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## Dissertations in CACREP-Accredited Counseling Doctoral Programs: An Initial Investigation

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## Dissertations in CACREP-Accredited Counseling Doctoral Programs: An Initial Investigation

### Abstract

Faculty in 38 CACREP-accredited doctoral programs in the US described their dissertation products over the last three years, composition of their dissertation committees, and their satisfaction ratings with dissertation products and processes. Results indicated traditional dissertation formats were predominant. Over half (54%) of completed dissertations were quantitative and 40% were qualitative. Committees typically included two or three counselor educators and at least one outside faculty member. Faculty were modestly satisfied with dissertations, citing the need for more rigor and consistency of standards. Higher satisfaction was related to committee composition as well as the use of a variety of research methods.

### Keywords

Dissertations, Dissertation Committees, CACREP, Counselor Education

### Author's Notes

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The dissertation is the culminating experience of a doctoral counseling student's professional education. According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009), the purpose of dissertation research is to generate new knowledge that informs counseling practice, counselor education, and counseling supervision. Little is known, however, about counseling doctoral education in general, either in the US or internationally (Adkison-Bradley, 2013; Goodrich, Shin, & Smith, 2011), and even less is known about the dissertation products generated by doctoral students in these programs. Accordingly, Goodrich et al. (2011) called for additional research on doctoral students' research products and attitudes. Dissertations likely are the most consistent product required across doctoral counseling programs, and thus provide a meaningful focus for needed research. Study of dissertations is important because they "reflect both the research interests and sophistication of prospective graduates" (Zankas, Phillips, Tansey, & Smith, 2014, p. 238). A search of relevant literature, however, yielded no empirical descriptions of counseling dissertations.

Instead, writers (Castro, Castro, Cavazos, & Garcia, 2011; Flynn, Chasek, Harper, Murphy, & Jorgensen, 2012; Hinkle, Iarussi, Schermer, & Yensel, 2014; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009) have focused on highlighting the experiences of counseling doctoral students, including motivations for pursuing the degree and factors that influence their successful trajectory through their doctoral program and the dissertation process. Flynn et al. (2012) gave particular attention to doctoral students' dissertation experiences. Based on their qualitative study of doctoral graduates, they suggested an emergent theory of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation composed of interacting internal (e.g., personality traits), relational (e.g., barriers such as competing life demands), and professional factors (e.g., influence of dissertation chair and committee members,

home environment). They emphasized the role of the dissertation chair in supporting the doctoral students' progress, but did not gather information about the composition or expertise of other faculty members on the committee. Focusing specifically on women in Ph.D. counseling programs, Castro et al. (2011) similarly identified personal characteristics (e.g., independence, perseverance) and supports (e.g., mentors, husbands) that allowed the women to be successful, and also found that the women turned negative external factors (e.g., lack of parental and family support) into positive motivations. Henfield, Owens, and Witherspoon (2011) interviewed African American doctoral students in counseling programs at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs); the students emphasized the importance of being assertive, forming relationships with more experienced African American students, joining race-based organizations on campus, and relying on emotional support from their advisors. Thus, although Flynn et al. (2012), Castro et al. (2011), Henfield et al. (2011), and the other writers (cited above) provided instructive information for supporting doctoral students through their program, they did not shed light on dissertation committee membership nor actual dissertation products, such as the format and methodologies used.

Limited information is available about dissertation products in a few other professions. Morris (2013) classified marriage and family therapy (MFT) dissertations produced at one university over a 10-year period. He found that, in contrast to MFT educational guidelines, only five of 64 dissertations were directly focused on clinical MFT research. In a study of research designs in school psychology doctoral programs over 25 years, Lekwa and Ysseldyke (2010) found fewer doctoral students used experimental designs and more chose single-subject designs. Several other researchers have noted the growing number of interdisciplinary dissertation topics either within specific fields (e.g., political science; Knapp, 2013; nonprofit studies; Shier &

Handy, 2014) or across disciplines at a university (Herther, 2010). Perhaps most relevant to this study is the ongoing documentation of doctoral dissertation research in rehabilitation counseling from 1979 (Lofaro, 1981) through 2011 (Zanskas et al., 2014). In the most recent review, Zanskas et al. (2014) reported quantitative research designs were employed in the majority of dissertations, and advanced and basic statistics were used equitably. Their data illustrated that, across 1990-2011, outcome studies (e.g., employment patterns, life satisfaction) were predominant, with increases in studies of attitudes towards persons with disabilities and research on clinical populations (e.g., those with spinal cord injuries).

