A Quantitative Content Analysis of Mercer University MEd, EdS, and Doctoral Theses

Justus J. Randolph, Lura S. Gaiek, Torian A. White, Lisa A. Slappey

Andrea Chastain, and Rose Prejean Harris

Mercer University

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Author Note

Justus J. Randolph, Lura Gaiek, Torian White, Lisa Slappey, Andrea Chastain, and Rose Prejean Harris, Tift College of Education, Mercer University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Justus J. Randolph, Tift College of Education, Mercer University, 3001 Mercer University Dr., Atlanta, GA 30341. E-mail: randolph_jj@mercer.edu

Abstract

Quantitative content analysis of a body of research not only helps budding researchers understand the culture, language, and expectations of scholarship, it helps identify deficiencies and inform policy and practice. Because of these benefits, an analysis of a census of 980 Mercer University MEd, EdS, and doctoral theses was conducted. Each thesis was coded on 10 variables. The descriptive characteristics of the theses, the predictors of the length of thesis, and the predictors of the type of research method of the thesis were investigated. The main results were that (a) the vast majority of thesis authors were female, (b) the number of qualitative theses was on the rise, (c) there were slight variations in research method and length based on location of publication, (d) the page length of MEd theses had been slightly decreasing over time, (e) mathematics instruction was the most frequent subject descriptor of theses, and (f) the proportion of male authors increased over time.

A Quantitative Content Analysis of Mercer University MEd, EdS, and Doctoral Theses

Quantitative content analysis, "the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1) has been used with much success in fields such as communications, marketing, sociology, and psychology to monitor trends and identify patterns of covariation in message characteristics. One benefit of this monitoring within education research is that it can lead budding scholars to insights about the "tribe and territories" (Becher & Trowler, 2001) of their field and gain a deeper understanding of the culture, language, and expectations of scholarship.

Another benefit of a content analysis of the message characteristics and methods within a body of research is that it can help identify common research deficiencies and, thereby, serve as a starting point for improving practice and informing policy. One example of this is Leland Wilkonson and the APA Task Force on Statistical Inference's influential 1999 report--*Statistical Methods in Psychology Journals: Guidelines and Explanations.* In that report, social science researchers drew on content analyses of existing research to identify deficiencies in statistical analysis and reporting and create guidelines to remedy those deficiencies.

Because of the many benefits that can come about as a result of a content analysis of existing research, we conducted a content analysis of Mercer University MEd, EdS, and PhD theses[1]. The purposes of this quantitative content analysis are (a) to describe the characteristics and subjects of Mercer University MEd, EdS, and doctoral theses and (b) identify any trends or patterns of in these publications. With hope, the results of this research can help budding scholars better understand the culture, language, and expectations of scholarship and to identify and trends or deficiencies in the research to improve practice and inform policy. Although the

[1] In this study we refer to MEd, EdS, and PhD theses or dissertations as "theses" although they are appropriately called "projects" or "dissertations" at Mercer University, depending on the type of publication.

scope of this study is limited to Mercer University theses, it may be the first step in a statewide, or national, contemporary analysis of educational theses and dissertations.

Related Research

A systematic literature search of Google Scholar, EBSCO Host, and ProQuest using the keyword combinations *dissertation characteristics education* and *thesis characteristics education* was conducted in October 2010. The results from those searches were explored to determine which met the following criteria for inclusion and exclusion:

- The research was written in English,
- The research was a content analysis of education theses or dissertations,
- Analyses of theses outside of the field of education were not included.

Furthermore, the references of the articles that met the criteria for inclusion and exclusion were reviewed to find more research that met the criteria for inclusion.

The systematic search ultimately resulted in nine studies that met the criteria for inclusion and exclusion (Avery, 1970; Coorough, 1993; Coorough & Nelson, 1994, 1997; Melendez, 2002; Morris, 1993; Rone, 1998; Sharpe, 1993, and Wick & Dirkes (1973). Unfortunately, Morris and Sharpe's studies were irretrievable unpublished doctoral theses. A summary of each retrievable study is given below.

Melendez (2002) conducted a review of 192 dissertations from the field of higher education, about half of which were published in 1977 and the other half published in 1997. The key findings of the Melendez study were that (a) there was an increase in the numbers of female recipients of doctoral degrees, (b) an increase in dissertation length over time, and (c) an increase in the use of qualitative designs over time.

