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

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1   *Abstract: Move abstract text up to here.*

2   Doctoral student attrition is often referred to as a silent epidemic whereby students tacitly

3   withdraw without ever being given an exit interview or follow-up. While most studies focus on

4   the departing students, few studies focus on the institution's implicit and explicit policies and

5   practices that encourage silence. Drawing upon the "Exit, Voice, Loyalty" framework, we

6   examined how the pathways to student voice that institutions provide for departing students

7   contribute to the silent departure phenomenon. Campus stakeholders, policymakers, and

8   administrators should solicit critical feedback from departing students and develop instruments

9   to assess their own departure process, rather than relying on national assessments.

10   Keywords: Exit Phone Interview, Silent Departure, Doctoral Attrition, Exit-Voice-Loyalty,

11   Doctoral Training, Graduate Audience.

12   In the United States between 40% and 50% of graduate students who begin a doctoral

13   program fail to earn a Ph.D. (Bauer, 2004; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts &

14   Nelson, 2000; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Sowell, Allum, & Okahana, 2015). Doctoral students

15   who prematurely withdraw often do so after completing all, or a significant amount, of their

16   course work, thus gaining significant knowledge (Golde, 2000). They frequently leave the

17   institution silently, that is, without giving formal notice (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde,

18   2000; Lovitts, 2001); and sometimes they are laden with significant student loan debt and

19   lingering emotional scars (Lovitts, 2001). This silent departure process is marked by a lack of

20   institutional engagement with departing doctoral students (Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett,

21   2006). It is problematic that doctoral students can simply disappear (Haynes, 2008), without any

22   formal notification and/or engagement with support services. Given the substantial investment

23   necessary for doctoral education (Smallwood, 2004), this occurrence is considered "a waste of

24 valuable resources" for the individual as well as the institution (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

25 According to Lovitts (2001), multiple individuals, including university administrators, faculty

26 and even students, contribute to the cultivation of an institutional culture that blames departing

27 students for non-completion. We recognize that not all Ph.D. students will finish—nor should

28 they (Cassuto, 2013), however, when only a little more than half of doctoral students earn a

29 Ph.D., it cannot simply be the fault of students. As part of a seven-year national study, the

30 Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) asked its 18 institutional research partners in the Ph.D.

31 Completion Project (PCP) to institute Ph.D. exit surveys for all departing doctoral students

32 including those who left the university prematurely. The CGS (Sowell, 2009) found of the 1,856

33 doctoral students who left a university, its institutional partners were more successful at getting

34 Ph.D. completers (n=1406) than non-completers (n=59) to fill out the Ph.D. exit survey. The

35 small sample size of non-completers precluded CGS from comparing non-completers'

36 experiences and opinions with those who completed the Ph.D.. While national initiatives to

37 understand doctoral attrition focused on the students' perspective, to affect positive change and

38 reduce doctoral attrition, educational institutions have to look inward at their own cultures and

39 practices. Tinto (2003) argued that while:

40   Departure from different institutions may share a number of important functional

41   similarities, the specific individual and institutional roots of departure will necessarily

42   differ. While institutions can and should learn from one another's experience, it remains

43   the case that each institution must assess for itself the particular attributes of student

44   departure from its campus. Only in that manner can institutions identify and accurately

45   target specific forms of actions to the task of student retention. Institutional assessment

46   is, in this fashion, a necessary beginning step in the formulation of an effective retention

47   program (p.5).

48 Tinto's call to action focused on each institution's need to assess student departure as part of its

49 retention strategy.

50   Although Tinto did not address doctoral student departure directly, this study focused on

51 the silent departure process of our doctoral students at Mid-Atlantic University (MAU). As

52 research partners in the Ph.D. Completion Project, we administered both a paper and an online

53 version of the Ph.D. Exit survey and also experienced a low response rate among MAU's Ph.D.

54 non-completers. The low response rate challenged us to reframe our thinking about the role of

55 the institution in the silent departure. Instead of asking, 'why doctoral students leave MAU?' we

56 focused on why they leave MAU silently. We argued that solutions to the silent departure

57 phenomenon can only be made after the causes of the problems have been fully identified.

58   A primary purpose of the study was to examine how the pathways and the type of

59 feedback mechanisms/instruments such as withdrawal forms, exit surveys, or exit interviews

60 (hereafter referred to as student voice mechanisms), that institutions provide for departing

61 students contribute to the silent departure phenomenon. Formal student voice mechanisms

62 generally offer students opportunities to provide feedback to the institution or to express

63 grievances. Given the high rate of doctoral attrition, coupled with silent departure, institutions

64 need systematic and ongoing evaluation of institutional practices that impact the quality of their

65 students' educational experiences.

66   Students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their departments, faculty,

67 staff, and administrators. Without fear of retaliation via an exit interview (Golde, 2005),

68 departing students can raise the tough issues, which departments, faculty, staff, and

69   administrators may have been unaware or unwilling to address. The perspectives of these

70   students might provide richer and more in-depth insights into the strengths and challenges of a

71   doctoral program that could potentially inform proactive doctoral retention program practices

72   (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 1996; 2001). With these insights departments, faculty,

73   staff, and administrators would be better able to influence change, prioritize goals, allocate

74   resources, increase student satisfaction, and possibly improve retention.

75   Over the past decade several researchers (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000, 2005; Lovitts,

76   2001), called for more support for graduate students, especially providing someone to talk with

77   when considering the decision to withdraw and knowing what options are available. Some have

78   recommended that departments (Golde, 2005) and institutions (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000;

79   Lovitts, 2001) consider using exit interviews. Despite the widespread recommendation to

80   implement an exit interview, few studies have examined how they have been adopted or

81   evaluated this practice. Moreover, the literature fails to provide guidance on the use of exit

82   interviews at the graduate level.