There also has been a national and international dialogue around the appropriate formats of dissertation products. As early as 1991, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) urged respect for the traditional dissertation and also suggested some flexibility in format might be appropriate. The CGS (1991) noted that some science disciplines allowed students to include scholarly articles published during their doctoral program in their dissertation, but emphasized that the parts of any dissertation product should be “logically connected and integrated” (p. 4), adding that “binding reprints or collections of publications together is not acceptable as a dissertation in either format or concept” (p. 4). Similarly, in 2005, the CGS again noted that some institutions permitted a dissertation in the format of a manuscript or manuscripts to be submitted for publication, although these products often included an overview statement or appendices with additional details about the “history, methods, and results” (p. 32). Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romanczuk (2009) reported that such a portfolio dissertation product was “evident worldwide in doctoral education” (p. 138) in professional (vs. PhD) doctorates. To date, however, there is no documentation concerning whether any counseling doctoral programs have adopted a non-traditional dissertation format or what those alternative formats might be.

## **Research Questions**

In sum, although researchers in some disciplines have documented basic information about their dissertations, no research documenting dissertations in counseling programs could be located in the literature. Thus, the purpose of this study was to gather the first descriptive information about counseling doctoral students' dissertations. Five research questions guided this study: What dissertation formats are used in counseling doctoral programs? What research methodologies do doctoral students employ in their dissertation studies? What is the composition of students' doctoral dissertation committees, and what is the committee members' expertise? How satisfied are counselor educators with their students' dissertation products, and what changes would they like to make in their program's dissertation products and committee composition? Given the lack of information on counseling dissertations, we chose to focus on U.S. doctoral programs accredited by CACREP (2009). CACREP-accredited programs seemed a logical starting point since these programs are required to meet a common set of standards around doctoral research training, but the standards are somewhat general and so allow flexibility in dissertation products. In fact, research training in these programs varies widely (Borders, Wester, Fickling, & Adamson, 2013; Goodrich et al., 2011), suggesting the programs' requirements around dissertations also might vary. It was hoped that this study would provide initial information that could serve as a starting point for further investigations and discussions around doctoral counseling students' dissertations, including format, topics, expectations, and quality, as well as trends in research interests and students' potential "to disseminate innovative counselor education research in scholarly venues" (Adkison-Bradley, 2013, p. 47).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Faculty members at 38 doctoral-level counselor education programs in the US and accredited by CACREP completed the survey. The 38 programs were located in 21 geographically diverse states and represented all regions of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). Faculty were located in relatively small and large programs, in both public and private universities, in regional and national universities, and in both rural and urban areas. Two of the 38 were online programs. In terms of Carnegie classifications, 38% of participants were located in very high research activity universities; 49% were in high research activity institutions, 8% were in doctoral/research universities, and 5% were located in master's-level institutions.

### **Measure**

Information regarding dissertations produced in CACREP-accredited doctoral programs and dissertation committees was collected as part of a larger survey focused on research training in those programs (see Borders et al., 2013). Although the authors reviewed similar published surveys (e.g., Aiken, West, & Millsap, 2008; Okech, Astramovich, Johnson, Hoskins, & Rubel, 2006; Rossen & Oakland, 2008) in an effort to create a comprehensive survey, no dissertation-related questions were included in previous surveys. Thus, questions were created based on the authors' knowledge of the relevant literature (cited above), the first two authors' experiences as dissertation chairs and committee members, and professional conversations with colleagues at counselor education conferences. University colleagues reviewed the survey for clarity, and then a pilot study was conducted with two counselor education programs that differed in relevant

ways (e.g., fulltime and part-time, in different states), thus supporting the face and content validity of the survey.