Rone (1998) investigated the characteristics of 115 higher education dissertations. In contrast to Melendez (2002), Rone found a decrease in dissertation length over time. He found about an equal number of female and male authors and, like Melendez, also found in increase in qualitative designs over time.

Coorough (1993) and Coorough and Nelson (1994, 1997) reviewed over 10,000 dissertation abstracts from 1950 to 1990 in terms of the designs and statistical procedures used. They found that survey research was overwhelmingly the most used design, one quarter of the reviewed dissertations reported no statistics, and one third of dissertations reported no statistically significant results. They also reported few changes over time. In terms of the differences between EdD and Phd theses, Phd theses were found to use more multivariate statistics and were more generalizable than EdD theses, which used more survey research and concentrated mostly on topics related to educational administration.

Wick and Dirkes (1973) analyzed the dissertation characteristics of a random sample of 199 included in dissertation abstracts. The coded each dissertation by type, independent variables used, research design, types of measures used, data analysis techniques, and sampling plans. The results that are relevant to this study are that 69% of those theses were experimental, and that only 7% of dissertations used non-numerical data gathering methods, such as interviews.

To examine the reliability of an instrument for the evaluation of doctoral dissertations in education, Avery (1970) reviewed 127 dissertations from Indiana University. The items on the instrument were grouped into the following categories: presentation of the subject, research material, adaptation, evaluation of facts and data, paragraphs, sentences, words, form of manuscript, and readability. Since this was a measurement study, the results of these dissertations in each of those categories is not given; reliability estimates are given instead.

In summary, the previous research converges on the finding that there is an increasing number of qualitative doctoral dissertations in education. The research diverges on whether the length of theses and the proportion of female authors is increasing, decreasing, or staying the same.

Research Questions

1. What are the descriptive characteristics of Mercer theses?
2. What are the predictors of length of theses?
3. What are the predictors of research methods of theses?
4. Is the proportion of female authors to male authors increasing, decreasing, or staying the same over time?

Method

In this section we describe the sample and sampling strategy used, the data collection process, and how interrater reliability was established. We end with a discussion of the data analysis methods used.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

All published Mercer University MEd or EdS theses or doctoral dissertations were included in this analysis. These studies were found by using the following terms in the subject search field of the Swilley Library Online Catalog: *Mercer University Atlanta Dissertations* and *Mercer University Dissertations.* The first search term yielded 855 theses or dissertations housed in the Atlanta campus. The second search term yielded 427 theses or dissertations from the Macon campus. A researcher then searched the note field of each bibliographic entry to determine which of these 1282 entries were MEd, EdS, or theses in the field of education. Of the

855 theses housed in the Atlanta campus, 768 (89.8%) were determined to be MEd, EdS, or doctoral theses in education. Of the 427 theses of theses housed on the Macon campus, 212 (49.7%) were determined to be MEd, EdS, or doctoral theses in education. In total, the bibliographic entries of the 980 MEd, EdS, or doctoral theses in education published at Mercer University were reviewed.

Data Collection

The bibliographic entry for each thesis was coded on 10 variables:

1. Type of publication (i.e., MEd, EdS, or doctoral dissertation),
2. Year of publication,
3. Number of authors,
4. Number of female authors (if able to be determined from names),
5. Number of pages,
6. Number of bibliographic pages,
7. The subject descriptors
8. Place of publication (i.e., Atlanta or Macon campus),
9. Research tradition, (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) if it can be determined from title of publication), and
10. Complete title of publication.

The coding book that was used can be found in Appendix A.

The six authors of this paper each independently rated between 100 and 200 of the 980 bibliographic entries. The first author of this paper selected a simple random sample of 100 of

the 980 entries and also coded those entries to establish interrater reliability estimates on the nonfactual variable (i.e., the research tradition variable).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the quantitative variables mentioned above. The general linear model was used to identify predictors of thesis length; logistic regression was used to identify the predictors of research method. All quantitative analyses were conducted with SPSS 11.0. Computer-based content analysis was done using *Concordance* software (Watt, 2009). Brennan and Prediger's (1981) free-marginal kappa was used as the measure of interrater reliability. It was calculated with Randolph's (2008) *Online Kappa Calculator* software.