83   Similar to Lovitts (1996, 2001) and Golde (2000), we employed Hirschman's (1970)

84   Exit-Voice-Loyalty (EVL) framework to evaluate the effectiveness of one Mid-Atlantic

85   University's (MAU) departure process for doctoral students. We assess the feasibility of the

86   institution's Withdrawal Form (WF) as a formal mechanism for departing doctoral students to

87   voice the discontent or concerns that led to the decision to withdraw. To follow-up and collect

88   more in-depth data from students who withdrew using a WF, we pilot tested a follow-up Exit

89   Phone Interview (EPI) as an additional or alternative mechanism for former doctoral students to

90   give critical feedback to the institution. We now offer an overview of the literature pertaining to

91   the exit process of doctoral students and a synopsis of the theoretical framework of EVL. This

92   explanation is followed by a description of the study we conducted and the results. We then

93   discuss the implications for policy, practice, and future research.

94   **Literature Review**

95   **Ph.D. Exit Surveys**

96   At the graduate level Mid-Atlantic University (MAU) and other institutions administer the

97   *Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED)*, an exit survey for doctoral students who complete their

98   degree. This survey, which is sponsored by six federal agencies including the National Science

99   Foundation (NSF), averages a very high response rate. For example, of the 54,904 individuals

100   who received a research doctorate in 2016, 91.8% completed the *Survey of Earned Doctorates*

101   (National Science Foundation, 2018). At MAU as part of the requirements for graduation

102   doctoral students are invited to participate in the annual *Survey of Earned Doctorates* and a

103   Ph.D. Completion Exit Survey (Sowell, 2009). The link to the Ph.D. Completion Exit Survey is

104   also available on MAU's webpage for doctoral students who plan to withdraw. For the Ph.D.

105   Completion Exit Survey, MAU experiences a high response rate from Ph.D. completers and a

106   low response rate from non-completers, suggesting that the exit process is different for these two

107   groups. Thus, the feedback mechanisms might need to be different as well. For the Ph.D.

108   completers, filling out an exit survey as part of the graduating process might be a seen as a

109   welcomed opportunity to share insight on a successful journey. In contrast, for the Ph.D. non-

110   completer the incentive to fill out the survey appears less obvious. Where an online exit survey

111   might work for Ph.D. completers, a personalized exit interview might be a better alternative for

112   Ph.D. non-completers, to share insights as to why their journey was less successful.

113 **Exit Interviews**

114 Exit interviews have been used extensively for a long time by human resources departments in

115 corporations (Izzo, 2016). Beyond an opportunity to gather important information and

116 knowledge from the employee or customer, an exit interview can also be viewed as an

117 opportunity for personal catharsis or a therapeutic experience. It provides a mechanism for

118 departing individuals to voice their frustrations and discontent with the organization. Also,

119 giving disgruntled employees the opportunity to voice their feelings legitimately may prevent

120 them from excessive cynical behavior and possibly harming the reputation of the organization

121 (Jurkiewicz, Knouse, & Giacalone, 2001). Additionally, exit interviews can provide departing

122 employees with information regarding their retirement accounts, health benefits, and other

123 available resources. The organization's motivation can, therefore, be interpreted as providing an

124 opportunity to relieve any hostilities or tensions (Hutchinson, 2002). Ultimately, the

125 organization can create a win-win situation by allowing employees a chance to give constructive

126 feedback and to leave on a positive note. In particular, Johns and Gorrick (2016) maintained that

127 an exit interview serves to identify not only the push and pull factors of voluntary termination

128 but also the areas in the organization that need improvement. As in the corporate sphere, an exit

129 interview of Ph.D. non-completers in academia could allow for a fuller understanding of the

130 reasons why students leave and more importantly, the areas in the graduate school that need

131 improvement.

132 **Exit Interviews and Doctoral Attrition**

133 Despite the general consensus regarding the value of exit interviews in academia, scholars

134 disagree about who should administer them. Whereas some studies (Gardner, 2009; Golde,

135 2000; Lovitts, 2001), recommended that exit interviews be administered at the university level

136 Golde (2005) focused, on departmental interventions since the policies, practices, and norms at

137 the department level have the strongest impact on graduate students' lives. Nonetheless, a

138 departmental intervention may prove difficult and insufficient particularly because current

139 studies, including Golde (2005), indicated that students often leave silently for fear of retaliation

140 if they share their discontent. Rather than conducting exit interviews at the department level

141 where the problems might exist, graduate students need a safe and confidential space to express

142 their thoughts. We piloted our exit interview at the institutional level because we believed that at

143 the institutional level, students should be able to talk with administrators who will listen, answer

144 questions, interpret policies/procedures, and provide guidance on the appropriate steps to

145 consider for a resolution if the students disclosed conflict that could be remedied if the student

146 wanted to be reinstated or considered starting over in another doctoral department at MAU..

Theoretical Framework: Exit Voice Loyalty

148 Drawing upon economic theory, the Exit Voice Loyalty (EVL) framework developed by

149 Hirschman (1970) described, three strategies used by customers and citizens to respond to

150 dissatisfaction with organizations. Hirschman suggested that, in a competitive marketplace

151 where people have many options, customers are more likely to leave (*exit*) and move to another

152 organization rather than express displeasure with prices that are too high or with a decline in

153 product quality. Whereas an exit represented an "escape from" displeasure, the term *voice*,

154 sometimes used as a verb and sometimes as a noun, can be understood as more political and a

155 form of protest, in that, it refers to the verbal expression of discontent to the manager or leader of

156 a business or organization. Be it individual or collective, Hirschman considered *voice* to be "any

157 attempt at all to change… an objectionable state of affairs" (p.30). While voice can bring

158 attention to the problem, O'Donnell (1986) extended the voice concept further by making a

159   distinction between "vertical" and "horizontal" voice. He suggested that it matters to whom the

160   complaints are voiced; vertical voice involves talking to superiors whereas horizontal voice is

161   talking to peers, friends and neighbors. Although each concept can be studied as distinct and

162   separate, the framework has more analytical power when the concepts are viewed as connected

163   rather than mutually exclusive. Dowding, Mergoupis, John, and Vugt (2000) presented, a

164   comprehensive literature review of EVL, they suggested that the relative costs of voice and exit

165   are crucial to any analysis. They offered insight to the following possibility.