In the section on doctoral students' dissertation products, faculty were asked to describe the dissertation products required of doctoral students in their program, providing options of "traditional design – 4 or 5 chapters (e.g., introduction, review of the literature, methodology, results, discussion and implications)"; "compilation of series of articles around a topic: # of articles required, # of these articles that must be empirical, # of these articles that must be submitted/accepted/published before graduation" with space for providing other guidelines relevant to acceptable articles; and "other (please describe)." Next, faculty were asked to estimate the percentage of doctoral dissertations in the last three years that used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, with space to describe the designs or approaches most typically used under each as well as any additional comments on research designs of dissertations produced in the program.

Next, faculty were asked to report the number of counselor education, research methods, statistics, and other faculty members who composed students' dissertation committees, and provide explanations for how "other" faculty were selected. Finally, faculty were asked to rate their satisfaction with dissertation products and committee composition on a scale from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), and then share any changes they would like to see in products, committees, or other dissertation processes.

## **Procedure**

Eligible programs were identified through the CACREP website and identified a contact person at each program through the program's website. Following IRB approval, faculty at the 61 CACREP-accredited doctoral counseling programs were contacted. Two reported their



doctoral program no longer existed; 45 agreed to participate and 38 completed the survey (64% of accredited programs). Those who agreed to participate were sent the informed consent and survey electronically. Follow-up emails were made throughout the course of data collection (approximately 6 months). Participants were invited to return the surveys electronically or by mail. To protect anonymity, a research assistant assigned a numeric code to each survey and uploaded the responses.

### **Data Analyses**

Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed as appropriate to the data. The first author compiled the brief faculty comments in each section. For the most part, these comments are reported verbatim below; when there were multiple comments for a particular question (e.g., desired changes), the first author grouped the responses together as appropriate (e.g., more rigor).

## **Results**

### **Dissertation Formats**

Faculty in a majority of programs ( $n = 29$ , 76%) reported that most (95%) or all of their students created traditional dissertation products (e.g., 4 or 5 chapters). One described a two-chapter format (review of literature, methodology and results); one reported a six-chapter traditional format in which the last chapter was a manuscript to be submitted to a journal, and one reported a similar product with the manuscript constituting chapter one of the four chapters. Faculty in six programs (15.78%) reported offering a combination of traditional products and an alternative option of compiling a series of articles around a topic. None reported using a non-traditional format exclusively and, when reported ( $n = 3$ ), the percentages of non-traditional dissertations were 5%, 10%, and 50%. The number of required articles was 1 ( $n = 3$ ), 2 ( $n = 1$ ),

2 or 3 ( $n = 1$ ), and 3 ( $n = 1$ ). In four of the six programs, an empirical article was required and in two of the six programs at least one article had to be submitted for publication before graduation.

Only two faculty wrote comments about their alternative dissertation models. One wanted to encourage more students to use the alternative model, citing the context of pressure to admit more doctoral students without adding more faculty. This respondent added, “The traditional model of dissertation is a wonderful tool to assess the depth of students’ research knowledge or knowledge about a specific subject, but I think it is limited in the ability to help them publish.” The other faculty’s comments suggested the change to an alternative model was dictated by the College of Education, and wrote, “I worry that the shift to journal-based publications will take some degree of rigor out of the dissertation process.” Another faculty respondent reported current discussions around creating an alternative format, a doctoral portfolio process that would include comprehensive exams and the dissertation process.

### **Dissertation Research Methods**

Faculty ( $n = 36$ ) estimated the percentages of methods used in dissertations over the last three years (see Table 1). All 36 faculty indicated students in their program used quantitative and qualitative methodologies, although the frequency at which students utilized these methods in dissertations differed. Quantitative methods were employed in slightly over half of the dissertations and qualitative methods were used at a somewhat lower but still substantive rate. Mixed methods were by far the least seldom used; twenty faculty reported their students did not use mixed methods.

