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Doctoral Program Issues: Commentary on Companion Dissertations

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Companion dissertations are characterized by collaborative inquiry by one or more students in which (a) each dissertation may utilize a target population with a unique study sample centered on a problem, a phenomenon, or a general topic of interest or (b) each dissertation may utilize two or more different target populations yet they may focus on the same problem, phenomenon, or topic.

We offer four formats in which a companion dissertation can be conceptualized. One format is the meta-analysis model. In this model there is a common research question. For example, a question may be, “What are the perceptions of superintendents and their school board presidents regarding the role of superintendents in 1000 Texas public school districts?” If a team of three individuals are working on this particular question, then the first dissertation may explore the question from a small district perspective; the second dissertation may explore the question from a mid-size district perspective, while the third dissertation may explore the question from the large urban district perspective. In this case, Chapters One and Two of the dissertation could be entirely different; however, they may all include a collaboratively-derived theoretical framework. Chapter Three would present the sampling plan in differing ways; however, all three dissertations may include the same information on instrumentation, research design, and procedures (all planned together). Chapter Four and Five would be individually authored and would present the findings for the unique samples and the summary, conclusions, and recommendations. It is recommended in this model that the chair(s) be the same person.

A second format is the multiple case study model that may elaborate one or more research questions. For example, one research question for three companion dissertations could be, “What content and instructional strategies should be included in a basic statistics courses created for both practicing and prospective school principals?” In this design, the three candidates completed a one-year research seminar dedicated to the following essential tasks: (a) creating a common theoretical framework (review of relevant literature), (b) constructing a dissertation proposal that specified both common and individual research tasks for each candidate, and (c) designing a common framework for organizing the narrative to be presented in each companion dissertation. The candidates’ proposals were designed to have four parts:

1. An elaboration of the theoretical framework that was developed earlier in the research seminar.
2. A second section of the proposal that shared the common purpose and research questions to be addressed in each dissertation.
3. A third section of the proposal that specified the common research design used to guide the unique and collaborative empirical efforts to be undertaken in each companion dissertation.
4. A final section of the proposal that described how the narrative for each dissertation would be organized into five parts (chapters).

In this case study model, all three dissertation proposals may be presented at on single proposal session. In this case, the same chair(s) and the same third committee member are recommended to be the same with a fourth committee member being different on each committee.

As an example, these three companion dissertations followed an agreed-upon structure for a five-chapter dissertation: (a) Introduction presented the theoretical framework and literature review, intent of inquiry (problem, purpose, and research questions), design of inquiry (process and expected outcome for each phase), and a review of how the dissertation narrative is to be organized, (b) Phase One elaborated the intent, actual implementation method, and research findings for the first phase in which each candidate logged entries into a personal daily journal, took statements from school principal colleagues, and investigated appropriate situations encountered in the school principal literature dealing with data-based decision making, (c) Phase Two elaborated the intent, actual implementation method, and research findings for the second phase in which the candidate served as a statistics and design consultant to a practicing principal during a data-based action research project, (d) Phase three elaborated the intent, actual implementation method, and research findings for the third phase in which each candidate developed an inventory of recommendations, and (e) Summary and Conclusions provided a brief overview of the detailed information presented in the first four chapters.

A third type of companion dissertation is considered the evaluation model. An example of this model is that two candidates desired to evaluate whether a highly focused Spanish early literacy intervention increased pre-reading skills for culturally and linguistically diverse students who were identified by their classroom teachers as most at risk for reading difficulties. In these companion dissertations, the evaluation agenda was the same but the samples were different. One study was at the kindergarten level and one was at the first grade level. Archival data were used. A common research design was

used for both dissertations including the same statewide instrument and descriptive statistics.

A fourth type of companion dissertation is a single case study design in which one context or setting is selected for the study; however, differing target populations are studied within that context. For example, one companion dissertation sought to determine differences in student achievement and attendance of African American students before and after the implementation of a standardized dress code in a suburban high school in Southeast Texas. As part of a companion study, differences in student attendance between African American students and Hispanic students (the second study) were studied to determine if differences existed in two separate subpopulations in the same high school. The organization of such a study follows: Chapter One (structured in the same way, but with differing information with the exception of the purpose which is stated the same but with different populations or samples), Chapter Two is different because two differing groups are studied; therefore, the review of literature will be different, Chapter Three is the same content with, of course, different samples or populations, Chapter Four and Five will be individually authored, and in this there will be a companion cross-case analysis that will be analyzed and written by the two candidates. That will be the only chapter that will be the same in both dissertations as indicated in Chapter One and in Chapter Three as a part of the methodology of the companion dissertations.

Essential Elements of Companion Dissertations

A companion dissertation program should have:

1. A Common Research Agenda (usually expressed as a basic research question).

2. A Common intent of the inquiry statement (written in each dissertation in terms of a unique target population of interest).

3. A Common Design of the Inquiry Statement (written in each dissertation to reflect the particular expected outcomes and corresponding inquiry procedures for completing a designated set of sequential research tasks).