166   An individual could exit and voice simultaneously—a "noisy exit" in which voice is used

167   to advertise one's exit decision. Or the decision to exit could be taken at a later date

168   following the failure of voice to raise standards (p.476).

169   In this study, we considered "student voice" to be analogous to "employee voice". Lovitts

170   (2001), suggested that graduate students were similar to consumers or members of an

171   organization where they could express "their discontent by either ceasing to purchase the product

172   (i.e., education) or leaving the university (exit) or expressing dissatisfaction to some authority

173   (voice)" (p. 32). Similarly, Mark (2013a) viewed students as customers when he suggested that,

174   "students are only satisfied when they have gotten what they paid for: a quality education in a

175   field of their choice with an accompanying credential that is valued in the labour market" (2013a,

176   p.2). When researchers examined to whom departing graduate students voiced their discontent,

177   Golde (2000) and Lovitts (2001) found more examples where students expressed their discontent

178   and plan to leave with fellow students (horizontal voice) instead of university administrators

179   (vertical voice). In some cases however, Lovitts (2001) found evidence of neither horizontal nor

180   vertical voice. In other words, there was no noisy exit as one would have expected with business.

181   As with exit and voice, for customers, loyalty is another possible response following

182   disappointment with the quality of a product or service. Hirschman defined loyalty as allegiance

183   to or willingness to stay with an organization despite disappointment with product or service.

184   Dowding et al. (2000) viewed this concept of customer loyalty as "brand loyalty" or the

185   "psychological resistance to change". Rather than viewing loyalty as "static attachment",

186   Dowding et al. (2000, p. 477) conceptualized loyalty in two distinct ways—the first includes

187   "one's identification with the object" and the second pertains to "the amount one has invested in

188   that object." In addition, Barry (1974, p.48) argued that loyalty is more than a reluctance to exit;

189   it can be "a positive commitment" to an organization to make it better.

190   **EVL and Doctoral Attrition**

191   One of the main ways that higher education uses the EVL model is by focusing on the

192   relationships between exit, loyalty, and voice. According to Golde (2000, p.223) "[graduate]

193   students will either leave (*exit)*, conform to the organization by becoming socialized to its norms

194   (*loyalty*), or speak out against the problem they see (*voice*)". This perspective of EVL presented

195   these three concepts as mutually exclusive and supports a silent departure phenomenon (Lovitts

196   2001), whereby departing doctoral students were seen as "silent leavers, departing without

197   saying good-bye" (Nettles & Millet, 2006, p. 125).

198   Unlike exit and voice, the concept of loyalty is minimally discussed in the literature on

199   doctoral attrition. When scholars discussed loyalty, they often focused on the total allegiance to

200   organizational norms and practices, even in the face of dissatisfaction (Lovitts, 1996). Lovitts

201   (1996) argued that expression of dissatisfaction is often viewed as a form of disloyalty in the

202   organizational structure and culture of academia. To express dissatisfaction is perceived as a

203   failure to conform to the disciplinary and departmental norms that are expected of a successful

204 researcher or scholar. In contrast, loyal doctoral students are those who have been socially

205 integrated into the norms and expectations of the department and would persist eventually to the

206 completion of the Ph.D.

207 Alternatively, we broadly consider two concepts of loyalty, Dowding et al.'s (2000),

208 loyalty to the organization (brand loyalty) and Barry's (1974) positive commitment, which we

209 interpret to mean loyalty to self in pursuit of the dream of completing a Ph.D. We argue that

210 when students are loyal to self, they might exit their Ph.D. program and re-enroll in a Ph.D.

211 program at another institution. Hence, the individual might not be loyal to the institution but

212 might be loyal to self by realizing the dream of achieving a Ph.D. For example, a student might

213 have left one doctoral program based on financial concerns and re-enrolled in another institution

214 that fully funds all of its doctoral students. Hence, where financial concerns might be considered

215 an individual problem in one circumstance, it might just be a matter of perspective in terms of

216 who is responsible for funding graduate education (Haynes, 2008; Nettles & Millet, 2006).

217 Moreover, we argue that it is possible to exit a doctoral program, give voice to the discontent,

218 and still be loyal to the university. Students may exit one program and re-enroll into another

219 program at the same university, even if it means starting over. Hence it is possible to exit a

220 program and still be loyal to the university and loyal to realizing your dream as well. For these

221 reasons, we amend the concept of loyalty to include allegiance to self and other higher education

222 institutions. We believe it is possible that the concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty might not be

223 fully understood and could be extended further.

The Study

224

225 **Context and Setting**

226 MAU is classified as a medium size Doctoral University with Higher Research Activity by the

227 Carnegie Foundation (2017). It enrolls approximately 10,000 undergraduates and 2,500 graduate

228 students. The university offers 24 doctoral degree programs, 23 of which are in STEM (science,

229 technology, engineering, and math) fields.

230 Before we discuss specific student voice mechanisms used to mitigate the silent departure

231 at MAU, it is necessary to provide an understanding of MAU's rules and definitions. According

232 to the University's continuous enrollment policy for graduate students, each student has the

233 obligation to enroll every semester (spring and fall) to maintain good academic standing within

234 their program. Failure to register each semester has important implications for financial aid and

235 comes with some negative consequences, which include lack of access to institutional resources

236 such as libraries, labs, and faculty advisors. Students who wish to continue in a degree program

237 but who cannot study in a particular semester or year are encouraged to notify their advisor,

238 Graduate Program Director, or the Graduate School, preferably in writing via an email or a

239 Withdrawal Form. While a leave of absence is better than complete withdrawal, the number of

240 leaves of absence is limited. The student may only be on leave of absence for up to three

241 consecutive semesters after which the student is considered withdrawn (MAU, n.d.).