Table 1  
*Dissertation Research Methods*

Measure	Qualitative %	Quantitative %	Mixed Methods %
Mean	39.97	54.28	11.50
Median	30.50	50.00	10.00
Mode	30.00	50.00	10.00
SD	21.24	20.03	6.90
Range	5 to 98	2 to 90	5 to 30

*Note.* For qualitative and quantitative,  $n = 36$ ; for mixed methods,  $n = 18$

Of the qualitative dissertations, faculty reported grounded theory and phenomenology ( $n = 20$  each) were the most frequently used methods. Frequencies of a range of other qualitative approaches are reported in Table 2 (faculty could report more than one method).

Faculty also reported that a wide range of quantitative methods was used in dissertations (see Table 2) (again, faculty could report more than one method), with none of the methods being predominate over the others. In this section, some faculty indicated actual statistical analyses that were conducted in the dissertation; these included ANOVA, MANOVA ( $n = 8$  each), regression ( $n = 6$ ), structural equation modeling, factor analysis, multiple regression ( $n = 5$  each), path analysis ( $n = 3$  each),  $t$ -test, Chi-square, hierarchical multiple regression, and conjoint analysis ( $n = 1$  each).

Table 2

*Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches Used in Dissertations (n = 36)*

Qualitative Approaches	<i>n</i>
Grounded theory	20
Phenomenology	20
Case Study	4
Ethnography	4
Narrative	3
Critical incident	1
Consensual qualitative research	1
Quantitative Approaches	
Experimental	5
Quasi-experimental	5
Survey	5
Correlational	3
Descriptive	3
Instrument development	3
Comparison of groups	2
Program evaluation	2
Delphi	1
HLM	1
Mediator/moderator modeling	1
Meta-analysis	1
Q methodology	1
Research review	1
Single case	1
Solomon 4-way	1

*Note.* Faculty could provide more than response.

For mixed methods, faculty reported interviews combined with another approach (e.g., survey, intervention, quasi-experimental, quantitative data,  $n = 5$ ), case study with repeated measures or case study with correlations ( $n = 1$  each), a survey combined with regression or SEM ( $n = 1$ ), concept mapping ( $n = 1$ ), and content analysis ( $n = 1$ ). Two faculty reported students are discouraged from using mixed methods: “Students are advised away from this due to work required and controversy at our university over doing both”; “I don’t often encourage

students to use mixed methods for dissertations because I have found that it is very difficult for them to learn two methods well enough to succeed on a dissertation.”

### **Dissertation Committees**

Faculty ( $n = 36$ ) also described the composition of doctoral students' dissertation committees (see Table 3). For those who gave exact numbers (vs. a range,  $n = 32$ ), total committee members ranged from two to seven, but committees typically included three or four members. Of these, two or three were usually counselor educators. Thirty faculty reported that a non-counselor education committee member also was required. Of these, 20 reported requiring a research methods committee member (who could be a counselor educator) and seven required a statistics faculty member; five required both a statistics and a research methods committee member, although these could be the same person in two programs. Other committee members were selected from the student's cognate or minor area of study or because of their expertise in the student's dissertation methodology, topic, or population. One noted that the outside committee member could be a doctoral-level practitioner. Four said the outside person was appointed by the Graduate School. One reported that two external readers join the final oral exam and one said a graduate representative was appointed to moderate the defense and help ensure dissertation quality. In comments about desired changes in the dissertation process, three wanted to add a research methods or statistics person to their students' dissertation committees.

Table 3

*Number of Counselor Education (CE) Faculty and Total Number of Dissertation Committee Members (n = 36)*

Measure	CE Faculty	Total
Mean	2.30	3.47
Median	2.00	3.00
Mode	2.00	3.00
SD	0.76	1.16
Range	1 to 4	2 to 7

### **Satisfaction with Dissertation Products and Processes**

On a scale of 1 (not satisfied at all) to 5 (very satisfied), faculty ( $n = 36$ ) reported their satisfaction with their students' dissertation processes and products (see Table 4). The average level of satisfaction was in the middle of the scale ( $M = 3.55$ ), but about 64% reported being mostly or very satisfied with their dissertation processes and products.

