest thing was really about probably the exercise and the eating law. (Kari)*

*You have to take care of physical. You've got to eat, you've got to sleep, you've got to exercise, you know, if you were not doing them before, start doing them now. (Ralph)*

Some students talked about coping with stress using unhealthy eating habits.

*I will say that I have coping mechanisms that are not healthy. So, I find myself in times of heightened stress eating a lot of chocolate. So, it's not a healthy way to do I, but I do that happens on occasion. The other, my other go to, is caffeine. So, I'm a caffeine junkie. (Kari)*

*I think that there are healthy ways to cope with stress and unhealthy ways to cope with stress. For instance, me loving to eat chocolate is an unhealthy way to cope with stress. (Teddy)*

*I'm a stress eater, I tend to snack a lot when I get stressed, and then I end up putting on weight, and it makes me unhappy, and then I just eat more because I'm stressed. (Hank)*

## **Taking a Break**

To restore their energy and mental resources and improve their productivity, some participants said it was helpful to take a break from technology, work, or study to carve out time to change the pace and scene and focus on something other than school. Making the time to stay away, disconnecting, listening to music, distracting the attention even if for a short period of time were among a few strategies students used to cope with stress.

*People who know me have come to realize that music is one of my stress relievers. (Granger)*

*Don't beat yourself up when you are tired; put the books down. Put the assignments down and take care of yourself. Take breaks. I have become intentional about taking time off. Planning vacation time and leave from office. When I have a lot on my plate at work, I take a vacation day, so I can be off the radar (Granger)*

*I try to make the time to watch a movie, take a walk, try to unplug from technology and get away from it. (Hank)*

*I like to take alone time.... carving out time for me. So, I do things that are distracting behaviors. (Teddy)*

*They [students] just need to figure out some way to disconnect even if it's for a short period of time, to allow them to focus on something different. (Dr. McKinley)*

*I would take breaks from the work, except sometimes I find this a little stressful too. Especially, if I was away from it for too long. (Ralph)*

Slowing down, being mindful, and diverting attention to other tasks were what Audrey, Hank, and Kari iterated.

*When I am stressed, I slow down. (Audrey)*

*I try to be mindful of those behaviors. I watch a movie and.... try to unplug from technology. (Hank)*

*.... go and read a book for a little bit something that's like, non-educationally related or non-work related something that's takes no brain power. (Kari)*

*.... make sure that you have enough time for intellectual stimulation and social engagement. (Eleni)*

*So sometimes.... you know, just sit, and just breathe for a little bit. I guess having some Mindfulness. That's been added to my repertoire of the other strategies. (Teddy)*

Dr. Jerry stated students needed longer breaks between the semesters to refresh and reduce stress.

*A break in between every semester, maybe you take a summer off, but everybody would have to take it. (Dr. Jerry)*

### **Faculty's Perceptions of Students' Stressors and Coping**

As for the third research question, faculty talked about the stressors of the program. They echoed some of the stressors mentioned by the students and talked about stress in the program.

As instructors, chairs, members of students' dissertation committees, faculty naturally talked more about the issues faced by students' academic life than stressors from students' personal or professional lives. During the interviews and the discussions related to the vignette, the faculty

acknowledged that, due to the nature and timeline of the program, there was stress inherent in the program, but it was not overwhelming. Another faculty member stated that a certain amount of stress is needed as it is productive and helps students accomplish their goals.

*The stress—it's not overwhelming. It's there, right. But it's not so overwhelming that they become immobilized. Most people, you know, work through the stress and complete the program. (Dr. Smith)*

*I think a certain degree of stress actually can be a good thing if it's channeled correctly. But I think it's that chronic stress and that being overstressed that are really going to be problematic in the long run for the students. It is a marathon, it's not a sprint, to get through this program. (Dr. McKinley).*

One of the stressors mentioned by doctoral students and echoed by the faculty members was related to the dissertation process. Variables such as choosing a researchable topic, the idea of writing the dissertation, the unknowns of the process, and having the defense were a few stressors related to the process.

*Stress in the program also seems to peak as students prepare for the comprehensive exam, for their proposal defense, as they conduct their study, and as they prepare for their dissertation defense. (Dr. McKinley)*

*I think most people get really freaked out not about the individual classes, but about this idea that there's a dissertation process waiting for them, and they don't know what that's really going to entail. And it seems the idea of the unknown. I think the most stressful is the idea that they have to write the dissertation, and students don't have an understanding of the steps related to that which seems to create a lot of stress. Like I don't know what my project is going to be. (Dr. Smith)*

*There are parts of the academic process for doctoral students that faculty get excited about that are likely perceived much differently by students. A good pair of examples are the proposal and final defense. As a student, there is often a tremendous stress that is associated with giving this presentation. (Dr. Jerry)*

Dr. Smith and Dr. Jerry stated that the peak stressors related to the dissertation for most students were (a) finding and choosing a topic for the dissertation, (b) writing the proposal, and (c) defending the dissertation (proposal and final defense).

*I think the most stressful is the idea that they have to write the dissertation and students don't have an understanding of the steps related to that, which seems to create a lot of stress. like I don't know what my project is going to be about. (Dr. Smith)*

*Students have to find their own research topics. I think this is the most significant point of stress. (Dr. Jerry)*

Dr. Jerry and Dr. Smith reiterated that having to take classes on Saturdays and students' other responsibilities were stressful for students.

*Working professionals ..., to this point in life have accrued a tremendous amount of responsibility. Taking away that Saturday which might be just completely necessary for recuperation is a really tough thing to do, and to do so at such a lengthy period of time.' (Dr. Jerry)*

*A great deal of the stress is exacerbated by the fact that they're really doing two full-time jobs. Right? And that they don't get, you know, to devote your weekends as somebody who's working with family and everything else, and then add this to it as an adult. (Dr. Smith)*

While Dr. McKinley did not mention Saturday as a stressor he did talk about the challenge of balancing work, life, and study.

*I think it's balancing everything that's going on in their lives because they're, they're all working adults. And most of them are parents. So by that, I should say most, certainly many I know, are parents and to try and to manage family life, work life, and an intense doctoral program. It really takes a lot of time management and if things are colliding, various aspects of their lives are colliding, it can be very, very stressful.*

During the interviews and the sentence completion activity, the faculty provided insight which corresponded to some of the doctoral students' perspectives on why statistics and the course were difficult for some students.

*"There's so much stress about statistics, it is that people come in with so many different levels of a starting point, especially on stats.... people took it 20 years ago...Because some come in blank....and some come in, like, I know everything. (Dt. Smith)*

Dr. Smith also added,

*It [statistics] is so foreign to people. Most people in the program, most of those people in our program, are in applied settings. They work with people. So doing a research process*

*is just so foreign, and therefore there is heightened stress about having no idea exactly how you're going to move forward. And so that's it's confusion.*

Another faculty member, Dr. McKinley, believed that, in statistics, the challenge is not just the math and concepts involved in learning statistics, but the mindset that the students have formed which has forced students to believe it is stressful. Helping students change their mindsets and biases and getting them to believe they are capable of learning statistics is difficult.

As for coping with stress related to statistics and writing, faculty provided the following statements.

*I don't tend to offer micro-level things like oh, do meditation or breathe deep, or let's try mindfulness. That's not what I tend to do. I tend to say, relative to this class, what can we do. (Dr. Smith).*

*I would offer more boot camps and, and prep classes and things like that. Because again, coming into this statistic, there are some who have a very solid background, but it seems the majority, their background is not quite where we'd ideally like it should be coming into this course and coming into this program. (Dr. McKinley)*

*Writer's block, I think, is a probably a bigger deal with stress...because people change the way they write. Set yourself a timer. It can be 10-15 minutes just write down in and assume you're going to throw it away. (Dr. Jerry)*

### **Recommendations of Faculty and Students**

Regarding the last research question on potential strategies that can improve doctoral students' experiences, faculty and participants provided various suggestions to inspire doctoral students to be persistent and involved in their studies. Some suggestions were pieces of advice that students provided during the vignette for individuals who plan on commencing a doctoral journey and some suggestions were addressed to doctoral students who had already started the program.

## **Weighing the Pros and Cons**

Several students, including Jane, Kati, Hank, and Eleni emphasized weighing the pros and cons before entering the program.

*Weigh all your options. Think about the outside stressors, make sure you are 110% in. You will have highs and lows where it gets really hard. Think and, if you have the passion for it and really want to do that, definitely do it. If you are not sure you are going to love it, then hold off on it. (Jane)*

*It's that discussion you have to consider in that time, your profession, what you want to get out professionally and personally, how it's going to impact your personal and your family life. And really, how you feel about giving up some of the freedom. You've got to really consider your own personal reality, your personal situation, and how.... you're going to integrate that into everything else. I would encourage them to consider why they're looking to pursue this program. (Hank)*

*You really need to look at your life. And make sure there's room in this and that the people in your life are willing to give you the space to do this because they're going to have to understand that you're not going to be able to be there for them. You know, full time, the way you have been in the past. And that is going to impact them, it's also going to impact you. (Eleni)*

*Weigh the pros and cons of it (the program). So really sit down and think like.... what are going to be the benefits of doing this [the program]? (Kati)*

## **Having Discussions with Family Members**

The next piece of advice that participants had for prospective doctoral students, after weighing the pros and cons of a doctoral journey, was to include the family members and friends by talking to them regarding their decision. With most classes being held on the weekends and students working on the weekdays, students emphasized that it was important to talk to family and friends to inform them how life would change once an individual decided to enter the program. Family and friends needed to know that more time would be spent on studies once the journey started.

*I think have a conversation with your family beforehand. Let them know what your schedule is going to look like; that you're not available on Saturdays, family gatherings, things like that. (Anna)*

Family needs to understand that you won't be as available as you were before entering the program, Eleni added,

*Make sure there's room in this and that the people in your life are willing to give you the space to do this because they're going to have to understand that you're not going to be able to be there for them.*

John and Kari also recommended talking with the family,

*My advice would be... depending on their personal situation, (Talk to) their wife or husband or partner, whoever. We're all blessed to have so many in our lives. That's the person you've got to have a discussion with. For me, there's my wife, and then most of my colleagues have a husband or wife or daughter or somebody (John)*

*Have conversations with your family.... I mean, it's those kinds of things ... making sure that they also understand, when you can't do something like, I can't show up to whatever social event you're having, because I'm working on a paper. (Kari)*

### **Taking Small Incremental Steps**

To avoid stress, students and faculty reported taking smaller steps as a way to increase productivity.