242 **Methodology and Research Questions**

243 We used a case study research design to examine doctoral students' departure process at MAU.

244 According to Yin (2009), a case study research design is used when an investigator is interested

245 in examining a contemporary social phenomenon in the context in which it occurs. We

246 employed a convenient sampling strategy to select the case—MAU, an academic institution that

247 had only one formal student voice mechanism: an online Withdrawal Form (WF) for doctoral

248 students who wanted to withdraw formally from their programs and the institution. Because this

249 is essentially a self-study of student voice in MAU's departure process, we focused on these

250 questions:

251 - Why do doctoral students leave silently?

252 - Why aren't our doctoral students speaking up? And when they do, what are they

253 saying, and to whom?

254 - In what ways are MAU's student voice mechanisms contributing to the silent

255 departure phenomenon in doctoral attrition?

256 This study formed part of the larger CGS' Ph.D. Completion Project conducted to

257 examine doctoral attrition. The research population for that study focused on all doctoral

258 students who left the institution. The Graduate School at MAU posted the Ph.D. Completion

259 Exit Survey on line and mailed a paper version to all doctoral students who graduated and those

260 who failed to register for two consecutive semesters including those who had previously filled

261 out a Withdrawal Form (WF). Prior to participating in the Ph.D. Completion Project, MAU had

262 an online WF form for departing doctoral students to formally announce their decision and

263 reason for early withdrawal. After that initiative, MAU continued to administer the online

264 version of the Ph.D. Completion Exit survey and the WF for all departing doctoral students.

265 Because of the low response rate among Ph.D. non-completers, MAU pilot- tested an Exit Phone

266 Interview (EPI) to consider adding another student voice mechanism to see if MAU's Graduate

267 School could get more participation from Ph.D. non-completers. This pilot intervention was

268 covered under the larger project's Institutional Review Board's (IRB) human subjects' approved

269 protocol.

270 **Data Collection and Definitions**

271 To develop and understand the case, we selected multiple data sources and analytic methods. As

272 an administrator in MAU's Graduate school, the lead researcher had the ability to gain

273 unrestricted access to MAUs administrative records such as student registration records and

274 transcripts. We collected data mainly from three sources: (a) institutional enrollment and exit

275 data, (b) Withdrawal forms (WF) and a (c) pilot study of an Exit Phone Interview (EPI). In

276 addition to these sources, we also relied on the institution's website to examine MAU's written

277 policies on its formal departure process. Thus, we combined these sources to triangulate the

278 institution's role in the silent departure phenomenon.

279 **Research Assumptions and Procedure**

280 To evaluate the value of MAU's WF to act as a student voice mechanism in mitigating the silent

281 departure, we began by exploring measures of silent departure in the doctoral attrition literature.

282 In this study, silent departure was characterized by a failure to register coupled with a lack of

283 formal notification via a WF. We suspected that most doctoral withdrawals at MAU occurred

284 without formal notification by the student (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). In addition, we

285 determined a "quiet departure" to be a departure in which the student submitted a notice to

286 withdraw (WF) without providing a written reason for leaving. Moreover, when a student

287 provided a written reason and or participated in the EPI, we considered that a "noisy exit" where

288 students voiced their concerns and the institution was able to garner critical feedback. Several

289 researchers in the doctoral attrition literature recommended an exit interview to mitigate the

290 silent departure phenomenon. We believed that, the EPI would be a better tool to solicit salient

291 information than was or is the WF.

292   Like previous researchers, we used the words *attrition*, *withdrawal, departure*, and

293   *dropout* interchangeably to refer specifically to leaving a doctoral program (Council of Graduate

294   Schools (CGS), 2008; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Sowell, 2009). We relied on the measure of

295   doctoral attrition used for the Ph.D. Completion Project (CGS, 2008; Sowell, 2009). CGS

296   measured attrition based on enrollment and completion of the same graduate program initially

297   undertaken. Hence, if a Ph.D. student left one program and enrolled in another, even if this is

298   within the same department, it was still considered attrition (CGS, 2008; Sowell, 2009). MAU's

299   aggregated data on doctoral attrition included doctoral students who voluntarily "transferred" to

300   a different department within MAU, enrolled in another doctoral program at a different

301   institution, withdrew from higher education entirely, or were academically terminated from the

302   program. These multiple definitions helped ground this study.

303   MAU's overall doctoral attrition from 1998-2016 was calculated from the enrollment

304   records as of fall 2016. Because some of MAU's doctoral programs offer enrollment both in the

305   fall and spring semesters, therefore we combined the institution's fall and spring data to calculate

306   the total number of doctoral students enrolled (n=2628) between 1998 and 2016. Based on

307   MAU's continuous enrollment policy, a non-completer is defined as a doctoral student having

308   more than two consecutive semesters of non-registration. Using this definition, we calculated

309   the number of non-completers over the same time period. Thus, from 1998 to 2016 the

310   population of interest for this study was 1,029 students identified by MAUs administrative

311   records as being non-completers of doctorate programs.

312   **Data Analysis**

313   First, to examine the scope of MAU's silent departure, we conducted a descriptive analysis of the

314   informal (silent) and formal (Withdrawal Form) exit pathways. We determined the scope and

315   context of silent departure at MAU by two components: (a) the number of WFs submitted

316   compared to the number of students who left and (b) the number of WFs with a written reason

317   for withdrawal compared to the number with no reason provided.

318   Second, we conducted a content analysis of the student's expression of *voice*—

319   specifically the extent to which students voiced discontent and/or shared their positive

320   experiences. Both the WF and EPI were designed to give students the opportunity to state the

321   reason for their withdrawal from MAU, we wanted to know what they said and to whom. On the

322   WF, in a blank space, departing students were asked to provide a written "Reason for request";

323   during the EPI they were asked the question directly. We conducted a content analysis of the

324   written answers on the WF and the transcripts of the EPI.