Table 4

*Counselor Education Faculty Satisfaction with Dissertation Products (n = 36)*

Satisfaction	<i>n</i>	%
Not satisfied at all	2	5.60
Mixed satisfaction	7	19.40
Somewhat satisfied	4	11.10
Mostly satisfied	18	50.00
Very satisfied	5	13.89

Faculty respondents were asked if their colleagues would agree with their ratings. Eight said yes, five said no, and two said agreement would vary among the other program faculty. In their comments, five reported faculty agreement around the need to strengthen dissertation products (e.g., "We recently had comprehensive discussions about this due to CACREP. We all agree rigor needs to increase"). Those who said other faculty would not agree typically reported they themselves had higher standards for dissertations they chaired ( $n = 4$ ) or had a different

emphasis (e.g., the process over the product,  $n = 1$ ) in comparison to other faculty in their program. One commented on disagreements around the use of mixed methods:

Traditionally, advisors may perceive that mixed methods should not be used for dissertation because students may not gain an in depth understanding of both methods/approaches. We now know that this is now the case and students should have that choice to pursue designs/methods of inquiry that could help them answer their research questions.

Faculty were invited to comment on any changes they desired in their dissertation processes and dissertation products. Many faculty ( $n = 20$ ) addressed issues of rigor, such as comments on research methods and statistics used (e.g., “fewer correlational”), more consistency in standards and expectations across faculty dissertation chairs and committees, faculty with better research training, and more studies based in theory or a model. Three wished students had more research experience before beginning the dissertation, four desired more investment of faculty in the process, three preferred an alternative dissertation product, three desired higher quality in students’ writing, two wanted more dissertation studies about clinical issues and applications, three desired better research methods instruction or student involvement with data before the dissertation phase, four wished more dissertations resulted in publications, one wished students could complete the dissertation more quickly, one thought more emphasis should be given to the literature review, and one preferred open dissertation proposal meetings (some participants are represented by more than one response in this list). Three faculty reported recent changes they found positive, including revisions in research standards “to increase the rigor of our students’ research products,” new faculty hires with higher “standards and expectations for rigor,” and “an increase in level of dissertation expectations and corresponding skill mastery.”

Faculty also could make any other comments about research designs of dissertations in their doctoral programs. Four reported discouraging or excluding survey research due to quality concerns (e.g., “We have excluded ‘surveys’ alone as appropriate for dissertations as a way of increasing the level of scholarly work”; “We allow surveys but only if they address issues likely to advance the profession and if there can be some assurance of representative sample”). One reported increased attention to “designs that incorporate program evaluation since many of our students work full-time and are often in positions requiring very significant and expansive program evaluations.” A faculty member who reported that 60% of dissertations were qualitative noted, “It appears the department is moving toward encouraging more quantitative and/or mixed methods designs.” Another wrote that students writing qualitative dissertations were “encouraged to present their results in a way that best describes the study and results. This could be in 8, 9, or 10+ chapters, dependent upon methodology and number of participants.” One reported, “We do not permit indiscriminate convenience sampling (e.g., recruitment blasts to CESNET).” One stated, “We are quite proud of the (relatively) high proportion of experimental, intervention designs produced by our students.”

**Comparisons of dissertation products and committees by satisfaction ratings.** To further explore faculty satisfaction ratings, the average number and composition of committee members as well as dissertation formats and designs were calculated by ratings of satisfaction with dissertation process and products. Visual inspection of the cross-tabs suggested that those reporting lower satisfaction ratings had smaller committees, made up primarily of counselor educators. Their dissertations were exclusively traditional format, with little variability in the types of methodologies used. Most had a high percentage of qualitative methods, with little to no quantitative and mixed methods. Quantitative dissertations were mostly descriptive. Faculty



reporting higher satisfaction ratings more often reported requiring a committee member from research methods or statistics. Their dissertations were more varied in terms of format and the use of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Due to lower power, these observations could not be examined with inferential statistics. These observations, however, were very similar to faculty comments throughout the survey.