*I would say it is trying to get organized early. Like it took me several, several sessions before I realized I needed one week. I needed to have a schedule for me that works. I need to know, the week that I have class A, I'm going to work on Class B. And the week I have class B, I'm going to do stuff for Class A because I was just trying to do everything together. So, ... try to be organized early. (Granger)*

*Plan your time, allot your time, chunking it however it works for you. (Anna)*

*Make sure to set aside time to get work done. To plan right, take things in small chunks, so you don't get overwhelmed. (Kari)*

To make things less stressful, Monique and Ralph suggested what the former program director had advised, which was to,

*Eat an elephant one bite at a time. (Ralph & Monique)*

*Breathe, take each class one at a time. (Monique)*

Dr. Smith also stated that stress in a doctoral program is inevitable, but one of the ways that can help students to avoid being overwhelmed is taking incremental steps.

*Break it down into its component parts. don't think you can get rid of stress.... Breaking things down into smaller parts make it manageable. like one assignment at a time will add up to a proposal chapter. To reduce stress is like, don't get overwhelmed by the big thing, take it one component at a time. (Dr. Smith)*

*You are thinking of all the things you have to get done. It's overwhelming. But if you look at it one task at a time, it helps. Make it less overwhelming because you can focus on things one task at a time. (Kati)*

### **Asking for Help and Seeking Support**

Knowing when, how, and to whom to turn to when stressed can help doctoral students better navigate the unknown of the journey. Some participants found working with peers and asking the faculty for support helpful.

*Don't stress yourself out... It's okay to ask for help. It's okay to tell somebody ... I need some help on this. (Monique)*

*The professors are amazing. So, when you're needing help, ask, they're there to work with you and meet with you. (Jane)*

*I guess the other really big coping mechanism is to be willing to ask for help. And set up[meetings]. You know, I set up weekly and biweekly meetings with cohort members to just talk about content, talk about assignments. (Kari)*

*And I've seen people in my class, go and talk to like Dr. X, and be like, hey, this and this and this is an issue. And she says, well, let's take care of it. And I think that's really great.... Doing a little bit every day? Being patient and kind with yourself and asking for help.... I think it would be really great for a lot of people to just be like, Okay, I'm struggling with this assignment. What do you think I should do? (Sophie)*

*Embrace the supportive services whether it's the librarian or faculty embrace those supportive services because you definitely cannot do this type of program alone. (Granger)*

Dr. Smith and Dr. McKinley's advice to students were:

*Work directly with your instructors, and especially for the dissertation process, that chair of your committee is highly committed to the process. So, you know, be as open and*

*honest as you can, especially with no one else in that chair of the dissertation committee about what's going on. (Dr. Smith)*

*Work together and come to office hours. Reach out to me or your classmates. (Dr. McKinley)*

Faculty stated they can alleviate students stress by working with them and providing guidance.

*Maybe one of the things we can do is be more consistent across instructors, right, their instructors in the program, and we know stress is an issue. If we became more informed and consistent with our responses to students about their stress, maybe over time, they keep hearing the same thing from us.... that would offer some assurance. (Dr. Smith)*

*For the Faculty to kind of get together and talk about, you know what are the ways that collectively we can reduce stress. I think we can come together and if we hear from students what some of the stressors are, we can use those to figure out how we can better plan and design our courses. (Dr. Jerry)*

### ***Support From Friends and Family***

A strong support system can improve well-being and better coping skills. Getting support from friends and talking to classmates were two important coping mechanisms for many participants. When the participating doctoral students were asked how they handled stress, many talked about reaching out to friends, family, and peers or engaging in activities promoting social support. Sophie said to relieve stress. She reaches out to friends.

*I meet up with certain friends and do certain things like I go for a long walk with a friend. We cook dinner, go to our social club, and play music.*

Lidia, Ralph, and Eleni suggested:

*Talking to other individuals to kind of work through that stress component. (Lidia)*

*Reaching out to friends and family, just sort of commiserating with people that were going through the same thing. (Ralph)*

*Spending as much time with family as one can. (Eleni)*

### ***Support from Faculty and the Program Director***

Students' learning environment had a positive impact on their stress levels. Most students expressed their satisfaction with the program and the support they had received during the Self-Anchoring Scale activity. One of the other success factors for students in this program, which helped them feel less stressed and persist despite being stressed, was the support the faculty provided in all the stages of the program. Even simple words of encouragement can make you feel good.

*That definitely makes it worth it when they're telling ... your paper looks great, you've got this it's going to be okay. That definitely helps .... (Kati)*

*It helps when your instructors are positive and are your cheerleaders saying you can do this, you got this just reminding you when you're having a rough day. (Jane)*

*Every professor in this program that I've met has been super supportive. And I really don't think it's because we're doctoral students. I think that's just because that's the kind of atmosphere they're trying to foster. (Sophie)*

In his Self-Anchoring Scale activity, Hank pointed out the importance of support as a characteristic of a stress-free program, a quality that is present in his college.

*I think it comes down to support, I think it comes down to listening, that you feel like the institution is, is considering you as a person and not just a just not a student, just not a body that's in a seat. Um, and I feel like we got it.... the instructors and the faculty generally care about the students. (Hank)*

*Our program is so well managed, and every step is supported. (Teddy)*

*Rely on the teachers.... The professors are amazing. So, when you're needing help, they're there to work with you and meet with you. (Jane)*

*I obviously can't say enough good things about the program. I'm a very big supporter. (Eleni)*

Even the doctoral faculty thought that the program has been supportive regardless of the stress some students had.

*This program is incredibly supportive in getting people across that line. And it may not feel that way because you think supportive will mean no stress. And that is not true. (Dr. Smith)*

*I think a lot of it is really showing that you're there, showing you're willing to help, showing that you're really there to support them and that you do care about their success in the journey. (Dr. McKinley)*

### ***Support From Cohort Peers***

Of all the various support networks available, the most effective type of social support for many doctoral students was the support from their cohort peers. Students reported coping with stress was easier when they were with their peers. In response to an interview question on whether being in a cohort has had a positive, negative, or neutral impact on their experiences of stress, almost all doctoral students expressed their satisfaction with the cohort model. They discussed interacting with other students, sharing experiences, and working towards a common goal with other peers in the cohort as positive aspects of a cohort.

*Oh, very positive. Very, very positive. I, you know, everyone finds people that they need to bounce ideas off of. So, I will often message friends with various questions that I might have related to classes.... Having a cohort is a massive strength. (Teddy)*

*They (cohort) become family because you spend so much time with one another...you understand what one another is going through. (Lidia)*

Anna said that she did not choose the program because of the cohort format, but once she started the program, she became aware of the importance and the positive impacts of the cohort.

*We were there for each other. We were verbally supportive. I felt they were my team. In a sense, they were supportive emotionally.*

Audrey saw the cohort as a support system one could lean on.

*It is nice to have someone to lean on.*

As a student at the candidacy level, Hank stated that it was his cohort that helped him come this far. Hank and Ralph mentioned that peers in cohort were less judgmental, more understanding better listeners.

*I don't believe I would be able to do this if we were not in a cohort.... We support each other. There is no judgment. I feel like there's a support group, I have a support group with, with them. In that, we all understand that we're going through a very similar and same thing. Like I can explain to my wife, or to a coworker, or to one of my friends what we're doing, but they don't have a full appreciation of what's going on because they're not in it. And so, the cohort has been fantastic. I don't think that this program, for me, would be sustainable if that cohort wasn't there. (Hank)*

*After a while my brother was tired of hearing from me, you know, 5 to 10 minutes he was done, but I could talk to my cohort people, like for an hour. (Ralph)*

Jane added that in times of her need for support, she turns to her peers in the cohort with whom she has formed a friendship.

*I was lucky to be put with four amazing women. We just automatically clicked, and that's who I go to when I need support.*

Sophie likes being part of a cohort and being able to offer help to others who need it.

*I like supporting people. I like helping them. That is something I have never had before. It's I think it helps me be more engaged. And it kind of helps humanize the program.*

It was not solely the support that was appealing to students but the fact that the cohort model was composed of a diverse group of students. According to some participants, having different backgrounds where students could make connections with each other was helpful in learning and in stress reduction.

*There were different people that added to the richness. (Ralph)*

*[I] got to see discussions through the lens of other people. (John)*

*I think that there's a lot of really interesting personalities. We've made connections regardless of it being through the screen.... And, uh, you know, all of our backgrounds are very different, it's highly diverse. (Hank)*

*There's a lot of diversity in the program. And I think the diversity is really good and important in dealing with stressors. (Tony)*

### **Providing a Mentor or a Mentoring Program**

One effective way of supporting doctoral students was reported to be mentors. In an academic setting, such as a doctoral program, some students mentioned that having a mentor was a helpful way to reduce stress. It was especially helpful to have a program with a special focus on connecting doctoral students in advanced cohorts with students who were in earlier stages of the program. Participants stated the connection helped the mentor and the mentee to discuss issues related to academia and how the mentees could manage stress in the program. Some participants said more advanced students were able to provide them with helpful tips related to the program.

Lidia believed mentorship programs could help students understand the program and the stressors related to it,

*Mentorship or coaching program would help people navigate the process during writing the dissertation and life stressors that come with it. (Lidia)*

*Mentoring, trying to do some pairing of the people. Or provide mentoring training. Teach some skills to mentors and mentees, so they get a better experience. (Ralph)*

As a graduate student, Ralph felt that mentoring programs impacts the mentor and the mentee in positive ways

*It (mentoring) helped me, and I am hoping it helped them as well. We just talked through what they were going through .... They came along six months later, and I was able to help them. That would give me energy and make me feel productive. So, I think that's probably a coping mechanism too.*

Katie, who had graduated, and Sophie, who had just started the program, also thought that a mentorship program could help relieve stress and suggested having a one-on-one mentorship.

