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Kathryn A. Sanders

Oklahoma State University

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Identifying Research Strategies for the Future: Alternatives to the Traditional Doctoral Dissertation

Kathryn A. Sanders
Oklahoma State University

Abstract: This study was designed to explore the attitudes and opinions of experts in the fields of adult education and vocational education toward future doctoral research needs and toward potential alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation. A three round Delphi and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if there are viable alternative research strategies, other than the traditional doctoral dissertation, which would be more beneficial to future doctoral students in order to compete in their future professional roles in an information intensive society. A secondary purpose was to discover which research competencies and/or research experiences will be required of future doctoral graduates in order to compete in their future professional roles in an information intensive society.

Introduction

Since *A Nation at Risk: The Full Account* was first published in 1984, the education system in the United States has been under scrutiny. The National Commission on Excellence in Education asked the nation to make a commitment to reforming education, calling upon the ". . . scholarly, scientific, and learned societies for their help in this effort ..." in order to secure the future role of the United States in the world (*A Nation At Risk*, 1984, p. 84). That plea placed a responsibility on the universities and colleges of the United States to better prepare students to compete in their future roles. Preparing future doctoral graduates for their professional roles may be the most challenging responsibility placed upon universities (Bowen & Schulster, 1986).

Considering the contribution that holders of doctorates can make to educational institutions, to the gross national product of countries through scientific research and development work, and to the intellectual and cultural life of nations, and noting that the economic, educational and political realities of the future are international in scope, the responsibilities placed on future doctoral graduates will no doubt increase greatly. (Noble, 1994, p. 35)

To meet these new responsibilities and requirements, the doctoral student will be required to be a competent researcher.

The steady growth of research and development in the economy of the United States requires doctoral programs to produce competent researchers (Cetron, Rocha, & Luckins, 1988). Those researchers must have the knowledge, skills, and competencies to compete in a global economy. "The biggest single action in higher education that will influence the future of the nation is to improve the research capacity of American institutions" (Kerr, 1986, p. 2).

Review of Literature: At a Glance.

The review of literature revealed that changes in attitude are necessary before alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation will be accepted within the academe. Doctoral degrees have been an integral part of higher education worldwide "...since the first was conferred in Paris circa 1150" (Noble, 1994, p. 1). Eight centuries later, the acquisition of that degree has remained relatively unchanged (Noble, 1994). The unwillingness to change seems steeped in tradition. Excellence in higher education has often been judged by the rigors of that tradition and by those who had the stamina to complete the doctoral degree. "Indeed, the doctoral experience might be viewed as the academic manifestation of the principle of 'survival of the fittest' " (Beeler, 1993, p. 5). The single most important element of that academic manifestation has been the completion of the doctoral dissertation.

The struggle to change the status quo within doctoral programs is not new. The traditional role of the doctoral dissertation has been a controversial issue in higher education for many years. In his now famous 1903 address, *The Ph.D. Octopus*, William James questioned the value of having those three important initials behind one's name. James asserts that the important credentials for academic success should not be based upon a badge or diploma. While the primary focus of James' paper was to make suggestions for remediation of the overall structure of higher education, a secondary focus was on the inflexible traditions held by higher education. Perhaps the title of his paper, *The Ph.D. Octopus*, serves as a reminder of the restrictive nature of the tentacles of the traditional doctoral dissertation.

Advertised as the degree that is based upon evidence of original thinking and the use of research tools, the fact of the matter is that the dissertation is so hemmed in with mossbacked traditions that original work is nigh impossible. (Atkinson, 1939, p. 59)

Many who seek a doctoral degree are disillusioned by the dissertation experience (Atkinson, 1939). The traditional doctoral dissertation requirement seems to be at the heart of the disillusionment. It is that component of the doctoral degree and the suggestion of alternative research strategies, other than the dissertation, which were addressed in this research.

Possibly, the greatest testimony to the need for looking at alternative research strategies is the all but dissertation (ABD) phenomena. The ABD phenomena is a chilling issue in the field of higher education. At the heart of this disturbing phenomena is a human being who, for one reason or another, abandoned his/her dream and became a statistic on the attrition list of some college or university. The literature overwhelmingly suggests that the most significant barriers to completion of the doctoral degree are financial problems and the

dissertation process. When examining the literature on barriers to completion of the doctoral degree, it would seem as though time stood still. An historical perspective presented in this research indicated that the issues surrounding the barriers to completion of the doctoral degree have changed very little in the past 30 years (Wilson, 1965; Madsen, 1983; Buckley & Hooley, 1988; Germeroth, 1991). Each researcher represented a different time period (1965, 1983, 1988, 1991), yet many of the same barriers served as obstacles to completion of the doctoral degree. While researchers traverse time, the one constant is that the resounding theme for the ABD phenomena is the dissertation process. Perhaps the best solution to the "All But Dissertation" phenomena lies within the existing doctoral programs. "If we are to rescue the ABD 'at risk' population in American higher education, we must deal with the issues of efficiency, excellence, and equity" (Hanson, 1992, p.17). The dissertation process embraces all three issues.