Results

Interrater Reliability

Based on a simple random sample of 100 cases, the proportion of overall agreement between the six raters and the interrater reliability rater was 95% on the research tradition variable. The corresponding free-marginal kappa was 0.93, indicating high interrater reliability.

Descriptive Results

Year of publication. The range of years for this analysis ranged from 1985 to 2010. A histogram of theses by years is shown in Figure 1 below. Note that while there were educationally oriented theses published before 1985, they were not labeled as MEd theses, and, therefore, were not included in this study.

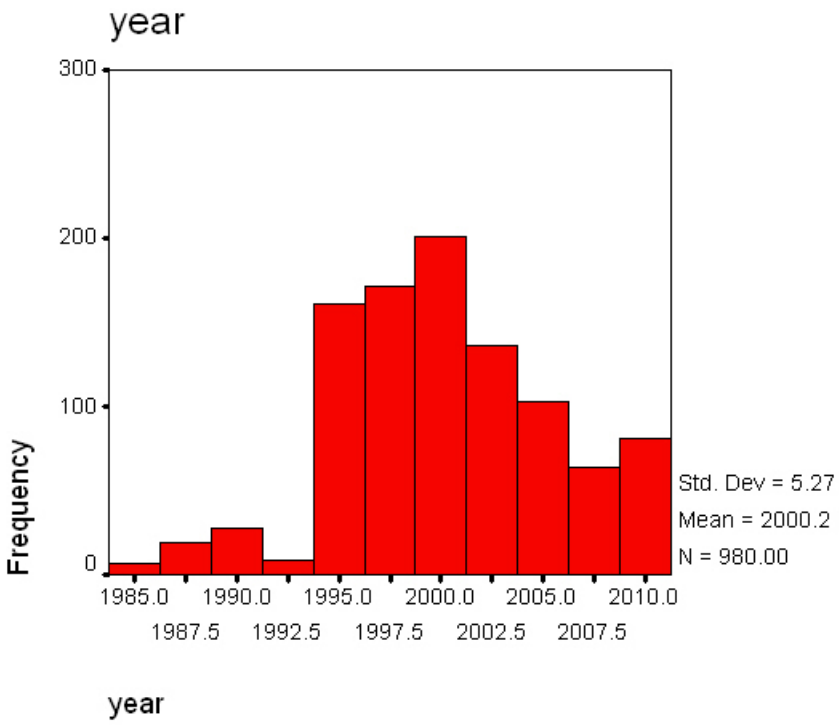

Figure 1. Histogram of theses published by year.

Number of authors. Of the 980 theses, 961 of those had a single author. The range of authors varied from 1-10.

Gender of authors. Of the 913 cases where the gender of the author was able to be determined by name, female authors accounted for 88.3% of the total.

Number of pages and bibliographic pages. For MEd theses, the minimum and maximum number of pages was 23 and 183, respectively. The mean was 64.15 with a standard deviation of 23.37. The minimum and maximum number of bibliographic pages was 1 and 38 respectively. The mean number of bibliographic pages was 5.32 with a standard deviation of 2.57.

For EdS theses, the minimum and maximum number of pages was 29 and 165, respectively. The mean was 67.18 with a standard deviation of 25.94. The minimum and

maximum number of bibliographic pages was 3 and 19 respectively. The mean number of bibliographic pages was 5.85 with a standard deviation of 2.25.

For doctoral theses, the minimum and maximum number of pages was 77 and 273, respectively. The mean was 142.40 with a standard deviation of 47.21. The minimum and maximum number of bibliographic pages was 5 and 24 respectively. The mean number of bibliographic pages was 10.53 with a standard deviation of 4.96.

Subject descriptors. Across all types of theses and years the ten most frequently occurring subject descriptors, in order of frequency, are listed below. The descriptors are followed by the number of occurrences in parentheses. A complete list of subject descriptors can be found online[2]

a. Mathematics -- Study and teaching (Elementary) (66)
b. Mathematics -- Study and teaching (Middle school (52)
c. Classroom management (49)
d. Group work in education (46)
e. Mathematics -- Study and teaching (Primary) (46)
f. Reading (Primary) (40)
g. Reading (Elementary) (30)
h. Language arts -- Correlation with content subjects (29)
i. Language arts -- (Elementary) (28)
j. Computer-assisted instruction (27)

Place of publication. Of the 980 articles in our study, 768 (78.4%) were published on the Atlanta campus.