325   Using the contact information from the WF, we followed up with a telephone call. For

326   those students with valid phone numbers (n=70), we left a message (n=2) or interviewed them

327   immediately (n=35). One student returned our call and agreed to be interviewed. Another

328   departing doctoral student who had not filled out a WF agreed to be interviewed based on a

329   personal invitation from the lead researcher. Thus, we interviewed a total of 37 students.

330   Prior to the start of the EPI, each participant was asked to give their informed consent to

331   participate in the research. All participants were also advised of the confidentiality, voluntary

332   nature and purpose of the study. Two administrators in the Graduate School served as

333   interviewers for the EPI. Interviewers referred to the answer written (if one was provided) on the

334   WF and asked the students, if he or she is willing to provide a more robust understanding of that

335   written answer (voice). We chose a semi-structured interview format to create a comfortable

336   atmosphere and to avoid making the student feel like our engagement was an interrogation

337   (Richards & Morse, 2007).

338   All interviews were conducted by telephone using a standard list of 10 questions and

339   lasted an average of 20-25 minutes. We asked former doctoral students a series of open-ended to

340   elicit both positive and negative information about their graduate experience. Immediately upon

341   completion of the telephone interview, field notes and or recordings were immediately

342   transcribed. The series of open-ended questions included on the interview protocol were

343   informed by the sensitizing concepts of the EVL framework. To explore the concept of *voice*,

344   the EPI interview process began with the following question; "I see that you have filled out a WF

345   and you listed 'x' as your reason for leaving the university, is there any other reason [for] leaving

346   MAU?" This introduction allowed the student to express the most salient aspects of the

347   experience. The next set of questions probed the student about specific themes including

348   institutional fit and expectations, advisor relationship, departmental support, ease of transition to

349   graduate school, and funding.

350   Unlike the WF, the EPI explored the concept of *loyalty*, based on the combination of the

351   original version from the EVL framework and Barry's (1974) extended version presented earlier.

352   The following questions focused on our concept of *loyalty.* "Did you decide to enroll at another

353   university? ""What will you do differently?" These questions were designed to give students an

354   opportunity to reflect on alternative pathways that they may or may not have considered at the

355   time of departure. The final set of questions asked the student to describe what she or he liked

356   most and least about the university. A question that directly assesses loyalty to the university

357   asked students if they would recommend the university to others. Following each interview one

358   interviewer took written notes and transcribed them immediately afterward, whereas the other

359   recorded the conversations and transcribed them later.

360   Both case study research design and content analysis comprised of a multistage iterative

361   process, which involved planning, designing, preparing, collecting and analyzing. First, we read

362   a printed copy of each interview and WF, making preliminary notes in the margins and drafting a

363   summary of each participant's individual experience. Next, we transferred the transcripts into

364   NVivo qualitative analysis software to create categories, assign descriptive and topical codes to

365   pertinent statements, and identify cross-cutting themes and patterns that emerged from the data

366   (Richards & Morse, 2007). To synthesize data contained in documents such as the MAU's

367   website, WFs, and the EPI transcripts, we engaged in an inductive iterative process of carefully

368   reading and rereading the documents. Although rather time-consuming, "this process yields

369   data—excerpts, quotations, or entire passages—that are then organized into major themes,

370   categories, and case examples" (Bowen, 2009, p.28).

371   **Results**

372   When we examined the scope of the silent departure process at MAU, we began by focusing on

373   the students' departure process and asking what voice mechanisms departing doctoral students

374   use to withdraw from the institution. According to MAU Graduate School's written withdrawal

375   policy available on MAU's website "Written notice of a withdrawal request is required by the

376   Graduate School. Withdrawal Forms are available for download." Figure 1 is based on

377   institutional data for 19 doctoral cohorts who began doctoral studies between 1998 and 2016.

378   We found that of 1,029 doctoral students who left the university between 1998 and 2016, the

379   majority (n=878) did not use any student voice mechanism; they simply did not register for

380   another semester. This failure to register suggests that the student just left or dropped out of his

381   or her program but it fails to specify the student's future intentions.

382   **The Withdrawal Form**

383   Since we were concerned about the effectiveness of the WF to provide voice to departing

384   students, we focused on the form itself. A small percentage (14.7%) of students filled out

385   MAU's WF prior to their departure. The WF presents both opportunities and challenges in that

386   it could either be seen as an opportunity for an expression of voice or a suppression of voice or

387   both. When the student made use of the WF the graduate school was notified of the departing

388   student's intention. However, if the student did not provide a written reason, the institution was

389   unable to determine why. Table 1 lists reasons that 27 Ph.D. non-completers noted on the WF

390   for leaving MAU. Still, the results indicate that of the departing students who filed a WF 123

391   left the 'reason for leaving' section blank. Of the students who provided a written reason for

392   leaving (*n*=27), wrote short sentences or two words. Based on content analysis of the written

393   reasons we find that the reasons fall into six broad categories that include: Quiet/no reason

394   (n=123), Lost of interest (n=9), Personal, Health, & Family (n=4), Work responsibilities (n=4),

395   Advisor/Committee Challenges (n=3), Transfer (n=3) and Other (n=4). The most common

396   written reason listed was "losing interest" (n=9).

397   **The Exit Phone Interview**

398   With respect to the most frequent written answer on the WF "losing interest", we asked students

399   to elaborate on their answers during the EPI. Despite a common written response, the nine

400   students provided more in-depth answers that pointed to a myriad reasons for leaving. For

401   example, one student who wrote 'lost interest" mentioned his advisor's departure from the

402   university as his primary reason for withdrawal. He stated:

403   I had all the coursework done, and my advisor left the university… but [MAU] had the

404   grant [under which he was funded and working for]. But once the grant finished I got a

405   lot of roadblocks from him [the advisor] even though another faculty member decided to

406   step in as chair and my old advisor would still be on the committee.