*I think like one of the things that helped me, is Dr. X assigned me a mentor who was in the cohort above me. So, I found that that was very helpful. (Kati)*

*One-on-one mentorship. I mean, Think about it. I find that when somebody is there (it helps), like a child with parents, you know, the child is new, the child is learning how to make these emotional connections. They're learning how to trust, and some children don't get that kind of successful bonding. And I think in a program where you've got something like a statistics class, if you have somebody who's right there, who's able to answer all your questions and be able to be like, you're fine.... (Sophie)*

Dr. Smith believed that there were some benefits in having mentors and interacting with them since mentors could provide the mentees with the information and encouragement that was needed to succeed.

*Stress just comes from the unknown. And so, the more people[mentors] can report back, like I've been in the future, I've been to your future. And this is what it is, and you'll be okay. I think that eliminates some of the anxiety because people report back, Oh, no, it's okay. You'll be alright. They're, they're not lying to you. (Dr. Smith)*

Along with other actions to reduce stress, the small act of giving yourself grace was an interesting strategy that some students mentioned.

*The other thing that I would suggest is, you have to give yourself some grace. By giving myself that grace, of saying, I'm not going to kill myself at this point because there's way too much other stuff going on. (Kari)*

*But take care of yourself. Keep up the exercise routine. And give yourself grace....and communicate with your professors. (Granger)*

Ralph said you can give yourself grace by expressing gratitude.

*I think this is really important for energy, expressing gratitude. So that's sort of spiritual, I don't mean, in a religious kind of connotation but an internal way, you know, I think you fill yourself up if you express gratitude to people (Ralph)*

As an advice to future doctoral students in discussions of the vignette, Tony's advice to doctoral students was not to invest more time than they needed and to focus on what is more important. This is also what John and Eleni referred to earlier in the interviews.

*.... put your energy in the where you're going to get the most out of, and that's a lesson that, I think, was directly spouted out in the first semester (Tony)*

## Summary

This chapter presented the findings of this phenomenological case study related to doctoral students' perceptions of stress, stressors, and effective coping strategies. The data collected addressed the research questions and demonstrated that a) despite the different terms used to describe the stress of the program, the participating doctoral students expected stress to be a common experience and that their stress varied at different stages of the program; b) students stressors that were reported in this study included lack of time and time management, finding the balance, the dissertation process, heavy workload, giving up weekends and the statistics course, along with various intervening experiences related to work and family and the pandemic; c) the doctoral students planned and prioritized and applied self-care practices, such as mindfulness exercise, sleep, and nutrition, to cope with stress and they sought social support from family, friends, faculty and particularly their cohort peers; d) faculty members also believed that stress in the program is expected and they had suggestions on how students could manage stress; e) doctoral students and faculty all believed that being mindful, exercising, planning, prioritizing, having social support, and having mentors and mentorship programs were helpful strategies in managing stress.

Chapter 5 includes discussion points regarding the analysis of participants' responses to the research questions and how the data from this study relate to other studies in the literature on doctoral students and stress. The limitations and the implications for practice and further research are also covered in the last chapter of this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Doctoral students make significant contributions to research, and their success is crucial for increasing the social and cultural resources of their society. The stress students experience can negatively impact their well-being and the quality or quantity of their work, or it might result in attrition which can mean loss of time, skills, and finances for both universities and students (Maher et al., 2020). With the adverse impact of stress, understanding more about doctoral students' experiences with stress and strategies to minimize the negative impacts can be valuable to doctoral students.

This study is significant as it is one of the few studies focused on executive doctoral students. Using qualitative methods, I investigated students' stress levels through their interactions with their environment to understand how they experienced stress, their sources of stress, and strategies they found effective in managing it. Unlike previous literature by Cornwall et al. (2019) on first-year doctoral students or Byers et al. (2014) on second-year doctoral students, this study sought to understand stressors for students in all three stages of the program (transition to completion phase) to identify their challenges, experiences, and stressors. As a multipurpose study, the first purpose was to explore and understand the lived experiences of stress of doctoral students in an executive cohort program. The second purpose of the study was to investigate students' perceptions of sources of stress and the type of coping strategies they perceived as helpful in managing stress. The third purpose was to understand faculty members' perspectives on stressors and effective coping strategies for their doctoral students. Faculty were essential to this study since their suggestions for coping and support can promote students' well-being and set students on a trajectory to success.

The theoretical model that guided this study was the transactional model of stress and coping. Findings from this qualitative phenomenological case study showed that stress, as an experience in the learning environment of doctoral students, is perceived and defined differently by each doctoral student. While some sources of stress in this program are similar to other doctoral programs, a few unique stressors dominated the executive doctoral program: Saturday classes and the statistics course. Some sources that were reported in other studies were not mentioned by students in this study such as financial concerns and student/advisor relations. While different coping strategies were reported in studies, one of the top coping strategies found in other studies of doctoral students as well as in this study was social support, particularly from cohort peers.

In this chapter, I discuss the primary findings related to stress, stressors, and coping, followed by social support and alignment with the conceptual and theoretical framework. Chapter 5 continues with exploration of the delimitations/limitations and recommendations for future research and practice. The chapter ends with concluding remarks.

### **Perceptions of Stress**

According to the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stress is a relationship between an individual and the environment. The model explains that stress is a phenomenon that does not reside in the individual or the environment but is the result of the interaction between the two. Stress is a reaction to internal or external demands and depends on the individuals' perceptions. The students under study were challenged with their various roles and responsibilities related to work, life, and the school environment. Doctoral students' lack of time, inability to find the balance, and their different roles and conflicts among the roles affected their stress and well-being. The magnitude of students' stress varied in different situations. The

pandemic and the disruptions it created also added to their stress. The participants' definitions of stress varied based on their perceptions and personal experiences with stress. Their view is a validation of Hans Selye's (1936) account that stress has a different meaning for individuals under different circumstances, and agreement on a uniform definition would not be an easy task.

Some studies related to doctoral students' experiences with stress reported doctoral students had higher levels of stress than peers of the same age in the general population (Barry et al., 2019). Participants in this study were 15 doctoral students across six cohorts and three faculty members in an organizational leadership, executive doctoral program. Given the intensive nature of this executive doctoral program, students experienced stress at different stages of the program. Doctoral students responded to stress in their own distinct ways. Some students mentioned getting fidgety, flustered, tired, and exhausted. One student referred to it as a positive challenge, and one other noted it is essential to growth. In their interviews, some students revealed that they expected stress to be part of the doctoral program and that the stress they experienced was manageable. Two (male) participants mentioned they were not stressed while in the program. I offer the following possible explanations for these findings.

Most of the students in this study were full-time working adults between the ages of 30 to 60 who were in leadership positions with years of experience. Besides better employment opportunities, some executive doctoral students mentioned they wanted to enhance lifelong learning and gain critical thinking skills. Many students had entered the program with a growth mindset knowing that stress would be part of the program. Greater work, more life experience, being older and possessing a growth mindset, are factors that literature points to as qualities that give a doctoral student better ability to face stress and a program's challenges (Crum et al, 2013; Hunter & Devine, 2016),

Most doctoral students pursuing a degree in this executive organizational leadership program were senior executives working in different fields. This leadership program contributes to doctoral students' growth by helping them recognize potential challenges. The program guides the students to take broader leadership roles. It shows them ways to increase their effectiveness as leaders by bringing in leaders-in-residence to share their challenges and experiences and having students work in diverse groups with other students. Having a leadership position at work, studying in a leadership program, working with diverse groups, and applying the knowledge and skills gained from school and work provided students with a higher sense of responsibility and control and helped lead to lower levels of stress (Sherman et al., 2012).

Based on the existing literature and the participants' interviews, another factor that impacted students' stress level was social support. Students in this study had a strong support network which included their family (spouse and children) and friends, faculty (i.e., program directors, instructors, and committee members) and their cohort peers. Students expressed their satisfaction with the program and the faculty who were flexible and supportive, particularly during the pandemic. They relied on the faculty mostly for professional support such as guidance and advice (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Their most effective support system to relieve stress, based on their own words, were cohort peers to whom they turned to for both guidance and emotional support. The negative impact of stress on participants' well-being was reported more than the negative impact on the quality/quantity of their work or their decision to leave the program.

### **Perceptions of the Program's Stressors**

With almost no studies exist on executive doctoral programs, it is difficult to compare the stressors of students who work, study, and tend to family to see how the results are similar to or vary from other executive doctoral students in different geographical locations with different

norms and designs. Based on the existing literature related to stress and challenges of the doctoral students, some sources of stress that doctoral students in this study encountered were similar to stressors reported in other studies. Common sources of stress found in previous studies were: a) lack of time and poor time management (Cornwall et al., 2019; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013; Yousaf et al., 2016; b) difficulty finding the right balance between school, life, and work (Castelo et al., 2017; Cornwall et al., 2019; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013; Pifer & Baker, 2016; Byers et al., 2014); c) heavy workload (Cornwall et al., 2019; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Schmidt & Hanson, 2018); d) the dissertation process (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Bazrafkan et al., 2016; Pifer & Baker, 2016; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Sverdlik & Hall 2020); e), student-advisor relations (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012); and f) financial constraints (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

In this study, executive doctoral students' sources of stress originated either from the program (lack of time and time management, finding the balance between work, life, and study, heavy workload, the dissertation process, Saturday classes, and statistics) or stemmed from outside of the program and were related to their work, family, and the pandemic.

### **Program-Related Stressors**

Stressors related to time, balance, and workload were due to the students' various roles and responsibilities and were similar to what other literature mentioned as sources of stress. Apart from lack of time and the heavy workload that were mentioned by students as stressors related to the program, all the stressors faculty mentioned were a reiteration of what the students had reported.

Previous studies reported the dissertation process as a stressor for many doctoral students. Lovitts (2001) noted, “A dissertation is a complex process which most students have little familiarity or prior experience.... Most feel inadequately prepared to do this type of research and find themselves unprepared for the writing in the style required for a dissertation” (p 72). Findings from this study also confirm that the dissertation process presented significant challenges. Participants’ stress was not due to issues related to advisors or feelings of isolation or lack of interaction that Ali & Kohun (2006) and Castelo et al. (2017) mentioned in their studies, but participants’ stress was related to finding a dissertation topic and scholarly writing. For some participants, finding a topic that would be interesting was stressful.