[2] http://justusrandolph.net/gera_2010/subject_descriptor_frequencies.pdf

Research tradition. Of the 930 theses where the method could be determined by the title, the vast majority (90.3%) were quantitative; the others were qualitative. None of the theses title clearly indicated the use of mixed methods. About 5% of theses had titles that were not descriptive enough to determine the type of research method used.

Titles of publications. Computer-based content analysis was used to analyze the titles of publications. The top ten most frequently used words in title are listed below. An interactive, concordance analysis of all titles can be found online[3].

1. Effect/effects
2. Students
3. Grade
4. Achievement
5. School
6. Mathematics/math
7. Writing
8. Teaching
9. Instruction
10. Classroom

Predictors of Page Numbers

Table 1 below shows a model predicting the number of pages in a Mercer thesis. Location of publication (i.e. Macon or Atlanta), type of publication (i.e., MEd, EdS, or doctoral thesis), year of publication, research method (i.e., quantitative or qualitative), type of publication

[3] http://justusrandolph.net/gera_2010/textfromclipboard-file3.txt/textfromclipboard-file3.txt.WebConcordance/framconc.htm

by research method interaction, and a type of publication by location interaction were statistically significant predictors of the numbers of pages.

Table 1. *Predictors of number of pages*

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: pages

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	324925.086[a]	8	40615.636	77.308	.000
Intercept	13677.932	1	13677.932	26.035	.000
LOCATION	53976.409	1	53976.409	102.740	.000
TYPE	177685.478	2	88842.739	169.105	.000
YEAR	12336.944	1	12336.944	23.482	.000
METHOD	3794.105	1	3794.105	7.222	.007
TYPE * METHOD	7907.669	2	3953.835	7.526	.001
LOCATION * TYPE	2320.326	1	2320.326	4.417	.036
Error	480714.533	915	525.371		
Total	5066256.000	924			
Corrected Total	805639.619	923			

a. R Squared = .403 (Adjusted R Squared = .398)

Tables 2 through 6 show the estimated marginal means for location, thesis type, method, the type of thesis by method interaction, and the type of the thesis by location interaction. In short, (a) theses published in Atlanta tend to be slightly longer (this included Atlanta doctoral theses); (b) MEd, EdS, and doctoral theses have an increasingly greater number of pages, respectively, (although the number of MEd and EdS pages is almost identical); (c) on average, qualitative thesis are longer than quantitative theses; (d) the only exception is that EdS theses have longer quantitative theses than qualitative theses, and (e) Atlanta MEd and EdS theses tended to be than Macon MEd and EdS theses (note: Macon does not publish doctoral theses in education at the current time). Regression analyses between year and length of publication were calculated for

each thesis type. The only statistically significant regression parameter was for MEd theses (b = -0.71, p = 0.00); however, the decrease in practical terms was negligible. For every year after 1985, an MEd has decreased by 7/10ths of a page; see Figure 2.

Table 2. *Estimated marginal means by location of publication*

1. Location

Dependent Variable: pages

Location	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Atlanta	98.700[a]	1.817	95.133	102.267
Macon	47.250[a,b]	2.265	42.805	51.695

a. Evaluated at covariates appeared in the model: year = 2000.13.

b. Based on modified population marginal mean.

Table 3. *Estimated marginal means by thesis type*

2. type of thesis

Dependent Variable: pages

type of thesis	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
MEd	58.495[a]	1.690	55.177	61.812
EdS	61.175[a]	2.889	55.505	66.846
PhD	151.260[a,b]	3.948	143.512	159.008

a. Evaluated at covariates appeared in the model: year = 2000.13.

b. Based on modified population marginal mean.

Table 4. *Estimated marginal means by research method*

3. method

Dependent Variable: pages

method	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Quantitative	75.742[a,b]	1.484	72.829	78.655
Qualitative	80.498[a,b]	2.696	75.206	85.789

a. Evaluated at covariates appeared in the model: year = 2000.13.

b. Based on modified population marginal mean.