The loss of students during the dissertation phase is a significant problem...Failure to successfully finish or extensively delay in finishing graduate research, may be a personal tragedy for individual students, but it is also a wasteful, negative situation for departments and institutions. (Goulden, 1991, pp. 39-40)

In an information intensive society, we are faced with "...the need to clarify campus missions and relate the work of the academy more directly to the realities of contemporary life" (Boyer, 1990, p. 13). Perhaps it is time to redefine the role and relevance of the dissertation within the doctoral program.

The fate of research is in the hands of research institutions. Team approaches to problem solving coupled with the explosion of knowledge readily available in our information intensive society cause one to question the value of the traditional dissertation "...as a narrow piece of isolated research" (Beeler, 1993, p. 9). That the dissertation, as the crowning achievement of academic success, continues to maintain a strong foothold in the American system of higher education is undeniable (Hanson, 1992). Perhaps, a more meaningful approach for demonstrating one's ability to conduct research is needed. "Success in most academic fields is determined by articles and scholarly publications, not tiresome reviews of literature and three-hundred-page monstrosities" (Solomon & Solomon, 1993, p. 108). The challenge that faces research institutions will be their willingness to change how they view doctoral programs and doctoral students.

"Every advance in education is made over the dead bodies of 10,000 resisting professors" (Hutchins quoted in Noble, 1994, p. 63). Those most resistant tend to be ingrained in the traditions of the doctoral degree, namely the dissertation.

...many tenure committees will not accept a dissertation, even a dissertation revised, as scholarly work. Thus they admit in one role what they will not admit in another - namely, that after all that nonsense, the dissertation does not really count at all. We tell our students, "It's not your first professional work, much less your *magnum opus*. It's your last student work." Indeed, why should it be required at all? (Solomon & Solomon, 1993, p. 109).

That the dissertation requirement should be totally eliminated was never the contention of this study. The dissertation will continue to play an integral role in doctoral education; however, this research asked that viable alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation be considered by the academe.

Alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation have received little attention in the literature, especially in the fields of vocational and adult and continuing education. Thorson's study examined the attitudes of professors of adult education toward doctoral research (1973). Several studies have been conducted concerning the role of the dissertation process and how to best improve that process. Solomon and Solomon, 1993, call for an end to the traditional dissertation in favor of practical products such as publications in scholarly journals. Some of the conclusions of the remaining studies reviewed (Murphy & Hallinger, 1987; The Council of Graduate Deans, 1991; Van Patten, Denny, & Bolding, 1991; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Denny, Bolding, & Van Patten, 1993) call for improved advising, shortening the dissertation, and practical

application for the Ed.D. dissertation. Most of the studies did not address the relevance of alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation as a primary focus of the study.

Design and Methodology

Two approaches were used in this research to investigate viable alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation and future research needs: the Delphi method and Semi-structured interviews. The two methodologies were chosen because of their appropriateness to the research questions being asked. A survey was sent to 191 members listed in the 1995 membership directory of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) and to the 384 members listed in the 1995 membership directory for the American Vocational Education Research Association (AVERA). All members from the United States were sent the survey. The combined 575 person membership were asked to identify individuals whom they considered to be on the cutting edge of research. A purposive sample of 22 expert panelists were chosen based on the number of nominations received by their peers. The sample was evenly divided with 11 of the experts representing the CPAE and 11 of the experts representing the AVERA. The panel members participated in a three round Delphi. The first round provided a definition of a traditional dissertation and asked the panel members to respond to two probes with that definition in mind. The first asked them to list statements of alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation which may be valuable to future doctoral graduates in order to compete in their future professional roles in an information intensive society. The second probe asked them to list at least three statements of research competencies and/or research experiences which doctoral graduates must have to compete in their future professional roles in an information intensive society. In addition, the 22 panel members were asked to fill out a demographic data sheet and at the bottom of that sheet the panel members were asked to identify mavericks in the field who had successfully challenged the traditional doctoral dissertation by adapting an alternative strategy. From those suggestions, four individuals were identified as mavericks, by their peers, in his/her area of expertise. Those four individuals were asked to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview. As a result of those interviews with the four mavericks, a fifth person was interviewed. None of the individuals who were identified as mavericks by the Delphi panelists served on the Delphi panel.

Summary of Findings

When comparing the data in the two classifications of "alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation" and "needed research competencies and/or experiences," it became readily apparent that the panel of experts believed that there are a limited number of viable alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation. It further indicated that the panel of experts believed that doctoral graduates should possess an enormous number of research competencies and/or participate in an enormous number of research experiences.