The dissertation is more than just a requirement to graduate. Doctoral students help develop a solution to problems that matter. There are many factors that contribute to the stress of finding a topic. The topics students choose needed to be interesting to students as well as their intended audience. Finding enough literature and data were other factors contributing to the stress of identifying a topic. Creswell (2002) noted, “Of paramount concern in this process is the need to obtain good data from qualified individuals and places.” (p. 11). In the literature reviewed, Sverdlik et al. (2018) discussed writing as an internal factor contributing to doctoral students’ experiences of well-being and stress. Sverdlik and his colleagues reported that doctoral writing can elicit both positive and negative emotions, but for many participants in this study, writing as a scholar was stressful. Academic writing and all its other components, such as following APA guidelines, made writing the dissertation difficult. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) also reported finding a topic and scholarly writing were challenging issues for doctoral students enrolled in an online program. Lovitts (2001) discussed the dissertation topic and the quality of the dissertation in relation to a supervisor’s support role. She notes that faculty

can encourage students to work on a topic related to their passion early in the program to help them maintain the flow of work (Sverdlik et al., 2018). This points to the important role of faculty and support which will be discussed later.

Another stressful aspect related to the dissertation process, according to a faculty, were the unknowns of the dissertation process. Stressors related to the dissertation such as topic selection, writing, knowledge of APA style were reported by students in different stages of the program, which in this program was translated into the 3 years (transition, candidacy, and completion). For students in the transition and the candidacy stages, the stress was more related to finding a topic and writing. For students in the completion phase, in addition to writing, issues related to the committee, timelines, deadlines, and editing were stressful elements related to the dissertation. Students who had graduated successfully and students who were in the completion phase of the program all acknowledged that due to all the issues related to the dissertation process, the last stage of the program was the most stressful.

Some students reported the timeline of the committee was stressful, but they did not state the student-advisor relation was a major stressor. With only one doctoral program at this college, students and faculty had a friendly relationship, and faculty in this program invited students to seek them out for support. The faculty also served as chairs or members on the students' dissertation committees; therefore, they worked closely and professionally with the students which was helpful in managing stress. Literature points to the role faculty can play in providing students with guidance and assistance on research, writing, and the composition of their dissertation to mitigate their stress and finish successfully (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). It should be noted that students might have felt unwilling to share student/advisor problems because I was a doctoral student in the same program.

Financial concerns or lack of financial support, such as scholarships and grants, was reported as stressors in some studies related to doctoral students. Lack of funding creates a barrier to a student's success (Acker & Haque, 2015), but none of the participants in this study mentioned it as a source of stress. Financial issues can have a negative impact on doctoral students' well-being and can lead to attrition. Many executive doctoral students in this study did not receive financial aid or assistantships to support their graduate education. However, they did not mention financial problems as a source of stress. One reasonable explanation for no reports of financial stress could be that fact that most of the students in this program were full-time working adults who had been working for years and had a stable financial status. They did not rely on any financial aid for the tuition or to conduct their research and did not report finances as an issue or stressor. One other possible explanation could be my position as a doctoral student in the same program which could have made them reluctant to share any financial concerns.

Two stressors that the participants in this study mentioned and were not reported in other studies related to the doctoral students were Saturday classes and the statistics course. Saturday classes and statistics were two specific stressors mentioned by the participants as sources of stress in this program. Doctoral programs vary in structure, design, and rigor, which create different stressors for students. Various factors can contribute to the stress related to Saturday classes. Becoming a doctoral student means having new responsibilities, commitments, identities, and relations. As employees, parents, or spouses, these students start a new role and form a new identity (Cast, 2003; Leshem 2017). They will be known as scholars, researchers, and lifelong learners. Thus, they need to exhibit their competence as doctoral students who are capable of conducting research while juggling various responsibilities. With their full-time jobs

during the week and class on the weekends, time and time management becomes more difficult and priorities might change for some students.

Students' expectations of themselves and of others around them might also change. Saturday class commitments might be accompanied with changes in doctoral students' social relations and family dynamics. Students will need the support of their family more than they did before they entered the program. Some might feel a sense of guilt for shifting the responsibilities on other family members or their significant other and not being able to be present for family events or to help their spouse as much as they did prior to entering the program. All this can be stressful for many doctoral students.

Students in this study were part of a cohort program who had classes on the weekends and met in person. Students, in this program, studied alongside a diverse group of students. There might be changes to students' circle of friendship and social dynamics. Doctoral students need to learn how to work closely with a heterogenous group of people, with different perspectives who can impact their opinions, beliefs, and values as well as their stress level.

In this study, the lives of these executive doctoral students did not revolve just around coursework. They had jobs outside the program and family and friends who required their attention. Besides the time students needed to do the assignments, participants stated they needed time to relax from the stress of work and to have quality time with their families. With back-to-back semesters, classes held on Saturdays, and work on the weekdays, Sundays become the primary time to study, focus on research .and catch up with any work missed during the week. All the sacrifices and changes students had to make to their work, life, and study schedules and habits made the weekends packed and turned Saturday classes into a source of stress for some of the students.

The other perceived source of stress was the statistics course. Statistics is usually difficult for many graduate students. With the statistics course there is some level of fear and discomfort among students. Students stated the technical forms and unfamiliar terminology became overwhelming, particularly for those who had been away from school for an extended period of time. Mathematical computations and calculations, data analysis, abstract concepts, and learning how to apply them to research can become overwhelming for students who have little prior knowledge of math and statistics. The exams, using statistics in research, and problems with accurately interpreting the results were also stressful for some students in the study. Learning statistics and how to apply it to research required absorbing and disseminating a lot of information which takes time and effort. With all the other responsibilities of doctoral students, the time they needed to spend on learning and finishing the assignments was limited. With little to no time to relax and destress, the students might experience cognitive overload that can lead to mental fatigue and stress.

A faculty mentioned that one of the other factors contributing to the stress of statistics was the students' preconceived mindset related to the statistics course. Mindset plays an important role in the domain of stress (Crum et al., 2013). Many students who take the statistics course take the course believing that they are not able to learn statistical concepts which might be a reason contributing to their stress level. Statistics, as a source of stress in methodology during the dissertation process, was mentioned in only one study (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

### **External Stressors**

Not all the stress doctoral students experienced sprang from the program. Some of the stress emerged from issues outside of the program and were related to doctoral students' work

and family. Most of the participants in this study were full-time students. Some were married and had children. Unexpected events related to family and work created stress for some students. Intervening life experiences such as traveling for work, meeting deadlines, change of career, becoming sick, having a child, or taking care of an elderly family member created stress for some doctoral students.

In respect to the magnitude of the disruptions that created stress for many doctoral students, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was salient for many participants. The COVID-19 outbreak was an added burden for many doctoral students by creating change in their daily routines and autonomy. Life and work habits changed for many students. Shifting from in-person classes to remote learning, fear of a new and unknown virus, fear of getting sick, delays in conducting research projects, finding time to do the assignments, research while working from home, and having children at home in the midst of the other responsibilities were all sources of stress during the pandemic.

### **Perceptions of Coping Skills**

Coping is a significant factor related to doctoral students' success and well-being. Coping strategies are essential to well-being (Martinez et al., 2013; Schmid & Hansson, 2018; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Different factors contribute to doctoral students' success in any program. Student success, as well as their well-being in this study, could have been due to the well-honed coping skills that students reported. Coping strategies are significant to students' learning, persistence, and success (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Coping with stress is vital for executive doctoral students who, besides studying, work full-time and attend to their personal life. There is a paucity of research on coping with stress in doctoral students. In the literature reviewed for this study, only a few studies examined both concepts in the context of

doctoral students and their well-being. Literature confirms that problem-focused coping is a good way for doctoral students to manage stress (Martinez et al., 2013; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018), Schmidt and Hansson's (2018) literature review on doctoral student's well-being revealed that coping skills were fundamental. Their findings indicated that, among various ways of coping, social support, followed by planning and exercising, were how doctoral students coped with stress. Planning and prioritizing what is important and exercising to focus on something other than schoolwork were strategies that doctoral students in this study applied. But besides these three coping mechanisms, participants in this study had developed other coping strategies and moved between these various coping efforts to tolerate, minimize, and manage their stress.

Executive doctoral students had a repertoire of coping strategies and combined different coping methods to mitigate the negative impacts of stress. Students provided different strategies to manage stress such as exercising, monitoring sleep and diet, performing tasks in small incremental steps, asking for help, taking a break, being mindful and including mindfulness activities when they were stressed. Participants' responses to what strategies worked provided a clear picture that there is no novel or "universal solution" to an effective coping strategy. As shown in the transactional model, stress is the relation between a person and the environment, and it is appraised differently by each individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Doctoral students' reactions to stress depended on how they perceived and evaluated the stressful situation they encountered. As literature mentions, different personal and factors such as values, commitment, beliefs, goals, resiliency, self-efficacy, and mindfulness, situational novelty, or ambiguity impacted how they assessed stressful situations and the type of coping they used. Therefore, even in response to the same stressor, doctoral students might use different coping mechanisms.

Exercise, asking for help, social support, and working in small steps were among the strategies students claimed were more effective in reducing stress.

Some participants mentioned the stress they experienced was attributed to the desire to be a perfectionist. Setting high standards, trying to accomplish several tasks at one time, and doing more than required made some participants feel stressed. Moate et al. (2019) examined the association between perceived stress and perfectionism and found that perfectionism played a role in doctoral students' stress levels and well-being. To minimize the adverse effects of stress, some participants reported that students should:

- *Refrain from doing more than required:* With too many responsibilities at home and work, class assignments and projects turned into a source of stress. Balancing between extracurricular activities, social time, work deadlines, and school workload is essential. One helpful strategy offered by some participants was not to spend more time on assignments than necessary. Most assignments were tailored to ensure doctoral students developed relevant skills. Participants stated it was important to pay attention to what each assignment asked for and to devote only the effort required to complete the assignment and no more. Understanding that time is limited and spending more time than needed on assignments is not helpful and might mean less time with friends, family, and other extra-curricular pursuits. Spending more than needed on assignments might lead to exhaustion and stress.
- *Give yourself grace:* Another helpful strategy was learning to give yourself some grace. Participants stated that doctoral students needed to avoid letting perfection rule their academic life. They needed to lower their expectations for themselves. They should take a step back, provide space for self-care, and allow their body and mind to

relax. They needed to take a break and step away from assignments, find an outlet, and focus on something that would help take their mind away from what was creating stress for them. Engaging in activities such as walking, hiking, talking to someone, or expressing gratitude to self and others might help release stressful emotions and decrease stress.