Table 5. *Estimated marginal means by method and type of thesis*

4. method * type of thesis

Dependent Variable: pages

method	type of thesis	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Quantitative	MEd	57.551[a]	1.172	55.252	59.850
	EdS	63.611[a]	2.433	58.835	68.387
	PhD	136.388[a,b]	5.324	125.938	146.837
Qualitative	MEd	59.438[a,b]	3.262	53.036	65.840
	EdS	58.740[a,b]	5.204	48.527	68.952
	PhD	166.132[a,b]	5.458	155.422	176.843

a. Evaluated at covariates appeared in the model: year = 2000.13.

b. Based on modified population marginal mean.

Table 6. *Estimated marginal means by location and type of thesis*

5. Location * type of thesis

Dependent Variable: pages

Location	type of thesis	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Atlanta	MEd	68.467[a]	1.911	64.716	72.217
	EdS	76.373[a]	3.252	69.992	82.755
	PhD	151.260[a]	3.948	143.512	159.008
Macon	MEd	48.523[a]	2.156	44.291	52.754
	EdS	45.977[a]	3.986	38.155	53.800
	PhD	.[a,b]	.	.	.

a. Evaluated at covariates appeared in the model: year = 2000.13.

b. This level combination of factors is not observed, thus the corresponding population marginal mean is not estimable.

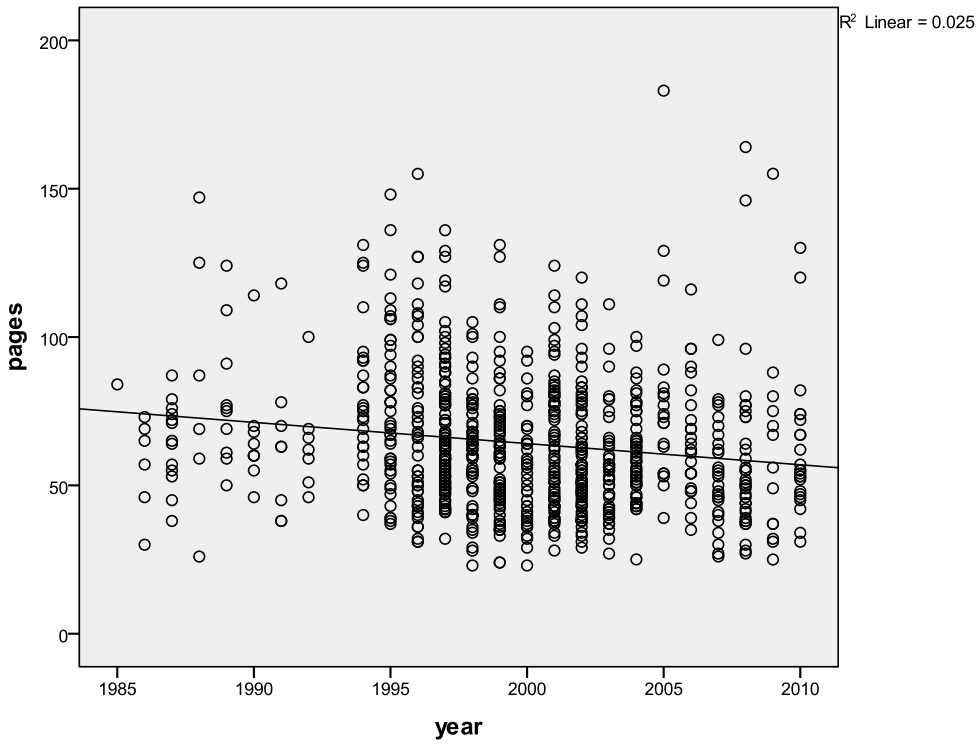

Figure 2. Scatterplot of pages of MEd theses by year. Line of best fit is included.

Predictors of the Research Method

The results of a binomial logistic regression analysis giving the predictors of a qualitative thesis are given in Table 7. The results show that qualitative theses are more likely on the Macon campus, are more likely in PhD theses than MEd or EdS theses, and show an increase over time.