407   Two more students who also wrote "losing interest" on their WF, referenced their age during the

408   interview as a factor in their decision to leave; both were over 50. After the first semester and

409   more self-reflection, one of the two responded:

410   The faculty in the program were intrigued by my master's thesis and thought I should

411   pursue it further to the Ph.D., but I could not do the comprehensive exams. They [the

412   faculty] thought I could produce a quality Ph.D. thesis, but I lacked interest in jumping

413   through hoops.

414   When compared to the written answers on the WF, the EPI offered more in-depth and precise

415   answers for the student's premature departure. In addition, we found a lack of shared meaning

416   among the nine individuals who wrote "losing interest" as a reason for withdrawal.

417   Moreover, interviewers administering the EPI were able to obtain reasons for leaving

418   from ten students who left the WF blank. Although these students did not provide a written

419   reason for leaving they readily volunteered a reason for their premature departure during the

420   interview. One student reported that she failed her compulsory exams and was dismissed.

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

422   I didn't have the heart for it, I thought the program was very good, but I think I wanted to

423   get a Ph.D. to give me something to do, I work in IT. But I didn't want to do research in

424   Information Systems.

425   Although the EPI would have been almost impossible without the WF, we did manage to

426   interview one student without it. When asked about the WF, she disclosed a lack of awareness

427   that MAU had a WF and that she had not filled it out. While the WF is readily available on

428   MAU's website, part of the silent departure might be due to a lack of awareness about MAU's

429   formal withdrawal process.

430   **Vertical and Horizontal Voice**

431   A content analysis of the EPI transcripts showed that, as a student voice mechanism, the EPI was

432   effective in providing the institution with critical feedback. We learned that slightly more than

433   half (19 of 37) of the departing students had discussed their decision with someone prior to

434   leaving MAU. With this information we were able to distinguish with which type of voice

435   (*vertical or horizontal*) students had engaged in prior to their withdrawal from MAU. Whereas

436   *vertical voice* involves talking to superiors, *horizontal voice* is talking to peers, friends and

437   neighbors. The greatest number of students had spoken with their advisor (n=7), others with the

438   Graduate Program Directors (n=5), the Graduate Program coordinator (n=2), other

439   administrators (n=2), or people outside MAU, such as a former undergraduate advisor (n=1).

440   Some students had discussed their options with more than one administrator.

441   Other critical issues uncovered from the transcripts showed that two students lacked a

442   clear understanding of the MAU's institutional hierarchy. Part of the issue was confusion about

443   with whom they should speak. When discussing which administrator had counseled the student

444   about the decision to leave the institution, these students were unclear about the role of the

445   administrator and the administrator's position in the university's hierarchy. For example, during

446   the interview we asked students to reflect on their experience when speaking to someone about

447   the decision to leave and knowing what the options were prior to leaving. From those comments

448   we see clear examples of students' apparent uncertainty about the institutional hierarchy. One

449   student responded:

450   I guess, maybe when I tried to get a meeting with the chair and the advisor...the Graduate

451   Program Director was my advisor since I didn't have an advisor, I called the department

452   because he generally has an open door policy--I realized I needed a mediator.

453 When the interviewer pointed out the department's hierarchy of Graduate Program Director

454 (GPD), Chair, and Graduate Program Coordinator (GPC), the student went on to say, "Well I am

455 not sure what I meant... I meant the person who was the chair or the person in charge of my

456 fellowship. It was pretty unclear..." Similarly, another said, "I am not sure what a GPD or GPC

457 is". When these roles were explained, the student responded *"No, I did not discuss it with*

458 *anyone in the Graduate School"*. When the interviewer clarified that these administrators were

459 located in the department, the student confirmed having discussed her situation with two

460 department-level individuals and listed them by name.

461   Reflecting horizontal voice, three students mentioned that they had discussed the decision

462 to leave with their friends. One student who engaged in both vertical and horizontal voice said,

463 "I talked to my peers and saw that they had a vision for their lives and what they wanted to do

464 with their Ph.D., and [I] realized that wasn't me… My advisor told me to take a leave of absence

465 first, and I did, and then I decided to totally withdraw."

466 **Exit Phone Interview and Loyalty**

467   A review of the EPI transcripts also disclosed positive factors about the institution. One

468 of those factors was brand loyalty to the institution and to the pursuit of the Ph.D. The results

469 support Dowding et al.'s conceptualization that loyalty and exit were not an all or nothing

470 proposition. We found that, even if some students had decided to give up on pursuing a

471 doctorate entirely, others had just decided to give up on pursuing a Ph.D. at this particular

472 institution. Despite withdrawing, we found that the majority (n=20) departing students were

473   staunch supporters of the university as a whole, while others (n=5) were less supportive of the

474   department within the university. When asked directly if they would recommend the university

475   to their friends, 20 departing students expressed positive sentiments of loyalty to MAU and

476   identified themselves as staunch supporters of the university. "...I do it all the time; I extol the

477   virtues of the place....I recommend MAU to people for themselves and for their kids as well."

478   Departing students' loyalty is based on many positive aspects of the university which include a

479   welcoming environment of inclusion, "What has been done for minority, highly qualified

480   minorities is interesting;" location, "It was so convenient because it was between work and

481   home;" and rigor of the coursework, "at MAU you get a very good education. They teach what

482   you need to know and they are very rigorous with real work situations." Identifying an

483   administrator in the Graduate School who had helped her, one student offered her endorsement

484   by saying, "I would recommend it because I thought the campus was student friendly and woman

485   friendly. And I would recommend MAU for kids who are interested in math and science. I am

486   going out with a good feeling about MAU."

