The Manuscript Option Dissertation: Dissemination and Challenges

Marion E. Broome

INTRODUCTION

Dissemination of a student’s dissertation findings is always a goal of doctoral (PhD) students and their faculty committees. In most cases the dissertation is the culmination of an average of four years engaging in an in-depth study of an important research problem. The dissertation committee is composed of four to six faculty members from several disciplines whose expertise in theory, methods, and analytics support the student’s area of study. In general, members of the committee will ultimately participate in publications derived from the work, and are expected to meet the criteria for authorship described by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE; www.icmje.org).
Traditional dissertations vary in length but typically consist of 5-8 “chapters” and may be anywhere from 75 to 300 pages long...sometimes more! In nursing, the most common structure is five chapters, as follows:

1. Chapter One, an introduction describing the problem or gap in knowledge, scope, significance, research aims or questions;
2. Chapter Two, containing a review of extant literature and if appropriate, a theoretical framework;
3. Chapter Three, a methods chapter which describes the design, hypotheses or research questions, sample, procedures, and analytic approaches used in the study;
4. Chapter Four, primarily concerned with reporting the findings; and
5. Chapter Five, consisting of the discussion and recommendations.

Graduates who choose the traditional dissertation format must then decide post-graduation how they will distill the findings from the dissertation into publishable papers, which is always a challenge. An alternative format for reporting dissertation findings, most commonly called the “manuscript option dissertation,” or the “three article dissertation” (Robinson & Dracup, 2008) has both advantages and disadvantages for the PhD student/candidate/graduate (see Table 1). The manuscript option dissertation is gaining traction in schools and colleges of nursing in the US and internationally. This article will discuss issues to consider in deciding “yea or nay” for the traditional versus this alternative format.

**WHY THE MANUSCRIPT OPTION DISSERTATION?**

The manuscript option format for a dissertation is not new. Other disciplines, such as geography, sociology, and some sciences, have been using the format for many years. The primary rationale for many schools of nursing who have chosen
to use the manuscript option was the recognition that publishing scholarly papers is a lifelong skill for doctorally prepared nurses who assume academic positions, as well as those who work in magnet designated health systems. Graduates who publish while in their PhD program and also have manuscripts either “ready to go” or under review are more competitive for assistant professorships or post-doctoral fellowships. In other words, they are ready to hit the ground running.

**TYPES OF MANUSCRIPTS FROM MANUSCRIPT OPTION DISSERTATIONS**

The first paper published from a manuscript option dissertation is usually submitted during the student’s second or third year in their program. Common topics these initial manuscripts often are:

- Theoretical framework, if original
- Concept analysis
- Systematic review
- Methodology
- The protocol for a clinical trial
- Pilot study findings

A review of several school of nursing websites that allow a manuscript option dissertation (University of Texas at Austin, Indiana University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) reflect some common principles for papers that will be accepted. In particular, papers included in the dissertation must be judged as publishable quality by committee and each paper must be substantially related to the topic of the dissertation. In some schools, at least one paper should actually be published; at others none are required to be published in order to graduate. Additional guidelines state no other student can be included as an author and that
the PhD student must be first author of the manuscript. Committee members are often co-authors on the various manuscripts once submitted for publication. Finally, most agree that any revisions of manuscripts submitted need to be approved by members of the committee. Interestingly, outside of nursing, there are disciplines that do not allow multiple authors or require justification for authorship.

Examples of manuscripts from manuscript option dissertations are listed in Table 2. In most schools of nursing, at least two of the papers must be data-based. Therefore, the student must discuss with their advisor and committee what would be appropriate findings to report in the data-based papers and determine who is interested in working on the manuscripts for submission to a journal. Often different members of the committee, with specific expertise (for example, in the method or analysis), would be author(s) on one paper but not on a second. However, all members can participate actively as co-authors, and the order of authorship would reflect their expertise and depth of involvement.

**POTENTIAL CHALLENGES TO CONSIDER FOR A MANUSCRIPT OPTION DISSERTATION**

The conceptual organization of the “dissertation report” is different, with three of the five “chapters” consisting of manuscripts in either the final word-processed or PDF document which was submitted for publication, or a manuscript that is “suitable for publication.” In some schools or colleges using this format, faculty have less skill and experience publishing research reports. They may lack awareness of issues surrounding copyright which sometimes leads to confusion on the part of the student or committee when working with editors and publishers of scholarly journals. If the paper has already been published, then the student needs to obtain permission to include the final version in the dissertation. If this permission cannot be secured, then final word-processed or PDF document of the
manuscript should be included in the dissertation (Baggs, 2011). Editors and publishers are working to understand copyright issues in this area and certainly want students to be successful in sharing their results, so realize we are all are on a learning curve in this area.

There is always the potential for overlap across some of the papers, especially in the methods section. Committees should carefully plan with the student which paper should be submitted first. Some journals (or reviewers) ask authors to publish all their data in one paper, despite page limitations, making it difficult for students to select those journals as appropriate outlets for dissemination. The ethics about order of co-authorship should also be considered and discussed among committee members with the student early on in the research process (Gross, Alhusen & Jennings, 2012).

Occasionally doctoral students and/or graduates call or email an editor asking for advice as they plan for dissemination of their dissertation. In my experience, it is very difficult to report all of the findings of a dissertation level research project in one manuscript and still have a thorough explanation of the methods and findings. To give the most helpful advice, the editor should ask for all abstracts of the planned manuscripts as well as those already accepted for publication. Any significant overlap should be identified and discussed with the author. I always advise authors to make it clear to the reader that the manuscript is reporting findings that were part of a larger study and cite the other paper(s). Of course the aims, most of the review of the literature, all of the findings and discussion should be different for each manuscript. I find providing this advice, and usually referring authors to several other journals as well as my own if appropriate, saves time and encourages dissertation results, which in the past sat on a shelf far too often, to be disseminated.
### Table 1. Contrasting Formats for Dissertations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Format</th>
<th>Manuscript Option Format</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. 5-6 chapters;</td>
<td>I. 5 “chapters”;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction/significance/scope</td>
<td>Introduction and overview of topic and three papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Review of literature</td>
<td>II. Review of literature; systematic review; theoretical framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Methods (design, sample, measures, analytic strategy)</td>
<td>III. One data-based manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Findings</td>
<td>IV. Two data-based manuscripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Discussion and Recommendations</td>
<td>V. Discussion and Recommendations</td>
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</tbody>
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### Table 2. Example of Three Option Manuscripts in Nursing Science

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PhD Nursing Science (Indiana University)</th>
<th>PhD in Nursing with Informatics Concentration (Blekinge Institute of Technology, Sweden)</th>
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## REFERENCES


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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