Table 7. *Logistic regression predictors of a qualitative research thesis*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1[a]	Atlanta	-1.623	.262	38.372	1	.000	.197
	PhD			43.761	2	.000	
	MEd	-2.522	.431	34.302	1	.000	.080
	EdS	-1.588	.536	8.763	1	.003	.204
	YEAR	.067	.028	5.769	1	.016	1.070
	Constant	-133.584	56.258	5.638	1	.018	.000

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: LOCATION, TYPE, YEAR.

To illustrate these ideas further, crosstabulations are shown in Tables 8 through 10. As shown in Table 8, Atlanta has 6.9% qualitative theses compare to Macon's 21.0%. As shown in Table 9, MEd, EdS, and PhD have in increasing proportion of qualitative theses. Finally, Table 10 shows that there has been a growth in qualitative theses over time.

Table 8. *Crosstabulation of location and research method*

			method		
			Quantitative	Qualitative	Total
Location	Atlanta	Count	693	51	744
		% within Location	93.1%	6.9%	100.0%
		% within method	82.5%	56.7%	80.0%
		% of Total	74.5%	5.5%	80.0%
	Macon	Count	147	39	186
		% within Location	79.0%	21.0%	100.0%
		% within method	17.5%	43.3%	20.0%
		% of Total	15.8%	4.2%	20.0%
Total		Count	840	90	930
		% within Location	90.3%	9.7%	100.0%
		% within method	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	90.3%	9.7%	100.0%

Table 9. *Crosstabulation of type of thesis and research method*

type of thesis * method Crosstabulation

			method		
			Quantitative	Qualitative	Total
type of thesis	MEd	Count	726	51	777
		% within type of thesis	93.4%	6.6%	100.0%
		% within method	86.5%	56.7%	83.6%
		% of Total	78.1%	5.5%	83.6%
	EdS	Count	93	20	113
		% within type of thesis	82.3%	17.7%	100.0%
		% within method	11.1%	22.2%	12.2%
		% of Total	10.0%	2.2%	12.2%
	PhD	Count	20	19	39
		% within type of thesis	51.3%	48.7%	100.0%
		% within method	2.4%	21.1%	4.2%
		% of Total	2.2%	2.0%	4.2%
Total		Count	839	90	929
		% within type of thesis	90.3%	9.7%	100.0%
		% within method	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	90.3%	9.7%	100.0%

Table 10. *Crosstabulation of year and research method*

			method		
			Quantitative	Qualitative	Total
years	85-89	Count	34		34
		% within yearfive	100.0%		100.0%
		% within method	4.0%		3.7%
		% of Total	3.7%		3.7%
	90--94	Count	59	3	62
		% within yearfive	95.2%	4.8%	100.0%
		% within method	7.0%	3.3%	6.7%
		% of Total	6.3%	.3%	6.7%
	95-99	Count	318	33	351
		% within yearfive	90.6%	9.4%	100.0%
		% within method	37.9%	36.7%	37.7%
		% of Total	34.2%	3.5%	37.7%
	00-04	Count	281	19	300
		% within yearfive	93.7%	6.3%	100.0%
		% within method	33.5%	21.1%	32.3%
		% of Total	30.2%	2.0%	32.3%
	05-10	Count	148	35	183
		% within yearfive	80.9%	19.1%	100.0%
		% within method	17.6%	38.9%	19.7%
		% of Total	15.9%	3.8%	19.7%
Total		Count	840	90	930
		% within yearfive	90.3%	9.7%	100.0%
		% within method	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	90.3%	9.7%	100.0%

Gender Authorship Trends

Table 11 below indicates that the number of male authors has been increasing over time. A linear-by-linear association test of the data in Table 11 was statistically significant, M^2 (1, N = 911) = 13.01, $p < 0.000$.