For example, one faculty who reported being “not satisfied at all” with dissertation products and process also reported 98% of dissertations were qualitative and said most students choose all counselor educators to be on their committee; the faculty respondent wanted to change this practice and “mandate a statistician to be on their committee.” In contrast, the five faculty who reported being “very satisfied” reported an average of 48% qualitative and 45% quantitative dissertations; three reported 10% mixed methods. Two noted that students sometimes used advanced statistics (e.g., SEM) in their dissertations, and their qualitative methodologies spanned across multiple types of methodologies (e.g., grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative, CQR). One reported that survey method was the most typical method, but noted a “movement toward more experimental intervention studies.” The very satisfied faculty said research methods or statistics faculty were required on the committee or were selected by a majority of students as the outside committee member(s). Two noted that all committee members had to be actively engaged in research. At least one of the very satisfied faculty was in a part-time program, as this respondent indicated greater consideration of quantitative program evaluations since many students worked full-time in positions “requiring very significant and expansive program evaluations.” Finally, faculty who reported an alternative dissertation format was allowed also reported, on average, being mostly satisfied with their dissertation products and process ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = .71$ ).

**Comparisons by predominant research methods.** Satisfaction ratings by faculty reporting that 70% or more of their dissertations were either qualitative or quantitative also were compared. Five faculty reported 70% or more of their dissertations were qualitative; their satisfaction ratings averaged 2.2 ( $SD = 1.30$ , mode = 1, range = 1 - 4). Their desired changes in dissertations were varied: mandate a statistician on the committee, require better research methods (not specified), allow an alternative dissertation model, and conduct an open dissertation proposal meeting.

Thirteen faculty reported 70% or more of their dissertations were quantitative; their average satisfaction ratings were 3.58 ( $SD = .79$ , mode = 4, range = 2 - 4). Their desired changes in dissertations also varied: increase consistency of standards across dissertation chairs and committees (mentioned by four), give more focus to process over product, allow students some creativity in the process, encourage more rigor in research designs and writing, increase students' use of higher level statistics, encourage more original work, increase data practice in research tool courses, achieve more guidance from dissertation chair, and have more studies of clinical practice issues. One of the 13 faculty reported being pleased with the outcomes of increased expectations of dissertation work.

### **Discussion**

The traditional dissertation format (i.e., 4 or 5 chapters) was the predominant format in CACREP-accredited doctoral programs in the US over the last three years. Faculty in only 16% of programs said they offered the alternative of a compilation of articles, which typically included one empirical manuscript. The type of dissertation format did not seem to be related to dissertation research methods (based on visual observation of cross-tabs). In the six programs offering an alternative format, an average of 31% were qualitative (range = 5% - 50%), an

average of 63% were quantitative (range = 45% - 90%), and an average of 12% (range = 0% - 40%) were mixed methods, while averages overall were 39.97% qualitative, 54.28% quantitative, and 7.96% mixed methods. Thus, regardless the dissertation format, faculty reported a majority of students completed quantitative dissertations over the last three years, although the percentage completing qualitative dissertations was fairly close. These results mirror those reported by Zanskas et al. (2014) for rehabilitation counseling dissertations. Unfortunately, no comparison data are available to discern how these percentages compare to counseling dissertations completed in previous years.

For qualitative dissertations, faculty reported students primarily employed grounded theory and phenomenology methods. In the research training sections of the survey, faculty reported these were the two qualitative methods most often taught in their doctoral programs (Borders et al., 2013). Faculty reported a wide range of quantitative methods was used in dissertations, including descriptive and experimental designs, basic and advanced statistics; these results again were similar to designs and analyses used in recent rehabilitation counseling dissertations (Zanskas et al., 2014). In the previous study on research training in their doctoral programs (Borders et al., 2013), the counselor education faculty reported a similar range of quantitative research designs and quantitative analyses were taught. Thus, it appears dissertation students are choosing methods they are being taught during their doctoral programs.

