

FINDING OUR VOICES: THE BITTERSWEET JOURNEY OF A DREAM  
FOR  
FIRST-GENERATION FEMALE DOCTORAL GRADUATES

A Dissertation  
by  
REBA HOUSER YARBOROUGH

Submitted to the Graduate School  
Appalachian State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT**  
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While much research exists on the topic of first-generation college students; there is limited research concerning the persistence of first-generation female doctoral graduates. This personal narrative builds on the frameworks of feminism and constructivism and implements qualitative inductive thematic analysis. The study's methodology included personal interviews, a focus group and document review. The document review included: 1) subjectivity journal notes, 2) interview transcripts and 3) focus group transcripts.

The research questions were: 1) What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies? 2) How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate? 3) What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education?

Data from the individual interviews, focus group interview and document review were analyzed using the principles of qualitative inductive thematic analysis. Based on the analysis of the data, four significant themes emerged: 1) finances, 2) relationships, 3) autonomous motivation, and 4) disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university. The four themes were used as the framework for analysis. Implications of the study and suggestions for further research are presented.