Table 11. *Proportion of female/male authors over time*

Five year period * GENDER Crosstabulation

			GENDER		
			Male	Female	Total
Five year period	85-89	Count	0	34	34
		% within Five year period	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within GENDER	.0%	4.2%	3.7%
		% of Total	.0%	3.7%	3.7%
	90-94	Count	3	56	59
		% within Five year period	5.1%	94.9%	100.0%
		% within GENDER	2.8%	7.0%	6.5%
		% of Total	.3%	6.1%	6.5%
	95-99	Count	36	298	334
		% within Five year period	10.8%	89.2%	100.0%
		% within GENDER	34.0%	37.0%	36.7%
		% of Total	4.0%	32.7%	36.7%
	00-04	Count	33	266	299
		% within Five year period	11.0%	89.0%	100.0%
		% within GENDER	31.1%	33.0%	32.8%
		% of Total	3.6%	29.2%	32.8%
	05-10	Count	34	151	185
		% within Five year period	18.4%	81.6%	100.0%
		% within GENDER	32.1%	18.8%	20.3%
		% of Total	3.7%	16.6%	20.3%
Total		Count	106	805	911
		% within Five year period	11.6%	88.4%	100.0%
		% within GENDER	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	11.6%	88.4%	100.0%

Summary

The main results of this study were that,

(a) the vast majority of authors are female,

(b) the proportion of qualitative theses is on the rise,

(c) there are slight variations in research method and length based on location of publication,

(d) the page length of MEd theses have been slightly decreasing over time,

(e) mathematics instruction is the most frequent subject descriptor of theses, and

(f) the proportion of male authors is increasing over time.

In terms of the relationship between our study and previous studies, first, our finding that the number of qualitative thesis is on the rise convergences with the research done by Melendez (2002) and Rone (1998). Second, at least compared to Rone's sample of higher education dissertations, which had about 50% female authors, our census indicated that over 88% of Mercer education thesis authors are female. The proportion of male authors of education theses had increased since 1985.

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Appendix A: Coding Book

Mercer Thesis Analysis Coding Book

Variable 1. Record number.

Write in the record number. This is the first line of the bibliographic entry

V2. Location of publication.

This can be founds from the "locations" line of the bibliographic entry.

1. Atlanta
2. Macon

Variable 3 . Name of coder

Input the number corresponding with the correct name.

1. Justus
2. Lura
3. Lisa
4. Andrea
5. Torian
6. Rose

V4. Number of authors

This can be found from the "author" line of the bibliographic entry. Input the number of authors.

V5. Number of female authors

Based on your best guess from the first name of the author, decide how many authors are male or female. The number of female authors cannot be greater than the number of variables in V4. If you are unsure about the gender of one or more authors input "-9" to indicate "unable to determine."

V6. Title of thesis

Copy and paste the entire title of the thesis in the database. Don't include the author's name if that is included in the title. For example, if the title in the bibliographic entry is "Ability versus achievement : the relationship between the Cognitive abilities test and Stanford achievement test / by Tammy D. Strickland," only copy and paste "Ability versus achievement : the relationship between the Cognitive abilities test and Stanford achievement test". This can be found in the "Title" line of the bibliographic entry.

V7. Year of publication.

Type in the four digit year of publication. This can be found in the "PUB INFO" line of the bibliographic entry.

V8. Number of pages.

Type in the number of pages (a.k.a. leaves). This can be found from the "DESCRIPT" line of the bibliographic entry.

V9. Type of thesis

This can be found from the "NOTE" line of the bibliographic entry.

1. MEd
2. EdS
3. PhD

V10. Number of reference pages.

This can be found from the "NOTE" field. For example, if the note field indicates, "Includes bibliographical references (leaves 41-47)," then you would type in 7 in the datasheet because the reference list is seven pages long.

V11. Subject 1

Copy and paste the first subject descriptor from the "SUBJECT" field other than "Mercer University – Dissertations." Do not copy and paste the period. Be sure to copy and paste because important that all descriptors be exact. If there is more than one subject, record them in variables v12 and v13. If there are ever more than three descriptors just ignore the rest.

V12. Subject 2

See V11 for instructions

V13. Subject 3

See v11 for instructions

V14. Methods

Look again at the title. Determine from the title whether the study is quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. For example, if the title has the word "Experiment" or "the effects of X on Y" or "the relationship between," then it is probably a quantitative study. If the title has the name of a qualitative tradition or examines "perceptions" it is probably a qualitative study. If the title has the words "mixed methods," it's probably a mixed methods study. If you can't determine from the title choose "unable to determine"

1. Quantitative
2. Qualitative
3. Mixed methods
4. Unable to determine

V15. Note. Use this space in case you want to make a note about a certain entry. This variable is optional.