

**THE SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY DOCTORATE - PURSUE, NOT  
PURSUE,  
AND NOT COMPLETE: THE REASONS WHY**

Charles L. Madison, Ph.D.  
Washington State University at Spokane

Barbara Guy, M.S. and Melissa Koch, M. S.  
Eastern Washington University

It is my pleasure to be a part of this effort to address the critical issue of a shortage of doctoral level academicians and researchers in speech-language pathology and audiology. There is little need to provide detailed documentation to substantiate the problem. We have a personnel crisis on our hands and we all know it. You have noted the positions available published in the ASHA Leader, listed at the ASHA Convention last November, and posted on the Council of Academic Programs in Communication Disorders and Sciences (CAPCSD) web site. You have experienced the near daily arrival of printed job notices to be posted or circulated to your faculty. Most of you are aware of the data from the last Survey of Undergraduate and Graduate Programs published by the CAPCSD documenting the reduced numbers of completed doctorates over the last 15 years. Many of you have experienced the difficulty of filling vacancies at our own institutions, low numbers in the applicant pools, candidates who may not be the best fit with the programs needs or the institutions demands, or perhaps no applicants at all. You are well aware of the problem.

Today, at the Council, we are addressing the problem by attempting, as we should, to better understand it and by searching for creative solutions to the recruitment and retention of qualified doctoral students. The data I share with you today will, I hope, help us understand the issues that influence the decision of people with a Master's degree in speech-language pathology to pursue, not pursue, or not complete the doctorate. The data are part of the information generated by survey work completed under my direction.

Three hundred eighty-four questionnaires were distributed via mail to speech-language pathologists holding a Master's degree, 64 to each of 6 geographical regions as noted by ASHA. Potential respondents were selected from the ASHA on-line membership directory. Three hundred five questionnaires were returned, and all were usable. This represents a 79% response rate.

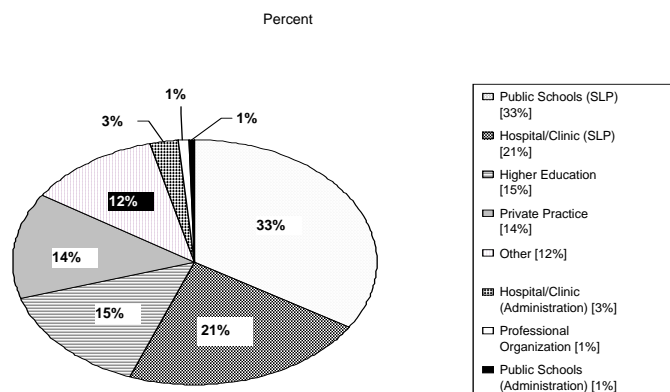
The questionnaire was organized such that respondents were asked whether they had ever considered pursuing a doctoral degree, whether they had applied to a doctoral program, whether they were accepted, and whether they had actually enrolled. If they had not considered, not applied, or not enrolled, they were asked to select and rank order from a list of possible reasons those that best represented why they had not done so. Those respondents who had enrolled in a doctoral program in speech-language pathology were asked to select and rank order from a list of possible reasons why they choose to pursue the degree. Finally, those who had enrolled in, but not completed the program, were asked to select and rank order from a list of possible reasons why they choose not to or were unable to complete the degree requirements.

Not unexpectedly, 94 % (288) of the respondents were female, while 6% (17) were male. As you can see from Table 1, there was an even balance in the number of respondents by geographical region.

<b>Table 1.</b> The number and percentage of responses by geographical region.			
Region	Area	Number of Responses	Percent *
1	Western	56	18
2	Southwestern	49	16
3	Central	52	17
4	Northeastern	48	16
5	Southern	50	16
6	Mid-Atlantic	50	16

\* = % of total responses rounded to nearest %

Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents by work setting. Again, as expected, the largest number of respondents were from the public schools, but hospital/clinic, higher education, and private practice were well represented also.



**Figure. 1**

Table 2 shows that 42% (128 of 305) of those who responded to this survey had at one time or another seriously considered getting a doctorate and that 33% of those respondents (42 of 128) actually applied to a program. Further, of those who applied, 98% (40 of 42) were accepted and of those accepted, 93% (37 of 40) enrolled.

