

## All Aboard: Showcasing Doctoral Studies to Guarantee the Vitality of our Field

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This special issue of *The Researcher* focuses on doctoral studies in educational fields. We are honored to be able to highlight such a critical topic as guest editors for this issue. The Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association has consistently championed doctoral students and given them an outlet for their work. The purpose of this special issue was twofold. First, we wanted to give doctoral programs an opportunity to showcase their philosophies and programs. The professional literature consistently highlights quality teacher education programs. We do not see the same attention given to doctoral programs in education. We find this concerning given that the graduates of our doctoral programs will be typically hired into positions with a teacher education emphasis. We hope this edition of *The Researcher* will encourage doctoral programs to engage in program evaluation with identified objectives. Second, we wanted to continue NRMERA's role in mentoring doctoral students by showcasing quality doctoral research while giving these scholars important tips about the higher education hiring process.

As special educators we have been focused on doctoral studies out of necessity. As a field, special education faces a shortage of qualified special education teacher educators and researchers. We believe that part of the shortage may be attributed to the doctoral training students receive and have begun reflecting on how we can decrease the shortage by improving our doctoral programs. We have learned that doctoral education is idiosyncratic to institutions and programs. There are not always standards, rarely a conceptual framework. The search committee who evaluate our students and then their select colleagues measures the quality of doctoral preparation. In a seminal study on special education doctoral graduates, Smith, Pion, Tyler, Sindelar, and Rosenberg (2001) quoted one respondent as saying, "I and my fellow students believe we have never been in a more 'disempowering' environment. We plan not to work in higher education because of this experience," (p. 25). It is this study that energizes us to change these poor outcomes.

In her research on student satisfaction in special education doctoral programs, Washburn-Moses (2008) suggested, "Doctoral program planners should consider for what they intend to prepare students and map program requirements and experiences to those outcomes." (p. 265) We hold that this is true of many doctoral programs in

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education. For example, what is the purpose of your doctoral program? Is it to prepare future researchers, future administrators, future psychometricians, future teacher educators, or some combination of those? Have you designed your program and all the activities in your program with that purpose in mind? As indicated in the Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate by Berliner (2006), the dissertation typically serves as the performance measure for excellence in research skills at the doctoral level. However, as noted by Gaff (2002), many recent doctorates feel unprepared for the rigors of being employed in higher education. In a current study we have in progress (Taylor, Bingham, & Abernathy, in progress), we are already seeing chairs of search committees comment that applicants for assistant-level positions in special education teacher education programs aren't ready for the rigors of ongoing research beyond the dissertation, indicating that special education doctoral programs need to think beyond traditional concepts of research training when preparing future teacher educators. The dissertation may be an under-performing indicator of success in higher education. While we have thrown our own field under the bus, we suspect that all fields in education should put themselves under a critical lens.

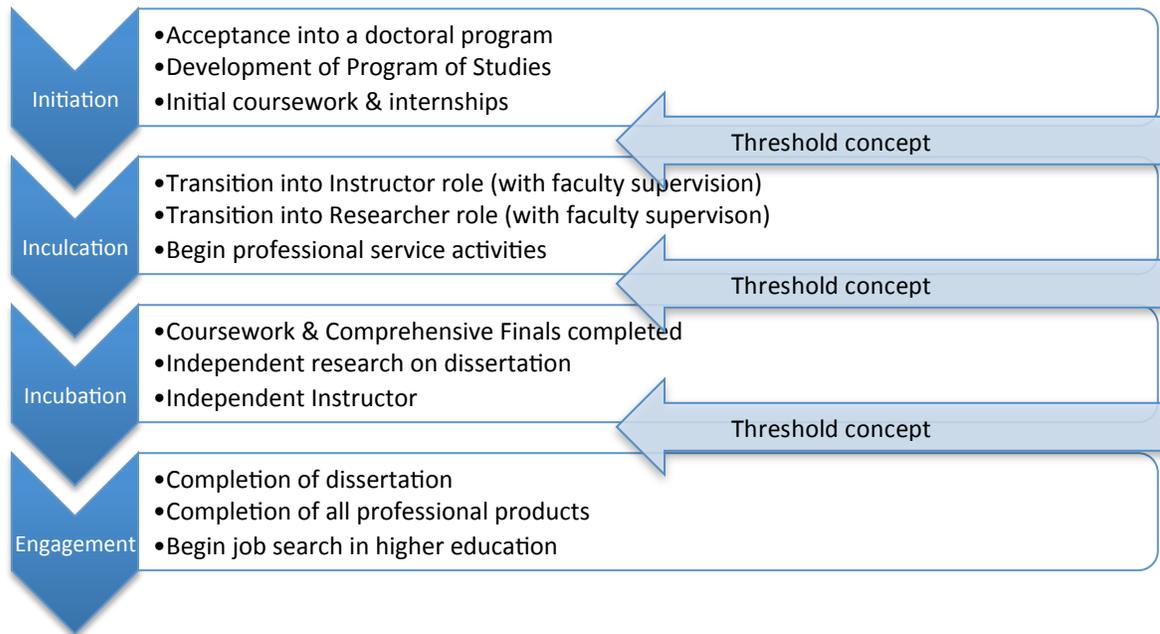
As Adams (2002) found in her study of the Preparing Future Faculty program, many doctoral graduates have difficulty changing from an environment in which their dissertation research was their primary focus to an environment in which they are expected to conduct rigorous research while also teaching, advising, and providing service to the profession and community (McCormick & Barnes, 2008). Further, not all doctoral programs prepare students for every type of higher education position. For example, many land grant institutions have a heavy teaching load, expect a significant number of research publications and demand committed service in the field of study, the university and program areas. As a result, junior faculty who trained in predominately research programs, with little to no teacher education program may find themselves striving to meet expectations that are very different than their doctoral preparation.