487   In addition, we found that negative experiences in their doctoral program did not

488   necessarily affect students' feelings about MAU. When asked whether they would recommend

489   the university to other graduate students, thirteen qualified their answer as one student did by

490   saying, "I would encourage them about the university as a whole, but I would definitely not

491   recommend anyone to that department." When asked if the student had decided to enroll at

492   another university, one expressed loyalty to the university by saying, "No, if it was going to

493   happen it was going to happen at MAU." Another suggested that the only reason he would

494   consider attending another university was "if MAU didn't offer what I was looking for like a

495   management degree an M.B.A. or Law degree."

Discussion and Implications

By examining the institution's formal withdrawal policies and practices, we believe that this self-study provides a new perspective on the silent departure phenomenon for doctoral students who withdraw without a degree. Drawing upon the framework of Exit, Voice, Loyalty (EVL), we conducted a self-assessment of our formal departure process and asked in what ways our student voice mechanisms contribute to the silent departure of our doctoral students. We explored the effectiveness of the institutional withdrawal form to act as a voice mechanism for students who withdraw, and we pilot tested the feasibility of a follow-up exit phone interview. The results of our analysis of MAU's doctoral withdrawal process confirmed that a majority of MAU departing doctoral students did not fill out MAU's online Withdrawal Form. While filling out the WF might be efficient at notifying the graduate school of the student's departure it is not effective if the departing students do not make use of it. Though, this departure process is flawed, this research is not suggesting that the WF should be eliminated altogether. Beyond posting the WF on line, administrators and departing students should be made aware of the WF. The feasibility of the EPI was tied directly to WF. When and if students fill out a WF silence is mitigated because it provides notification of the student's departure. This behavioral option of filling out a WF could be considered a quiet departure because many students leave the reason for withdrawal blank. When students provided a written reason, the reasons were often limited to brief, two-word, safe, generic answers. Conversely, the follow-up EPIs provided more in-depth information about former students' experiences in their respective department. Instead of focusing on the challenges to implementing an EPI, efforts should be focused on improving the departure process. Interacting with students prior to and after their departure can still provide institutions with valuable information and knowledge if the institution wants feedback on how to

519   bring about change. Given the extent of the phenomenon, the high rate of doctoral attrition, and

520   the increasing accountability demands from state legislatures, we believe efforts to mitigate

521   silent departure have important implications for the future of graduate retention for other

522   institutions as well as ours. We propose that examination of this problem within the context of

523   an individual institution has the potential to shine the light on department- specific systemic

524   problems and departmental successes. Instead of relying on national studies, institutions can

525   develop recruitment and retention strategies that are specific to their environment.

526   From our participation in the larger Ph.D. Completion project along with the results of

527   this project, we found compelling evidence that asking departing students to complete a Ph.D.

528   Exit Survey or a WF, though sufficient to give formal notice of their departure, is insufficient to

529   help institutions really understand why their students decide to discontinue their doctoral studies.

530   Therefore we suggest that an exit interview is important for understanding issues relating to

531   departure—but even it is not enough. Although these student voice mechanisms are available

532   and rather easy to implement, our descriptive results confirmed previous researchers' results on

533   the silent departure of doctoral students, i.e., too many students discontinue their studies by

534   simply not registering for the following semester (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005; Lovits, 2001;

535   Nelson & Lovitts, 2001).

536   With the data we gathered, we realized that our departing graduate students' experiences

537   provide insight that would be useful for our retention efforts. The reasons for departure imparted

538   in EPIs helped us to better understand the areas in the institution that need our attention.

539   Moreover, the EPI also helped us to evaluate the inadequacy of the WF as the only student voice

540   mechanism to explain the silent departure phenomenon. Drawing a connection between

541   employee voice and employee retention, Spencer (1986) found a positive relationship between

542   the number of voice mechanisms and the levels of employee's expectancies for problem

543   resolution and perceived effectiveness of an organization's procedures for problem resolution.

544   When viewed through the lens of EVL, Hirschman's theory (1970) narrows the gap in

545   helping to understand both the institutional and the individual factors that help explain why

546   doctoral students silently leave the university. While the notion of the EVL framework dictates

547   that departing doctoral students have chosen *Exit* as the main response to their dissatisfaction,

548   *Voice* and *Loyalty* still play an active role in the departure process.

549   Outside of the department, the WF and EPI provide the institution with formal student

550   voice mechanisms for assessing the experiences of departing graduate students. From these

551   interviews, we were able to see that students relied on both vertical and horizontal voice to

552   express their discontent and inform others such as peers, administrators, and advisors, of their

553   plans to depart. That some students had discussed their decision to leave with members of the

554   university suggests that 'Exit' was not a decision reached either quickly or without careful

555   consideration. This protracted period of contemplating the exit decision, the time between the

556   student's decision to leave and the actual departure date, offers a crucial opportunity to gather

557   important information from the student. Knowing how long it takes students to act on their

558   decisions to depart is valuable because retention is still possible. That students communicate

559   with different people before leaving suggests that it might be possible to retain them if we can

560   resolve their issues early enough. For example, "a lack of interest" might be an indication that

561   the institution needed to better market the potential benefits of the degree. Frequent, request for

562   leave of absences and extensions could be an early indicator of attrition.

563   As in the Spencer (1986), and Johns and Gorrick (2016) studies, this research reveals an

564   important connection between exit and voice. We argue that these constructs are not one-

565   dimensional. When taken together, we found that the exit process for MAU students can involve

566   all of three behavioral concepts: exit, voice, and loyalty, either individually or collectively.

567   According to Hirschman, (1992) loyalty does not encourage exit as an option even when an

568   employee has attractive offers. We disagree having found that Hirschman's concept of loyalty,

569   defined as the allegiance to the organization, can be extended to members who leave. Whereas

570   Dowding et al. (2000) extended Hirschman's concept of loyalty, they have yet to examine this

571   revised construct empirically. We found no other studies to use this concept of loyalty to mean

572   not merely a commitment to the organization, but also a commitment to self. Moreover, contrary

573   to doctoral attrition literature which views exit, voice, and loyalty in mutually exclusive terms,

574   our findings suggest that doctoral departing students can simultaneously exit, voice their

575   concerns, and still be loyal to the institution and self.