The CPAE panel members were more accepting of alternatives to the traditional dissertation than were AVERA panel members as evidenced by the number of statements that each group found to be acceptable as viable alternatives. The CPAE panel members found that 10 of the 22 statements were viable alternatives, while the AVERA panel members found only six alternatives acceptable. The panel members as a whole were unable to strongly agree that any of the 22 statements were viable alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation. They were able to agree that the following ten condensed statements are viable alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation: (1) "Nonempirical" studies, such as philosophical, historical, or conceptual analyses - Mean = 4.476. (2) The rigor of dissertations should remain the same; however, a different "package" for presenting the finished product is a viable alternative to the traditional dissertation format (e.g. CD-ROM or hypertext program, video, multi-media, submitted electronically, audio and/or visual descriptions of the study, making copies available to others via the Internet) - Mean = 4.380. (3) Co-authored dissertations, representing collaborative projects with other doctoral students - Mean = 3.785. (4) Synthesis and analysis of previously related literature to formulate new ideas - Mean = 3.619. (5) A series of

scholarly, refereed, published materials - Mean = 3.571. (6) Participatory action research projects which involve practitioners as researchers within a shared area of concern - Mean = 3.547. (7) A collaborative (group) research study, with one or multiple products - Mean = 3.547. (8) High quality research based projects which contribute to the knowledge base and link theory to practice - Mean = 3.523. (9) Generating a "work" which represents (A) theoretical and research background preparation, (B) application of conceptual ideas to the creation of a "work", and © presentation of the work with adequate theoretical-conceptual background and documentation of judgment by an expert panel - Mean = 3.523. (10) Project dissertations in which a systematic approach is applied to a problem or to practice (e.g. development and testing of a video or written material for training and development, successful change in teaching methods in a field, community based education projects, educational partnership projects) - Mean = 3.500. A Kendall W for Round III, Probe One statements of alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation resulted in a coefficient of $W = .8387$ which indicates a fairly high level of agreement among panel members. This is not to say that the panel of experts agree with the 22 statements as viable alternatives to the dissertation. What it does imply is that there is substantial agreement among referent groups (CPAE and AVERA) as to the relative ranking for each of the 22 statements of viable alternatives generated by the panel members.

The second Delphi probe asked the panel members to identify research competencies and/or experiences that will be needed by doctoral graduates to be competitive in their professional roles. The panel members as a whole were able to strongly agree upon nine of the 30 statements. Such statements as (1)' Doctoral graduates should have the ability to synthesize information, draw conclusions, and develop recommendations based on research findings in order to develop conceptual and theoretical frameworks for research studies' and (2)' Doctoral graduates should be able to propose and define a problem, indicate why that problem is important, and place their findings in perspective with what is known' were among those strong agreed upon. The panel members agreed upon an additional 15 competencies and/or research experiences as needed by doctoral graduates to compete in their future professional roles in an information intensive society.

To supplement and enhance the findings of the Delphi component of the study, five individuals, who were perceived to be mavericks by their peers, were selected and interviewed to obtain practical data about their experiences with alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation. In analyzing the transcriptions of the interviews, ten recurrent themes were identified: (1) dissertations are culminating projects or experiences, (2) the culminating project or experience must maintain the rigor of research, (3) there are no model dissertations, (4) dissertations are very political, (5) the traditional research paradigm leaves little room for change, (6) committee members work with and for the student, (7) written documentation of research fosters accessibility, (8) non-traditional programs nurture non-traditional dissertations, (9) non-traditional programs require the support of one's colleagues, and (10) non-traditional programs are similar in design.

Conclusions

Doctoral granting universities and colleges continue to view the dissertation as the crowning achievement for their highest degree. Challenging this traditional academic requirement as the sole viable culminating experience to the doctoral degree was the focal point of this study. The role of research is integral to the dissertation process; it was for that reason that the second probe asking for needed research competencies and/or experiences was incorporated into the study. The Delphi panel of experts verified that there are alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation by choosing ten such alternatives; however, only two of the ten alternatives chosen could be considered viable because the other eight statements addressed issues that did not represent alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation. Of the two viable alternatives agreed upon by the panel, one dealt with the presentation of the finished product and not with the dissertation itself. At this point in time there appears to be few viable alternatives to the traditional doctoral dissertation that would be accepted within colleges and universities. There were several possible alternative identified by the panel of experts; however, they panel members could not agree on *viable* alternatives. In order to implement several of the suggested alternatives, graduate programs will have to modify the existing dissertation process and product requirements. While the study clearly suggests that changes are needed in the dissertation component of the doctoral degree, the implementation and acceptance of those changes are

questionable. Until a viable alternative which replicates the intent of the dissertation is agreed upon, it is unlikely that the traditional doctoral dissertation will be changed within the academe. While CPAE panel members were more willing to accept alternatives to the traditional dissertation than were AVERA panel members, CPAE members were extremely conservative in the selection of those viable alternatives. The acceptance of 24 of the 30 recommended competencies indicates the importance placed on research and the overall value of the research process within adult education and vocational education.

Closing Comments

One does not have to reinvent the wheel to make the research process meaningful to the doctoral student. Often time, all that is needed is reshaping what already exists. The problems that are facing doctoral programs continue to exist and to multiply. Perhaps, the solution to those problems lie, not with existing strategies and traditional programs, but within the framework of an emergent paradigm embraced by those paradigm pioneers who are not willing to settle in and never take risks. Incorporating a risk taking philosophy into doctoral programs may foster the research process as well as promote the timely completion of the culminating project or experience. "Ultimately, now and in the future much of the success or failure of doctoral education hangs on the role and nature of the dissertations" (Hamilton, 1993, p.55).

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***(A complete list of references will be given out at the presentation.)**