Students had stressors related to work, family, and the pandemic which originated from outside the program; they also had stressors related to the program all of which contributed to students becoming stressed. While in some studies maladaptive strategies such as crying, isolation, smoking, and alcohol were reported as ways to cope with stress, most participants in this study revealed healthy strategies such as walking, hiking, swimming, and socializing. Engaging in healthy activities promoted students' well-being and decreased their stress. Students' maladaptive copings were not extreme. Only a few participants reported using less healthy (maladaptive) coping strategies such as indulging in chocolate, sweets, caffeine, and/or stress eating while in the program. No extreme maladaptive copings of the doctoral students could be attributed to their age, experience, or leadership qualities.

Most participants discussed mindfulness and incorporated mindfulness activities into their daily routine which allowed them to manage their thoughts and emotions and helped them to control stressful situations at work, school, and in daily life. Some participants recommended that students be cognizant and mindful of stress. Mindful strategies such as using the senses to help stay in control, yoga, aromatherapy, wrapping hands around a cup of hot tea, listening to music especially focus music (i.e., music designed to enhance focus and concentration), praying, taking a deep breath, and slowing down when there was too much going on were mechanisms that helped some doctoral students manage stress. Literature related to mindfulness points to the

positive link between mindfulness and better coping strategies. Mindfulness has been linked to decreased stress and increased resiliency (McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015).

Participant provided evidence of their self-efficacy during their interviews. Each participant's confidence in their ability to face stressful situations and their strenuous efforts to achieve their goals by using different coping strategies (all adaptive and positive) are proofs of their self-efficacy. Bandura and Locke (2003) claimed that individuals with high self-efficacy can face challenges better. These various coping strategies seemed powerful in managing stress and helping students persist through the program despite the challenges they faced. Five participants in this study had already graduated from the program and the others were working hard to pursue their dream of receiving a doctoral degree. The various coping strategies they used helped them fulfill their academic tasks, work efficiently, meet deadlines, deal with their family issues, and study.

The pandemic forced schools and universities to lock down and shift to a virtual platform. Despite the disruptions of the pandemic, doctoral students were determined to overcome all the challenges and started adapting to new ways of learning. They were able to function as effectively as they did before the pandemic despite all the tragedy, adversity, and health threats related to COVID-19. These resilient doctoral students had acquired coping skills that seemed to help them become more confident and determined to succeed. Students' resiliency helped many complete the doctoral program despite all the responsibilities and challenges. There are a limited number of studies that focused on doctoral students and their experiences with resilience. However, these few studies show that resilience is positively correlated with effective coping strategies. Resiliency improves students' mental health and equips them to cope with stress skillfully (McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015). Students' circle of social support, particularly

from peers, and the interactions among them impacted doctoral students' resilience and could have played an essential role in doctoral students' persistence and success which is also reported by Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) as an effective factor in persistence. Psychological resources such as self-efficacy, optimism, mindfulness, and resilience are key factors to understanding how people adjust to stress (Lazarus, 2003). Doctoral students' psychological resources could be the reason to better appraisal, different coping skills, and greater ability to handle stress more effectively.

### **Participants' Support Network**

Students in this study had different sources of social support, including their family and friends, their peers in the cohort, and their program faculty. The support network they had was effective in dealing with stress. Support was mentioned by many participants as an essential resource regardless of their stage in the program. Social support is mentioned in many studies related to doctoral students as a factor that might help reduce the negative impacts of stress. Support is not only an effective coping strategy, but it can also contribute to finding other ways to cope with stress (Greenglass, 1990). The findings of this study highlight the importance of the academic environment in providing support. Almost all participants endorsed social support as an effective way to minimize the negative impacts of stress. McCray and Joseph-Richard (2020), Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012), and Byers et al. (2014) all noted that doctoral students who receive support and socialization have the higher rates of completion.

Literature related to the support of doctoral students also confirms that having someone to offer reminders of what the students are capable of is essential in their sustaining resilience and persisting in their studies (Bagaka's et al., 2015; Castro et al., 2011; McCray & Richard, 2020). Students reported how, besides guidance, positive feedback from the faculty could help

minimize their stress. There were no reports of any conflict between students and their chairs or students and members of their committee. The participants reported that faculty in this study provided them with the emotional support they needed to get through the program.

Faculty also emphasized the importance of all faculty members coming together collectively and discussing ways to reduce students' stress by reminding doctoral students they can succeed despite all the challenges and by providing them with the support they needed. Another way to help students that was suggested by one of the faculty was learning more about students' stress so faculty and program directors could implement the necessary changes in the design of the courses. Coping strategies suggested by the faculty were not as extensive as the coping strategies students provided.

Being in a cohort with a diverse group of doctoral students with different perspectives for more than 3 years created a strong bond and relationship among students in the cohort. Diversity in this program extended well beyond age and gender. Students in this program had different occupations, marital statuses, races, and ethnicities. From the doctoral students' perspectives, this diversity was a positive aspect of the program. Doctoral students could connect with others who added to the cohort's richness and provided new perspectives.

Students became familiar with other members of their cohort and the challenges of other students. When students were stressed, they turned to their cohort peers who were going through the same challenges. They talked, laughed, cried, and shared experiences to relieve stress. Students felt more comfortable expressing their emotions to someone who would listen and who was familiar with their struggles without fear of judgment, which explains why many participants reported that they depended more on support from cohort peers than faculty, family,

or friends. These findings all corroborate previous findings on the importance of a cohort and the support its members can provide.

### **Faculty and Students Recommendations to Mitigate Stress**

Sailing through a doctoral program with different responsibilities is not an easy task., Students and faculty provided a few recommendations for students to thrive and succeed. Students, faculty, and the program directors can all benefit from these recommendations. The students recommended that any individual considering embarking on a doctoral journey should consider the positive and negative aspects of their decision before starting a doctoral program. Students should discuss the advantages and disadvantages of entering a program with family members to inform them of the sacrifices the family might need to make and how things will change once they start the program. This is particularly important for those who are married and have younger children. To reduce stress and make the doctoral journey more enjoyable for students already on the journey, it is wise to have a plan and take incremental steps so that they can use time more efficiently. To minimize the negative impacts of stress it is important for students to ask for help and seek support to better thrive in the program. The support can come from anyone with whom students feel comfortable which, in this study, were their peers in their cohorts. Students also reported their positive experiences from having peer mentors from earlier cohorts who provided the participants with guidance and emotional support.

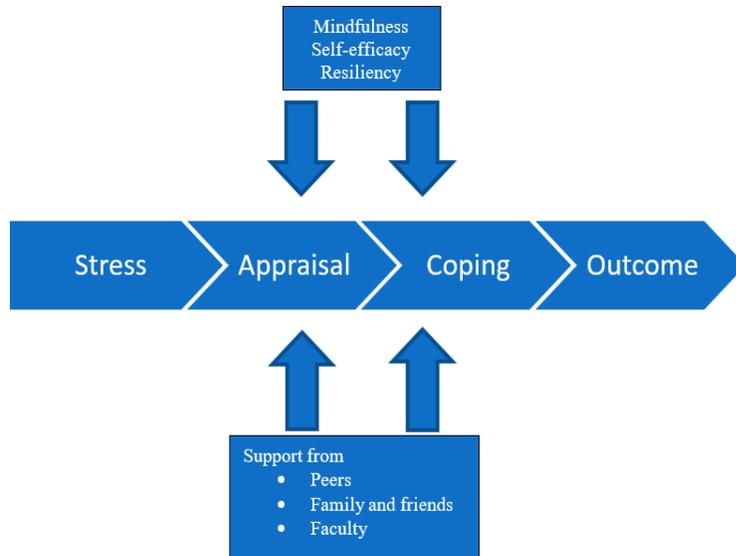
Most of the students and faculty in this study were great supporters of peer mentoring programs. Talking to peers from earlier cohorts who have been through the same program can provide newly admitted students with invaluable information on the challenges they might face and ways they can mitigate the stress resulting from them. Mentors can provide students with an additional support system in addition to the cohort peers (Bagaka's et al., 2015).

### **Alignment with the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that helped guide this study was the transactional model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which states that an individual's ability to cope with challenges is the result of the interactions that happen between that individual and their environment. When an individual is confronted with a stressful situation, he evaluates the stressor and the resources to overcome the stressful situation. The conceptual framework for this study, as explained in Chapter 1, depicts how doctoral students appraised stressful situations and used their cognitive, social, and behavioral coping strategies to appraise and find resources to cope with the stress. The various coping skills (being mindful of the stressful situation to know what can be done and students' persistence to finish the program despite all the roles and tasks) impacted how doctoral students appraised stressful situations and the type of coping mechanism they used. Figure 2 provides a graphic of the study framework. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) stated that students' coping resources involved tools, problem-solving, social skills, support, energy, health, positive beliefs, and the ability to find the resources to reduce stress. Cognitive recourses, such as mindfulness, resilience, and self-efficacy, boosted a sense of control in coping with stress. Interviews with doctoral students pointed to the impact of students' psychological resources such as mindfulness, resilience, and self-efficacy and the effect of social support on managing stress. The ranking in the Self-Anchoring Scale activity showed that for many students stress decreased (or would decrease once they graduate from the program) demonstrating the relation between students' stress and the learning environment.