Based on faculty reports, dissertation committees typically were composed of two or three counselor educators and one other faculty member, chosen based on the students' topic or methodology. Over half reported a research methods or statistics faculty member served on their committees, although in a few programs this person might be a counselor educator. Other

faculty, including at least one reporting predominately qualitative dissertations, wished that a statistics person was required on their committees.

Faculty reported modest satisfaction with their dissertation process and products, including those who reported allowing an alternative format. Across satisfaction ratings, their desired changes most often were around measures to increase rigor of methodology and achieve consistency in standards across dissertation chairs and committees. Several reported being pleased with recent efforts in their program to increase rigor and consistency. In general, faculty reporting low satisfaction also reported committees predominated by counselor educators and low variability in research methods. In contrast, those reporting high satisfaction said their dissertation committees included research methods or statistics faculty. They also reported that their students used a variety of methods in dissertations, typically including a fairly strong percentage of qualitative dissertations, and said students used more advanced statistical analyses in quantitative dissertations. Faculty satisfaction, then, did not seem to be dependent on dissertation format or dissertation methods (i.e., whether qualitative or quantitative), but satisfaction did appear related to composition of the dissertation committee.

The favorable satisfaction ratings when there was variety in dissertation methods cannot be fully explained by the data. High percentages of qualitative or quantitative dissertations may reflect the expertise of counseling faculty. On the other hand, it may be that allowing, or encouraging, consideration of several different methods reflects an emphasis on identifying a gap in the literature that then becomes the basis for writing research questions and choosing methodology. Such an approach was supported by a Delphi study of counseling research competencies (Wester & Borders, 2014); the expert panel emphasized breadth of knowledge of

research methods that allowed one to select the most appropriate approach for answering research questions that are driven by the literature.

Faculty clearly had mixed opinions of mixed methods, including disagreements within their own programs, and reported quite a range of mixed methods used in dissertations. Most said students conducted interviews in combination with some other method, such as a survey or collection of quantitative data. Others, however, reported combinations of methods that do not fit the definition of “mixed methods.” It appears that there is some confusion or misunderstanding among counselor education faculty about what mixed methods are and their appropriate (and rigorous) place in research.

Faculty also had mixed opinions of dissertations based on surveys. Five reported surveys as a quantitative method used in dissertations; one of these said surveys were the “most typical” design for their students’ dissertations. On the other hand, four faculty reported specific efforts to limit, exclude, or discourage use of surveys in order to increase the rigor of their dissertations. Somewhat in contrast with these comments, in the research training sections of the survey, 76% of faculty said survey design was covered in required coursework, with only 5% reporting survey design was not covered in their required or elective coursework (Borders et al., 2013). It is not clear what contributed to faculty’s range of opinions about survey dissertations, although issues around quality certainly seemed implied. Similarly, Heppner, Wampold, and Kivlighan (2008), after noting the contributions of survey research to the counseling profession, stated, “Perhaps the most frequent problem with survey research is not with survey methods *per se*, but rather with the lack of knowledge about conducting sound survey research” (p. 228).

## **Limitations**

The data in this study represent the first descriptions of dissertation products and process in CACREP-accredited counseling doctoral programs, but much more needs to be known. Detailed descriptions of the dissertation products created in alternative formats were not collected, and so it could not be determined whether they met the suggestions of the Council of Graduate Schools (1991, 2005). The data did provide descriptions of what research methods were employed by programs, and faculty estimates of which methods were used most often by students. Nevertheless, it was not possible to surmise with certainty which quantitative and qualitative methods, if any, are more “typical” of dissertations across counseling programs.

In addition, given the length of the full survey from which these data were gathered, questions about a number of other potential areas were not included. For example, it would be informative to ascertain what topics and subjects are being addressed in dissertations. A few faculty expressed a desire for more dissertations focused on clinical populations and issues, but this reflected thoughts about their own programs only. Since survey questions did not address dissertation topics specifically, it is not clear how many dissertations achieved CACREP (2009) standards of informing counseling practice, counselor education, and supervision, nor what gaps need to be addressed.