Successful faculty in today's teacher preparation programs have learned how to balance their scholarship, teaching, and service, and wherever possible, link the three areas together (for example, conducting research on their teaching practice or using service activities as an opportunity to conduct research in the field). These are the skills that newly minted doctoral graduates in education need as they head into faculty positions in a variety of education programs across the country, and doctoral programs need to ensure they are preparing the faculty member of today and not the faculty member of yesterday.

In our reflections on how to best guide our scholars through the doctoral studies process successfully, we designed a theoretical framework based on research by Adler and Adler (2005) and Kiley (2009). Adler and Adler identified the stages through which doctoral candidates must pass as *initiation*, *inculcation*, *incubation*, and finally *engagement*. The conceptual framework (shown in Figure 1 below) for doctoral study we envision is based on these stages. Furthermore, Kiley recognized that moving through stages was a significant endeavor. She stated that supporting doctoral candidates and making the transition from student to faculty member requires mentorship through *threshold concepts*. Threshold concepts are those elements of a program that are so critical that scholars cannot move on to advanced stages of learning without having mastered them. The transitions between stages (*initiation*, *inculcation*, *incubation*, and *engagement*) are viewed as threshold concepts, and those transitional points as the times doctoral

students are most likely to leave their programs or become disillusioned with the idea of higher education as a career goal. Our conceptual framework is designed to recognize the stages through which students progress, as well as the threshold concepts that students must assimilate to move from one stage to the next.

*Figure 1. Stages of the Doctoral Experience*



As Adler and Adler (2005) point out, there are points at which doctoral students, if not provided with sufficient guidance and/or mentoring, become “stuck” and frustrated, and it is at that point many either drop out of their programs or decide that they will finish, but not go into academe, due to disillusionment with higher education. In our framework, we envision that those points coincide with Kiley’s (2009) points at which students are acquiring threshold concepts and require additional mentoring. With the low numbers of special education doctoral graduates and the high needs we have for faculty in our field, we need to ensure we provide adequate guidance and mentoring so that after completing their programs, graduates secure positions in higher education.

We believe the issues surrounding successful completion of doctoral programs in education are varied and require a critical eye. It is also often difficult to find a forum in which to publish studies examining programs or components of doctoral study, and for that reason, we felt that a special issue dedicated to this topic could add valuable information to the field and start a critical conversation about doctoral preparation.

With this issue of *The Researcher* we wanted to highlight work done by successful graduate students and help them progress through those final threshold concepts. So in this issue, you will find three articles focused on doctoral education. What surprised us was that doctoral students coauthored two of the three articles. Doctoral students who are studying their own programs and experiences can offer us an essential point of view to which we don’t always have access. The article by Brooke, Chen, Lui, and Valle is an examination of one specific doctoral program in education psychology, as reviewed by graduates of the program. Another article by Treacy, Casillas, and Wiest is a case study of one specific course within a doctoral program, an introductory doctoral seminar, as

viewed by two former students and the faculty member who developed and has taught the class. Finally, an article by Taylor and Bingham examines the phenomenon of doctoral students in special education who leave campus while ABD (“all but dissertation”) to accept their first faculty position, and how other special education faculty view individuals who make that decision.

Our four articles from graduate students are diverse in topic and research methodology and are from a variety of regions. Two of the articles focus on teaching students with atypical needs. Hayes, Casey, Williamson, Black and McClure examined skills teachers need in order to successfully education students with autism. With the number of children identified with autism growing so rapidly, this is a timely piece. Leavitt focused on teaching English Language Learners and effective instructional strategies. Williamson and Hunter examined the quality of preparation for school administrators to effectively manage schools with a population of students with special needs. Gathering data from principals who are currently challenged in schools with high needs students was a perfect sample to draw from. This reliable sample gives us an honest representation because they had no reason to provide socially appropriate responses. Miller’s piece on Motherhood in Academia returns us to the theme of this issue. While on the surface motherhood appears to be a female issue, if we look more critically we find that it impacts all fields, all programs, and men and women alike. This qualitative study provides many of us with a new lens with which to view this issue.

Finally, we noticed that while we were compiling this issue that many of the articles focused on special education topics or population. This was never our plan but rather an artifact of the submissions we received. We have identified two possible reasons for this. First, we realized that while we were trying to learn more about doctoral programs in education we found the literature base to be thin except in Special Education. The federal investment in preparing doctoral students in Special Education may be driving the focus on program evaluation. Second, because both editors are special educators, it may be that we drew in manuscripts from colleagues in our field. We believe this speaks to the strength of NRMERA membership in drawing new and emerging scholars to our organization and our publication. With our diverse membership drawing from all fields of educational research, we hope this sparks an increase in new submissions to *The Researcher* and the yearly NRMERA conference.

We are indebted to the researchers who submitted their work for review. We are appreciative of the reviewers who generously donated their time, expertise and professionalism. Finally, we thank NRMERA for this invigorating opportunity.

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