**Figure 2**

*Conceptual Framework - Internal and External Factors Impacting Stress*



### **Delimitations /Limitations**

The selected data sources and methods explored the phenomenon of stress in an executive doctoral program at one particular college. The study was bounded to a specific program and time. The study was a phenomenological case study, and the goal was to portray the depth of executive doctoral students' lived experiences with stress. The sample was a purposeful selected group of 15 executive doctoral students and three faculty in an organizational leadership program at a Mid-Atlantic college, and the phenomenon studied was stress.

The study relied on the experiences and perceptions of the doctoral students in a specific program. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic which affected students differently. When the pandemic started, some students had already graduated, some were in the process of graduating, and some had just started the journey. Therefore, the stress each student experienced might have been different. Although this was not a focus of the study, the study

participants were predominantly female doctoral students. Some research suggests a difference in the stress level of male and female students and that women, particularly those with children, suffer slightly more from stress and mental fatigue than men (Appel & Dahlgren, 2003; Schmidt & Umans, 2014; Sverdlik et al., 2018). However, in this study participants were predominantly female doctoral students and thus there was not sufficient data to make comparisons to analyze gender differences, which could be seen as a limitation of the study. Another limitation of the study was my positionality as a doctoral student in the same program. Thus, the study may have left room for unintended or unconscious biases and/or personal influence from the researcher and the participants when sharing their experiences or during data analysis.

### **Recommendations for Research**

Executive doctoral programs are a fairly new phenomenon and there is little to no information on doctoral students' experiences with stress and their stressors in these programs. More research on executive doctoral students is needed to better understand their perceptions of stress, their stressors, how they cope with stress, and how to help them avoid the negative impacts of stress.

Students' perceptions of stress and their sources of stress vary in different phases and different stages of a program. To learn more about stress and stressors in different stages of a doctoral program, more qualitative and longitudinal studies on executive doctoral programs are needed. These studies can be helpful to provide a more in-depth understanding of how students' stress varies from transition to completion phase.

Doctoral students in this study reported different stressors. Some stressors were similar to sources of stress mentioned in other studies, while a few stressors were specific to doctoral students in this study. Different programs have different structures, designs, and norms. So,

future research might focus on executive doctoral programs in other geographical areas that offer weekend classes and those that offer evening classes to see how the findings would compare to the findings in this study. To understand more about the doctoral students' attrition from their programs, future research could include non-completers and completers to compare their sources of stress and learn how stressors are differed for those who quit the program compared to those who successfully complete the program. Additional studies to understand gender differences in stress, sources of stress, and coping mechanisms would be helpful to identify if differences exist on how students of different genders perceive stress, sources of stress, and management of stress.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Implications for practice of this study are discussed in terms of creating support and providing supportive school resources. A common theme in the findings is support. Many participants reported that the peer mentoring program the college offered was helpful in reducing stress. Matching students with other students and peers to talk and share thoughts and experiences can help students navigate their own experiences (Gardner, 2013). Students also reported the benefits of interacting with those from earlier cohorts and having a mentor in an informal setting. Participants in this study noted that seeking help and talking to a mentor who had already been through the same experience and informed them of what the stressors were made them feel less stressed. Schools can provide orientations and mentoring programs so students can meet members of other cohorts and benefit from the experiences of peers in the earlier cohorts.

With different roles and responsibilities of executive doctoral students, doctoral programs can provide students with a handbook that outlines the potential stressors of the executive

program based on experiences of faculty and students. Coping skills and wellness strategies can be included to help students address those stressors.

Being familiar with the supportive resources offered by a college is helpful and can reduce stress, but, as an effective strategy, this was mentioned by only one participant. Knowing about these resources can foster positive experiences for executive doctoral students who have various roles. Support can be provided to students by providing a booklet during orientation that includes a comprehensive list of resources such as information on instructors' office locations and office hours, the wellness center, the writing center, the library, the librarian, the help desk for problems with technology, and any other center that can provide support for the students. Having prep classes or boot camps for the difficult courses, such as statistics, can also be beneficial in reducing students' stress.

Besides providing academic guidance, universities, program directors, and faculty can work collectively to learn more about their students' stress and stressors. By learning more about students' stress and its sources, faculty can become more consistent in providing the reassurance and the emotional support the students need. According to one faculty member, learning about students' sources of stress and taking them into consideration when designing the courses might also help students experience less stress.

### **Summary**

As participants mentioned, earning a doctoral degree is a big commitment and entails hard work and great effort. There are numerous challenges and stressors on the road to earning the degree. However, students who embark on the doctoral journey acknowledge that stress is part of the journey and is essential to their academic and intellectual growth. Doctoral students have multiple rationales for entering a doctoral program and pursuing a doctorate. Their motives

range from love and passion for education, meeting new people, developing personally and professionally, conducting research to adding credibility to their business, giving weight to their voices, and growing emotionally, academically, and intellectually. These reasons should motivate all students to commit to a doctoral program and persist despite all the challenges (Brailsford, 2010). Students might face various challenges and stressors, but those who wish to embark on the doctoral journey should know that the stress is only temporary. Besides the personal challenges, students will gain many rewarding experiences such as self-satisfaction, intellectual and emotional growth, becoming better observers, thinkers, and performers, and, finally, becoming a better version of themselves. With guidance and support from faculty and peers, doctoral students can overcome the challenges they face. Resetting one's mindset when faced with challenges and barriers by viewing them as opportunities rather than roadblocks can make a significant difference on the journey to success and growth. A quote attributed to football coach Lou Holtz is highly relevant—"It is not the load that breaks you down, it is the way you carry it."

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## **Appendix A. Email to Students**

My name is Heidi Askari, and I am a doctoral student. I am kindly requesting your participation in my doctoral research study titled: Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Stress, Stressors, and Coping Strategies. The intention is to explore your thoughts and experiences of stress in this doctoral program and learn more about sources of stress, and the type of coping strategies you perceive as useful in managing stress while in this program.

The study involves completing basic demographic information and two 30–45-minute interviews via Zoom. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study will keep your identity confidential.

If you wish to participate, please email me back and provide me with your contact information. I will send you additional information about the study and the specific directions for participation. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign a consent form.

Your perspective will be instrumental in my research to help understand more about doctoral students' stress, stressors, and effective coping strategies that can help them manage their stress. I will be grateful if you decide to participate.

## **Appendix B. Informed Consent Form (Doctoral Students)**

A Phenomenological Case Study on Doctoral Student's Perceptions of Stress, Stressors, and Coping Strategies.

### **Consent Form**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As a doctoral student studying in the Executive Doctoral Program in Organization Leadership, you are invited to be a participant in a research study about stress, sources of stress and the effective coping strategies that can help doctoral students better cope with stress. The study is being conducted by Heidi K. Askari in affiliation with Hood College as part of the doctoral program.

#### **2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study will investigate your perceptions of stress, sources of stress, and the strategies that you believe can be implemented to help students cope with stress more effectively. The intended significance of the study is adding to the limited research on executive doctoral students' stress, their sources of stress, and effective coping strategies that students might find helpful in managing stress while they are in the doctoral program, particularly in Organizational Leadership Programs which are now expanding. The other significance of the study is helping the Doctoral Program understudy understand its strengths and areas it needs to strengthen regarding assisting students with their stress. The study might also help students know what to expect when they enter the program.

### **3. DURATION**

There will be two interviews and the length of time you will be involved with this study is approximately 30-45 minutes for each interview. After you sign the consent form, you will answer some demographic questions which I will email later. The first interview questions will be related to stress followed by the Self-Anchoring scale activity. The second interview will be three to ten days after the first one is completed.

### **4. PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- Sign the consent form
- Fill out the demographic information
- Participate in a voluntary, semi-structured interview followed by the Self-Anchoring Scale Activity.
- Take part in the second interview for about 30-45 minutes. Both interviews will be recorded and transcribed

### **5. RISKS/BENEFITS**

The research study presents no foreseeable risk of harm to participants. However, with the questions being related to stress in the Doctoral Program, you might experience minimal discomfort. In the event discomfort is experienced you can contact the College Health and Counselling service at <https://www.hood.edu/hood-community/health-counseling-services> or call [301-698-8374](tel:301-698-8374).

### **6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

The records of this study will be kept private. To protect confidentiality:

- At no point will participants be asked to provide any identifying information.
- Your name will not be used in any aspect of this study
- You will provide or be assigned a pseudonym
- All data will be kept in a secure computer with a passcode
- Notes about data collected will all be kept on the researcher's computer, which is only accessible through username and password entry.
- All data will be destroyed electronically and shredded (if any /notes taken) after five years.

In any sort of report that is published or presentation that is given, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant or the school.

## **7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether to participate or not will not affect your current or future relationship with Hood College or any of its representatives. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships. All interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder or will be recorded on Zoom and then will be transcribed. You can withdraw from the study at any time you want. Your responses will be destroyed and will not be included in the study results.

## **8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

The researcher conducting this study is Heidi Askari. You may ask any questions you have right now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at [hka1@hood.edu](mailto:hka1@hood.edu). If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, you may contact Dr. Jolene Sanders, the

Institutional Review Board Chair, Hood College, 401 Rosemont Ave., Frederick, MD  
21701, [sandersj@hood.edu](mailto:sandersj@hood.edu)

## 9. STATEMENT OF CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

The procedures of this study have been explained to me, and my questions have been addressed. The information that I provide is confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw anytime without penalty. If I have any concerns about my experience in this study (e.g., that I was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily threatened), I may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board or the Chair of the sponsoring department of this research regarding my concerns.

### Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C. Participants' Demographic Information**

- Participant's name:
- Cohort:
- Participant's preferred pseudonym:
- Gender:
- Age – please circle one (between 30-35, 36-40, 41-45, 46-50, 51-55, 56 or older)
- Race:
- Work position (Full-time/Part-time)
- Responsibility:
- Flexibility of work schedule:
- Number of children (Age):

## Appendix D. Interview Questions for Students

### First Interview Protocol:

**Participant Pseudonym**

**Date**

**Time**

1. What was your main reason for wanting to enter this doctoral program? (What made you decide to begin working on a doctorate? Do you remember the day you decided to apply? What were you thinking and feeling then?)
2. How would you describe the stress of the program?
3. What kinds of things have caused stress for you while in the program? (What were some stressors you can think of?)
4. What has been the most stressful experience you have had while in the program? (How has this experience impacted you?)
5. What other stressors do you have outside of the doctoral program? (What other sources of stress can you think of besides those related to studying?)
6. Have any of your stressors impacted you in any way? (What have the impacts been on your well-being? What have the impacts been on your academic performance?)
7. Has being in a cohort had a positive, negative, or neutral impact on your experiences of stress? (Tell me more, please. What aspects of being in a cohort have relieved or caused stress for you?)
8. What phase of the program has been(was) the most stressful for you, why? (Please explain more) (This question was for students who had graduated or were in the last phase of the program)

### **Vignette for Students**

One of your good friends who has multiple roles and responsibilities is accepted in the same program that you are enrolled in, but she is not certain if she is ready to embark on this journey and commit. She does not know what to expect in the program. She is afraid that with all the other responsibilities, she might not have the time and the journey would be too difficult and stressful to handle.

9- What would your advice be? (How is that advice helpful?)

10- What would you tell her is the most stressful aspect of pursuing a doctoral degree?  
(Why do you think so?)

11- If you could give her advice on coping with stress, what would that be? (Is there any other advice?)

## **APPENDIX E. Interview Questions for Students (Second Interview Protocol)**

**Participant Pseudonym**

**Date**

**Time**

12- How do you handle stress in general? (How do/did you handle stress while in the doctoral program? How do you handle stress at work and home?)

13- How would you describe the stress of the program?

14- What sort of coping strategies have you developed or used to help alleviate your stress? (What have you learned that has helped you reduce your stress?)

15- What type of coping strategies do you believe counters stress? (What helps reduce stress? How does it help you?)

16- If you had all the power and budget to get rid of stress in this program, what would you do?

17- What phase of the program has been the most stressful, why do you think so?

18- What else would you like to add related to your experience with stress and stressors in this program that we did not cover?

### **Self-Anchoring Scale Activity (Second Interview Protocol)**

The next activity is the Self-Anchoring Scale activity (Kilpatrick & Cantril, 1960). For this activity, you will use your words to describe the worst and the best doctoral program in terms of being stressful and stress-free. I will take notes and write your words down as you are describing your thoughts. When you are done answering, I will remind you of your words related to each anchor that you have provided.

Then, on an imaginary ladder numbered from zero to 10, you will rate your stress level on a scale of 0-10 at present, in the past and in the future. Zero will present no stress and 10 will mean highly stressed.

1. where on the ladder do you feel you are standing now?
2. Where were you last year?
3. Where will you be next year at this time?



(Image from Google images)

9-Why are your steps different/ the same from past to present?

10-Why are your steps from present to future different/ the same?

## **Appendix F. Email to Faculty**

Dear Doctoral Program Faculty,

My name is Heidi Askari, and I am a doctoral student. I am kindly requesting your participation in my doctoral research study titled: Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Stress, Stressors, and Coping Strategies. The intention is to explore Hood's Doctoral Program and get your thoughts and experiences about doctoral students' sources of stress, and coping strategies. Your perspective will be instrumental in my research to help understand more about doctoral students' stress, stressors, and effective coping strategies that can help them manage their stress. I will be grateful if you decide to participate. The study involves a 30–45-minute interview on Zoom. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your identity and participation will be kept completely confidential. If you are willing to participate, please email me back with the best day and time for the Zoom interview.

## **Appendix G. Informed Consent Form for Faculty**

A phenomenological Case Study on Doctoral Student's Perceptions of Stress, Stressors, and Coping Strategies.

Consent Form

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As a faculty member working in the Executive Doctoral Program in Organization Leadership, you are invited to be a participant in a research study about stress, sources of stress and the effective coping strategies that can help executive doctoral students understand how to better manage their stress. The study is being conducted by Heidi K. Askari, in affiliation with Hood College, as part of her doctoral program.

### **2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study will investigate the students' perceptions of stress, sources of stress, and the strategies that students and faculty believe can be implemented to help students cope with stress more effectively.

The intended significance of the study is adding to the limited research on executive doctoral students' stress, sources of stress and effective coping strategies, particularly in Organization Leadership Programs which are now expanding, and helping the Doctoral Program understudy, understand its strengths and the areas that are needed to strengthen regarding assisting students with their stress.

### 3. DURATION

There will be only one 30–45-minute interview, using semi-structured interview questions and a vignette.

### 4. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- Sign the consent form
- Participate in a voluntary, semi-structured interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed

### 5. RISKS/BENEFITS

, The research study presents no foreseeable risk of harm to participants. However, with the questions being related to stress in the Doctoral Program, you might experience minimal discomfort. In the event, discomfort is experienced you can contact the College Health and Counseling service at <https://www.hood.edu/hood-community/health-counseling-services> or call 301-698-8374

### 6. CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private. To protect confidentiality:

- Your name will not be used in any aspect of this study
- You will provide or be assigned a pseudonym

- All data will be kept in a secure computer with a passcode
- Notes about data collected will all be kept on the researcher's computer, which is only accessible through username and password entry.
- All data will be destroyed electronically and shredded (if any /notes taken)

In any sort of report that is published or presentation that is given, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant or the school they attend.

## 7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether to participate or not will not affect your current or future relationship with Hood College or any of its representatives. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships. All interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder or will be recorded on Zoom and then will be transcribed. You can withdraw from the study at any time you want. Your responses will be destroyed and will not be included in the study results.

## 8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

The researcher conducting this study is Heidi Askari. You may ask any questions you have right now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at [hka1@hood.edu](mailto:hka1@hood.edu). If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, you may contact Dr. Sanders, the Institutional Review Board Chair, Hood College, 401 Rosemont Ave., Frederick, MD 21701, [sandersj@hood.edu](mailto:sandersj@hood.edu)

## 9. STATEMENT OF CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

The procedures of this study have been explained to me, and my questions have been addressed.

The information that I provide is confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw anytime without penalty.

If I have any concerns about my experience in this study (e.g., that I was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily threatened), I may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board or the Chair of the sponsoring department of this research regarding my concerns.

Participant signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H. Faculty Interview Protocol

**Participants Pseudonym-----**

**Date/Time-----**

1. How long have you been working with doctoral students at this college?
2. How do you have contact with your students? And how often?
3. How would you describe students' experiences of stress in their doctoral studies?
4. Talk about a time when a student came to you under a great deal of stress. What were the general circumstances, and what did you do in response?
5. What are some things that you think are stressful aspects of this doctoral program for students? (Which is the MOST stressful in your opinion and why?)
6. At what stage of the program do students get more stressed and need support the most? (Why do you think this phase is so stressful for students? What makes it stressful? How do you help them?)
7. What sort of stress coping strategies do you believe are effective for doctoral students to reduce stress? (Are they more cognitive, social or behavior strategies?)
8. How might being in a cohort impact doctoral students' stress? (How can a cohort contribute to doctoral students' stress or decrease their stress?)
9. What do you suggest to students when they feel stressed?
10. If you had all the power and budget to get rid of stress in this program, what would you do?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add related to doctoral students' stress or coping?

### **Vignette for Faculty**

Helen is an executive doctoral student who works full-time as a principle and has little to no flexibility in her work hours. She works during the week and takes her classes on the weekends. She is married and has two children. Her children are students at school and require her attention. Helen has been stressed since she has started her doctoral journey. Different factors have contributed to her stress. Learning how to balance work, life, and study, managing her time, finding a topic for her dissertation, and writing the dissertation are some of the common stressors that she has had. The heavy workload in some of her classes are quite stressful, but she is unlikely to let the instructors know how stressed she is. She rarely expresses her feelings or asks for help.

12. What would your initial response/ reaction be to Helen?
13. What would you change in your class (or on dissertation committees?) to reduce doctoral students' stress if you felt they were stressed?
14. What would you change in the program to reduce doctoral students' stress if you felt they were stressed?
15. How do you believe faculty members can assist doctoral students to make their whole doctoral journey less stressful?"

### **Complete the following sentences**

16 - The most common student stress experiences in this program is - are -----

17- The most common stressor(s) in my class is/are -----

## **Appendix I. Institutional Review Board Research Proposal**

**1. Title of Proposal:** A Phenomenological Case Study on Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Stress, Stressors, and Coping Strategies.

**2. Principal Investigator (PI):** Heidi Askari

**3. PI Department:** Doctoral Organizational Leadership (DOL)

**4. PI Contact Information:**

[heidiaskari@gmail.com](mailto:heidiaskari@gmail.com) [hka1@hood.edu](mailto:hka1@hood.edu) Tel: (301) 758- 6443

**5. Faculty Sponsor and Contact Information (if PI is a student):**

Dr. Jennifer Cuddapah, Chair [cuddapah@hood.edu](mailto:cuddapah@hood.edu)

**6. Other Investigators:** None

**7. Date of this Submission:** December 28, 2021

**8. Proposed Duration of the Project**

Start Date: Start recruitment of participants                      February 7, 2022

End Date: End of data collection    April 1, 2022

**9. Background Information and Research Questions:**

Literature refers to doctoral students as main contributors to knowledge and the backbone of the research world (Wang et al., 2019). With all the other roles and responsibilities of the doctoral students, one of the challenges that many doctoral students have, which creates stress, is finding a balance between work, life, and study (Martinez et al., 2013). With the pandemic forcing students to take classes online and work remotely, stress has become even more problematic. Stress has been related to the attrition of doctoral students from their programs of study, which is a waste of time, effort, skills, and finances for both the students and the schools. It can also impact the

doctoral students' academic performance, the quality and quantity of their research (Levecque et al., 2017), and their well-being.

Executive degrees in higher education are a relatively new phenomenon in the United States, with little to no information about the benefits and the limitations of these programs (Freeman & Forthun, 2017), or how students experience stress or what these programs' stressors are. Executive doctoral students work during the weekdays and take classes on the weekends or weeknights. The condensed program, back-to-back semesters, and various academic, work, and life responsibilities can lead to stress in some students.

Given that stress impacts doctoral students' mental and physical well-being, academic performance and can lead to students' decisions to withdraw from their programs of study, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological case study (Merriam, 1988) is multi-fold.