4. A Common Dissertation Narrative Format (written in terms of what is to be presented in each chapter of the dissertation).

5. Recommended to have the same chair(s) and at least one other committee member who would serve on the companion dissertations for continuity.

Benefits of Companion Dissertation Programs

Companion dissertation programs can help to

1. Design meaningful “custom-made” research elective courses.
2. Shorten dissertation completion time,
3. Reduce redundancy in dissertation advising.
4. Establish early on a clear rationale that allows students to connect formal coursework and dissertation research.
5. Create an opportunity to provide both faculty and graduate students: hands on” experience in conducting actual research synthesis and meta-analysis studies that have direct and immediate relevance in their own practicing professional environments.
6. Create an opportunity for faculty members to update their research skills, especially in the domain of case study research.
7. Reduce the number of ABD students.
8. Create a community of learners.

9. Assist in developing a culture in which collaboration in publication is valued.

Implementation Constraints and Recommendations

Companion dissertation programs are not without limitations. Two of the most critical constraints associated with implementing effective companion dissertation programs follow.

1. Highly effective companion dissertation programs require creating a departmental advocacy and commitment to this type of collaborative activity. Ideally, this advocacy and commitment should be established before the program is implemented.

2. Highly effective companion dissertation programs also require a department faculty to “bring on board” members of the graduate college responsible for final approval of each companion dissertation.

3. Since the concept of companion dissertations is not widely known, it would be informative if the first chapter of each companion dissertation referenced a dissertation appendix that explained this concept.

4. Ideally, the appendix should have two parts. The first part should provide a brief but informative general description of the characteristics encountered in a companion dissertation. The second part should be designed to include a brief specific description of two pieces of information: (a) a brief explanation of the individual and collaborative contributions to be presented in the dissertation and (b) a list of other companion dissertation authors.

5. Since the concept of companion dissertations is not widely known, it would be informative if the first chapter of each companion dissertation referenced a dissertation appendix that explained this concept. Finally, we recommend that the title reflect the

companion study as in the following: Dissertation A. *A study of the implementation of a standardized dress code and student achievement of African American students in a suburban high school: A companion study*, and Dissertation B. *A study of the implementation of a standardized dress code and student achievement of Hispanic students in a suburban high school: A companion study*. Individuals who are reading one study, then know immediately to look for the companion to this study.

References

McNamara, J. F., Lara-Alecio, R., & Hoyle, J. (June, 2006). *Companion Dissertation Programs*. Unpublished document presented to the Annual Summer Conference Florida Association of Professors of Educational Leadership. Orlando, Florida.

Appendix A

Companion Dissertations

Meta-analysis Models

Horace E. Lilley (August 1975). *The Role of the Superintendent of Small Schools in Texas as Perceived by Superintendents and School Board Presidents*. (Ph.D. in EDAD Dept.) Texas A&M University.

Edwin H. Casburn (December 1975). *The Role of the Superintendent of Small Schools in Texas as Perceived by Superintendents and School Board Presidents*. (Ph.D. in EDAD Dept.) Texas A&M University.

Monte K. McBride (May 1976). *The Role of the Superintendent of Small Schools in Texas as Perceived by Superintendents and School Board Presidents*. (Ph.D. in EDAD Dept.) Texas A&M University.

Case Study Models

Mary K. Jones (1999). *Developing Statistics and Data Analysis Skills for Principal Preparation Programs: An Exploratory Study*. (Ed.D. Record of Study in EDAD Dept.) Texas A&M University.

Susan L. Etheredge (1999). *Developing Statistics and Data Analysis Skills for Principal Preparation Programs: An Exploratory Study*. (Ed.D. Record of Study in EDAD Dept.) Texas A&M University.

Barbara E. Polnick (1999). *Developing Statistics and Data Analysis Skills for Principal Preparation Programs: An Exploratory Study*. (Ed.D. Record of Study in EDAD Dept.) Texas A&M University.

Evaluation Models

Linda H. Mohr (August 2002). *Reading Achievement of First Grade Children Enrolled in a Spanish Early Literacy Intervention Developed in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Public School Serving Pre-Kindergarten Through Second Grade Student*. (Ph.D. degree in the Department of Educational Curriculum and Instruction). Texas A&M University. This dissertation won the 2003 AERA Best Dissertation Award in Bilingual Education.

Frances M. McArthur (August 2002). *An Assessment of a Kindergarten Spanish Early Literacy Intervention*. (Ph.D. degree in the Department of Educational Curriculum and Instruction). Texas A&M University.

Single Case Study Models

Creel, Jimmy Ray (2000). *A Study of the Implementation of a Standardized Dress Code and Student Achievement of African American Students in a Suburban High School: A Companion Study*. (Ed.D. degree in the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling). Sam Houston State University.

Widener, Angela (2000). *A Study of the Implementation of a Standardized Dress Code and Student Achievement of Hispanic Students in a Suburban High School: A Companion Study*. (Ed.D. degree in the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling). Sam Houston State University.