576   **Conclusion**

577   In conclusion, we argue that some of the institutional responsibility for mitigating the silent

578   departure phenomenon at any doctoral institution can be successfully tackled. No exit interview

579   intervention can be implemented successfully without a clear institutional commitment to

580   communicate and act upon the findings. The implications of this case are simultaneously

581   encouraging and discouraging. On one hand, the case highlights the potential benefits of

582   examination of the problem at the individual institutional level. On the other hand, the case

583   illustrates the difficulties with a lack of generalizability. Nonetheless, Yin (2009) argued that

584   scientific facts are rarely deduced from a single study; qualitative findings are often confirmed

585   through multiple studies, using a myriad of methods, and in different settings. Hence, Yin might

586   argue that this case study will strengthen generalizability to other institutions wanting to conduct

587   their own examination of the problem and their institutional responses.

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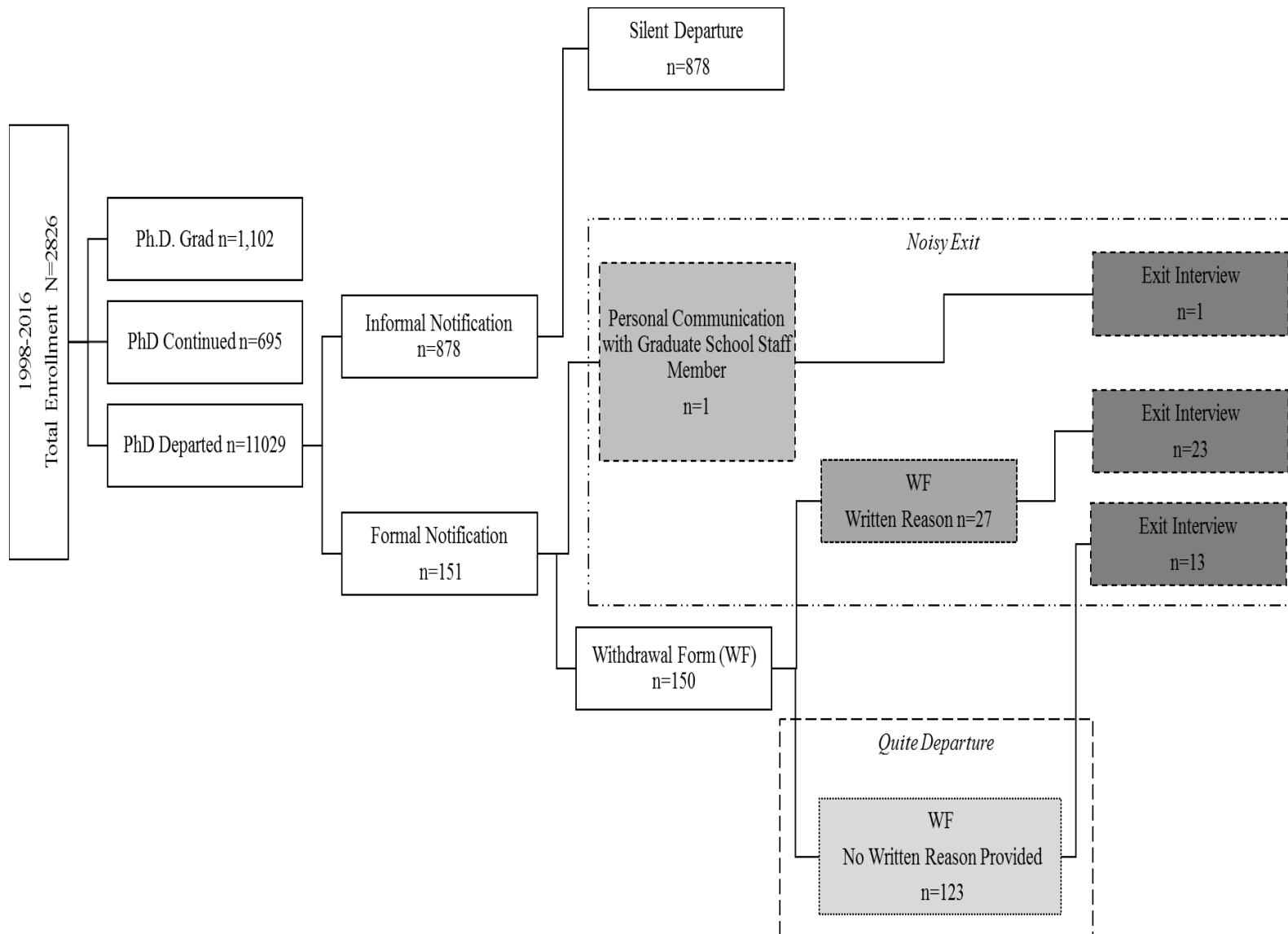   Sage.

Figure 1 1998-2916 Doctoral departure at MAU

Table 1:
Students Written Responses on the Withdrawal Form (WF)

Theme	Written Reasons for Leaving	Frequency
Silence	Space left blank	123
Loss of Interest	Losing interest	9
Personal, Health & Family (n=4)	Personal	1
	Some family issues	1
	Medical reasons	1
	Health problems in pursuing the degree	1
Work Responsibilities (n=4)	Work responsibilities	1
	Combined workload/academic workload too much	1
	Someone at my job quit and had to take over some of his or her responsibilities	1
	Military deployment	1
Advisor/Chair Challenges (n=3)	Had an issue with an advisor	1
	I had a bad experience with an advisor	1
	General dissatisfaction with the program and differences with advisor and department chair	1
Transfer (n=3)	Transferring to a different program at a different school	1
	Received a fellowship award from [name of another university]	1
	Leaving to attend another university	1
Other (n=4)	Changes/refocus of professional and academic plans	1
	I no longer want to pursue a degree from the university	1
	Leaving the area	1
	Relocate to [name of another state]	1
Total		N =150