- First, it is to explore and understand the thoughts and experiences of the stress of doctoral students who are in an executive cohort program.
- Second, to investigate and learn about students' perceptions of sources of stress and the type of coping strategies they perceive as useful in managing stress.
- And third, to understand faculty members' perspectives on stressors and effective coping strategies for their doctoral students.

The following research questions will help guide this study:

RQ1: How do executive doctoral students describe their experiences of stress and specific stressors?

RQ2: How do executive doctoral students cope with their perceived stress?

RQ3: How do doctoral faculty describe students' stressors, and how do they perceive students' coping?

RQ4: What do doctoral students and faculty suggest as effective coping strategies to improve the experiences for doctoral students?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Attrition:** Attrition, according to Merriam-Webster, is a reduction in number. But in the context of higher education, Google defines it as the number of individuals who leave a program of study before it is finished. Doctoral student attrition generally refers to when students drop out of their doctoral program prior to completing their degrees (Ali & Kohun,2006).

**Doctoral Cohort:** “In Educational doctoral programs, according to Bista and Cox (2014), the doctoral cohort is a group of about 10-25 students who are in the same program of study who work together and share their experiences and are working together towards a mutual goal. A cohort has a supportive structure.

**Coping:** Lazarus and Folkman (1987) define coping as any response to a situation or event that is deemed threatening and allows the person to adapt to that situation. Coping will change behavior or cognition and will help manage the situation successfully.

**Coping Strategy:** Any strategy used by the doctoral students or the faculty to help alleviate a challenge or a problem.

**Doctoral Students:** Any individual who is enrolled in a doctoral program and works toward getting his/her degree (Google Dictionary).

**Executive Doctoral Programs:** Doctoral programs that are designed for working adults.

***In-Person Doctoral Program:*** Any form of instructional and learning program that occurs in-person(face-to-face) and in real time between teachers and doctoral students (Google Dictionary).

***Organizational Leadership Programs:*** Programs that provide business and organization team leaders with the skills, knowledge, and tools needed to move up in their leadership positions in their organizations and guide them to become more effective leaders.

***Mindfulness:*** Mindfulness is the process of an individual responding to situations consciously and being aware of each moment to know where he/she is and what is happening, without over-reacting or being overwhelmed (Łoś et al., 2021)

***Resiliency:*** Resiliency is an individual's ability to recover from difficult or tough situations and successfully adapt to the environment. It is the ability to thrive despite facing any adversity (McGillivray and Pidgeon, 2015).

***Self-efficacy:*** Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), is an individual's ability to be in control of any event that might affect his/her life. It can provide a foundation for well-being.

***Stress:*** Stress has also been defined by scientists in different fields, with each providing a definition particular to their discipline. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define stress as “a relationship between a person and the environment that is appraised by the individual as exceeding his/her resources and endangering his/ her well-being”.

***Well-being:*** Well-being, or as it is common to say, health, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1948), is “a state of complete physical, mental or social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018)

**Working Adult:** In the context of higher education, Kazis et al. (2007) define working adults as “Students who tend to be older, work more (full-time), attend school less, have more family responsibilities compared to their peers who are mainly students” (p. 9).

## **10. Human Participants:**

### **A. Who are the participants?**

Doctoral students and faculty from three cohorts at this Mid-Atlantic college will be chosen based on purposive sampling. This type of sampling will allow me to include participants who will be “selected deliberately so they can provide information that is particularly relevant and related to the questions and goals and could not be collected through other choices” (Maxwell, 2013, p.97).

### **B. How many participants do you plan to have in your study?**

115 executive doctoral students in Organization Leadership and 3 doctoral faculty of the school will be the participants in this study.

### **C. How will the participants be contacted or recruited?**

Participants will be contacted via electronic mail (See Appendix A and F), which will explain what is being studied and why the study is significant. After I provide a brief introduction of myself and the purpose of the study, I will explain the risks and benefits of the study. Confidentiality of participants and the information they provide and, how it will be protected will be included in the email as well.

### **D. Will the participants be compensated for participating? If so, describe:**

All doctoral students who participate will receive a Thank-you note along with a \$5.00 Starbucks gift card. The faculty will only receive a Thank-you note.

- 11. Procedures:** I will use different data sources, but the main instrument in data collection will be semi-structured interviews with the students and faculty, which will all be recorded and transcribed. Data collection methods are attached in the Appendices. Doctoral students will have two separate interviews, which will be about 30 minutes each. The interviews will be three to ten days apart. In the first interview, I will get students' demographic information (Appendix C). Then, I will move to the interview questions related to stress. The Self-Anchoring Scale activity (First Interview Protocol, Appendix D) will help get students' perspectives on different sources of stress and can also be helpful in understanding more about different types of coping strategies. In the second interview, I will ask students questions related to coping, and then I will move to the next data source which will be a vignette (Second Interview Protocol, Appendix E). Faculty will have one 30- 45-minute interview. For the faculty, data sources will be semi-structured interviews, a vignette, and sentence completion activity (Appendix H). The vignette will be based on the students' responses to the interview questions. If the students are allowed back on the campus, the interviews will be face-to-face; otherwise, I will interview the participants using the Zoom platform.
- 12. Consent:** I will use the informed consent form template provided by Hood College.
- 13. Risks and Debriefing:** There are no known harm or foreseen risks associated with participating in the interview.
- 14. Privacy and Storage of Data:** The records for this study will be kept private on my computer using a password. Pseudonyms will be used instead of students' names. Every precaution and measure will be taken to protect the students' identity. Data files will be

stored using encrypted passwords to access all data files in Microsoft Word. After the study is completed, all the collected data will be destroyed and deleted.

## Appendix J. Research Questions and Data Collection Matrix

### *Research Question and Data Collection Matrix*

Research Question	Questionnaire and Activity Items
RQ1: How do executive doctoral students describe their experiences of stress and specific stressors?	Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q10, Q13, Q17 Students' Semi-structured interviews Self-Anchoring Scale activity
RQ2: How do executive doctoral students cope with their perceived stress?	Q12, Q14 Students' semi-structured interview
RQ3: How do doctoral faculty describe students' stress and stressors, and how do they perceive students' coping?	Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q8, Q11 Faculty semi-structure interviews Q12 vignette for Faculty Q16, Q17 Sentence Completion
RQ4: What do doctoral students and faculty suggest as effective coping strategies to improve the experiences for doctoral students?	Q9, Q11, Q12, Q14, Q15, Q16 Students 'interview questions- Self-Anchoring Scale activity Q 7, Q8, Q4, Q10 Faculty Interviews Q13, Q14, Q15-Faculty vignette Self- Anchoring Scale Activity

*Note.* Question 1 in students' first interview protocol and questions 1 and 2 in faculty interview were warm up questions. Question 18 in students' interview and Q11 for faculty were added in the event participants needed to add additional info they had forgotten to mention during the interview. Q17 was for doctoral students who had graduated or were in completion phase.

**Appendix K. Summary Matrix: Quotes, Codes, Theme Matrix, and Executive Summary**

<b>Vignette- Q.10 What would you say is the most stressful aspect of pursuing a doctoral degree?</b>		
<b>Participants'</b> <b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Quotes</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Tony	Time management, and having the time to do the assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time Management</li> <li>• Having the time</li> </ul>
Lidia	Anxiety related to dropping a ball, of not getting something done that was required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting things done (meeting deadlines)</li> </ul>
Anna	Just the amount of work and taking away your personal life? You know, I mean, for me I'm an extrovert, and just not having that interaction time with people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The amount of work</li> <li>• Not having interaction</li> </ul>
Ralph	Not having a topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No topic</li> </ul>
Granger	Making the time, and the stress of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making time</li> <li>• Stress of time</li> </ul>
Audrey	Needing to meet others and professors or things like that during the workday, which they deserve every right to meet. But I also work. So, it makes it difficult to kind of coordinate the time with my professional duties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Balancing work, life, and study</li> </ul>
Eleni	The stress of time, or perhaps not being able to do everything as well as you like to do and not being able to meet your own standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress of time</li> <li>• Not meeting your own standards</li> </ul>

John	You've got to commit to yourself that you are doing this for the right reason. Finding a topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• Finding a topic</li> </ul>
Hank	The time and commitment. Finding the time and energy to give your best.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• Time</li> </ul>
Monique	knowing that the writing is not the writing you would normally do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different writing</li> </ul>
Teddy	To have the time available. If you have the time, it won't be as stressful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have time available</li> </ul>
Kari	I just think that you feel like you need to know now, when really, you have to let time pass and you have to grow into it. I think we all show up. Because we are strong in our field. And we're passionate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give yourself time to grow and learn</li> </ul>
Jane	Managing the time to do the assignments with your personal and professional life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing time &amp;</li> <li>• balancing life, work, and study</li> </ul>
Kati	The writing portion was a big struggle for me because I doubted myself as to whether my writing was up to par. Like the writing of a scholarly practitioner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The writing</li> </ul>
Sophie	What was I going to do my dissertation on?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• finding a topic for the dissertation</li> </ul>

**Vignette- Q.10 What would you say is the most stressful aspect of pursuing a doctoral degree?**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Time management</b>	<b>Deadlines</b>	<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Workload</b>	<b>Heavy</b>	<b>Topic selection</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>balance</b>	<b>Finding the scholar</b>	<b>Writing like a</b>
<b>Tony</b>	x						x			
<b>Lidia</b>			x							
<b>Anna</b>				x			x			
<b>Ralph</b>						x				
<b>Granger</b>	x									
<b>Audrey</b>								x		
<b>Eleni</b>	x									
<b>John</b>						x				
<b>Hank</b>	x									
<b>Monique</b>										x
<b>Teddy</b>	x									
<b>Kari</b>	x									
<b>Jane</b>	x							x		
<b>Kati</b>										x

<b>Sophie</b>				X			
<b>Total Mentions</b>	7	1	1	3	2	2	2

### **Executive Summary**

Seven participants expressed time management as a stressor. This was described in in their statements on how they struggle to manage time with their busy schedule and various roles they had. Three of the participants expressed their stress of finding a topic and the selection of a topic for their research. Finding the balance, academic writing, and no interaction were other stressful aspects of pursuing a doctoral degree for some other doctoral students.