

## **Life as a Researcher: Continued Exploration of an Alternative Dissertation Model**

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The role of graduate preparation to become a life-long music education researcher has remained largely unexplored. Graduate program chairs in Music Education reported that only 50% of doctoral graduates publish their dissertation (Sims & Cassidy, 2015). Therefore, we question whether the process of writing a dissertation prepares students for what most researchers do throughout their careers. Penn State, and few other programs, now offers an alternative dissertation model option. Based on the premise that learning to do research requires doing research, our Ph.D. students conduct research projects throughout their doctoral study. When a student's area of research interest emerges early, his/her dissertation may represent a collection of studies related to one topic rather than one large study.

In order to explore the process and effectiveness of the revised dissertation model from the perspective of the doctoral students and faculty, a preliminary study was conducted (Rutkowski & Thornton, 2015). Two doctoral students who completed the degree, one doctoral student currently writing the dissertation, and four doctoral students soon entering the dissertation phase of the degree, as well as members of these students' doctoral committees

served as participants, each completing an open-ended questionnaire. Themes that emerged among all participants included those supportive of the multi-study option (publication options, more like future scholarly engagement, more timely completion of degree) and some that raised potential concerns (acceptance by the Music Education scholarly community, potential lack of depth, may be more difficult to conceptualize and/or decide on a topic early in the program).

For the present study, doctoral students (2 in progress and 2 who have graduated) and members of their committees (2 music education faculty and 2 outside area faculty) were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. Students desire for their research and practice to inform each other; enjoy building their topic and reviewing the literature over time; like the flexibility of having choices; enjoy interacting with others about their work; feel the 3 study option provided momentum in their research endeavors; expressed that doing a big project can be overwhelming. Faculty felt the 3 study model would perhaps prepare students better for publishing articles but voiced concern about the “publish or perish” model and the potential lack of depth; the 3-study model may be closer to how we really work allowing studies to feed off each other although this may vary based on the type of study; regardless of model, rigor and choices are important.

Based on this project, if you are considering a Ph.D. program:

- What choices are available to you for your dissertation?
- Is engaging in research encouraged throughout your program?
- Do you have opportunities to engage with other scholars throughout your program?
- Are your teaching and research endeavors symbiotic?

Rutkowski, J. & Thornton, L.C. (2015, September). *Life as a researcher: Exploration of an alternative dissertation model*. Paper presented at the Society for Music Teacher Education Symposium, Greensboro NC.

Sims, W.L. & Cassidy, J.W. (2015). The role of the dissertation in music education doctoral programs. *Journal of Music Teacher Education*, Prepublished May 14, 2015 as doi: 10.1177/1057083715578285