Importantly, data that would allow evaluation of the quality of dissertation research were not collected. Quality indicators, such as those used by Wester, Borders, Boul, and Horton (2013), would provide a more precise measure of the appropriate application of research methods in dissertations, would better indicate whether dissertation research is benefitting the profession, and perhaps would further our understanding regarding faculty satisfaction with dissertation products. In addition, information about incomplete dissertations was not requested (were

research methods related to students not completing the dissertation?), and only faculty opinions and satisfaction ratings were collected, excluding doctoral students' views.

No obvious differences between the programs of faculty respondents and nonrespondents were apparent. Both groups included geographically diverse programs, relatively large and small programs, and full-time and part-time doctoral programs. Nevertheless, response bias may exist, as data about the dissertation products, committee composition, and satisfaction ratings of faculty in unrepresented programs is unknown. In addition, not all program faculties' opinions were represented, as some respondents said other faculty would not agree with their responses. Thus, results should be interpreted with some caution.

Finally, doctoral programs that offer a professional (vs. PhD) degree, such as the program described by Southern, Cade, and Locke (2012), were not included. These authors proposed a portfolio project, or Project Demonstrating Excellence (PDE), as part of a doctor of professional counseling (DPC) program. Southern et al. (2012) suggested PDE dissertation alternatives should "reflect meaningful applications of scholarship in practice settings" (p. 8), such as a competency-based portfolio (demonstrating best practices and evidence-based practice), a participatory action research study, and/or a program development and evaluation project conducted in a clinical setting. Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romancauk (2009) described a similar portfolio approach for professional doctorates in education, designed to benefit the practice community rather than the academic community, yet still reflecting rigor. In line with CGS (1991, 2005) recommendations, they stated that the portfolio of works should have a thesis, "an over-riding line of argument" (p. 139) that provided coherence to the body of work doctoral students selected to include in the portfolio, and suggested the portfolio should be examined by a committee that included "highly regarded, experienced professionals" (p. 142) from relevant

practice communities. They listed criteria for the professional education doctorate portfolio dissertation at one Australian university, which included clearly stated research questions with significance to practice; competency in reviewing relevant literature; quality of research design; collection and analysis of appropriate data; linking findings to theory, policy, practice, and future research; and quality of writing and/or other presentation media, as appropriate to the relevant audience(s). Future researchers, then, may want to explore similarities and differences between dissertation processes and products for PhD as well as DPC counseling programs.

### **Implications**

Additional studies of counseling dissertations are needed to more fully understand their evolution, scope, and quality. In addition, it seems important to determine which dissertations are published and in what journals. Such information could be compiled by program and by program faculty and shared with prospective students. In addition, location of dissertation-based publications would allow researchers to determine whether they reflect concerns about research quality of submitted manuscripts (e.g., Kline & Farrell, 2005) and published articles in counseling journals (e.g., Wester et al., 2013).

It appears some counselor educators may want to consider the possibility of adding outside members to the dissertation committees, particularly members from research methods or statistics. The value of these committee members was highlighted by some of our respondents and desired by others, and was related to higher faculty satisfaction with dissertation products. Concerns about rigor and consistency of standards across committee chairs suggest faculty may want to initiate conversations around these issues in their program. In addition, in programs where either qualitative or quantitative methods make up a high percentage of dissertations,



faculty may want to reflect on whether research questions and methods are driven by the method or perhaps preferred by faculty, rather than being driven by the identified gap in the literature.

Although limited, the results provide a basis of comparison for future researchers seeking to determine any changes in the use of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, as well as specific designs and committee composition. Such studies could help identify trends in the field, nationally and internationally, and reasons for any changes.

### **Conclusion**

Ideally, the dissertation serves as the launching point for the new PhD's research agenda and continued contributions to scholarly counseling research (cf. Adkison-Bradley, 2013). Strong dissertations can lead to a productive career in which counseling researchers generate substantive contributions to counseling practice, counselor education, and counseling supervision. Hopefully, this study provides a foundation for building knowledge of the factors that contribute to quality counseling dissertation research that then can evolve into meaningful research agendas.

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