**Table 2.** The number and percentage of respondents reporting seriously and not seriously considering getting a doctoral degree, respondents who applied and who did not apply, who were accepted, and who enrolled in doctoral programs

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Not seriously considered	177	58
Seriously considered	128	42
Applied	(42)	(33) <sup>1</sup>
Did not apply	(86)	(67) <sup>1</sup>
Accepted	(40)	(98) <sup>2</sup>
Enrolled	(37)	(93) <sup>3</sup>

1 = based on 128 who seriously considered obtaining a doctoral degree

2 = based on the 42 who applied to a doctoral program

3 = based on the 40 who were accepted to a doctoral program

The number and percent of those who seriously considered pursuing a doctorate and those who actually enrolled are presented by work setting in Table 3 (on following page). These figures are based on the entire respondent pool (n=305). As you can see, those who had seriously considered obtaining a doctorate were, on a percentage basis, primarily from hospital/clinic, public schools, and higher education settings. It is clear, however, that those already familiar with higher education were more likely to actually enroll in a doctoral program.

The reasons given by respondents for not seriously considering obtaining a doctorate, not applying if they were interested, or for not enrolling if they were accepted are summarized in Table 4 (see following pages). Keep in mind, that respondents were asked to indicate those reasons that applied to them and to rank those that they chose. The lower the mean reported in Table 4, the more important that reason was for their deciding not to pursue a doctoral degree. A variety of personal reasons (i.e., Other), family obligations, lack of research interest, and satisfaction with current position were among the highest ranked reasons why the doctorate was not pursued. The criteria for being accepted to a doctoral program, the influence of significant others, interest in teaching, and available financial support were among the lowest ranked factors.

**Table 3.** The number and percentage of respondents that seriously considered getting a doctoral degree and number and percentage of those that enrolled, by work setting.

Employment Setting	Seriously Considered Number	Seriously Considered Percentage*	Enrolled Number	Enrolled Percentage*
Public Schools (SLP)	34	11	2	1.0
Public Schools (Administrator)	1	0	0	0.0
Hospital/Clinic (SLP)	36	12	9	3.0

Hospital/Clinic (Administrator)	5	2	0	0.0
Higher Education	32	10	20	7.0
Private Practice	21	7	5	2.0
Professional Organization	0	0	0	0.0
Other	14	5	4	1.0

\* percentage of total responses (305)

<b>Table 4.</b> Reasons for not pursuing a doctoral degree ranked according to mean (lower mean indicative of increased importance).			
Reason	Number of responses	Mean	SD*
Other	63	2.38	1.75
Family obligations	132	2.80	2.52
Lack of research interest	135	3.00	2.88
Satisfaction with current position	133	3.17	2.19
Satisfaction with current degree	135	3.40	2.29
Length of program	105	3.60	2.10
Cost of program	92	3.84	2.30
Long hours	71	4.15	2.35
Distance/ location of program	62	4.19	3.73
Lack of interest in working higher education	86	4.37	3.30
Satisfaction with current salary	78	4.50	3.31

Lack of financial support	61	4.57	3.54
Lack of interest in teaching	72	4.63	3.63
Spousal/significant other influence	57	5.49	4.36
Criteria of getting accepted	33	6.52	3.63

\*SD = Standard Deviation

Table 5 (following page) summarizes the reasons given by those respondents who actually enrolled in a doctoral program for doing so. Highest ranked among those reasons were desire for knowledge, research interest, and interest in teaching, while prestige, dissatisfaction with current degree, and the influence of others were lowest ranked as reasons for pursuing a doctorate.

<b>Table 5.</b> Reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree ranked according to mean (lower mean indicative of increased importance).			
Reason	Number of responses	Mean	SD*
Desire for knowledge	30	2.20	1.27
Research interest	27	2.80	1.70
Other	5	3.00	1.87
Interest in teaching	25	3.28	2.03
Wanted better life for family/children	7	3.57	2.67
Working with a particular scholar	10	3.60	2.72
Spousal/significant other influence	3	3.67	4.04
Dissatisfaction with current position	7	3.71	2.92
Interest in higher education	19	3.84	2.06
Making contribution to the discipline	26	4.00	1.62

Future salary possibilities	9	4.44	2.92
Availability of financial support	13	5.30	2.25
Dissatisfaction with current degree	5	6.20	2.77
Prestige and title	10	6.79	2.63

\*SD = Standard Deviation

Table 6 (following page) presents the ranking of reasons given by respondents for not completing the doctorate after having enrolled. Here, family considerations, loss of advisor, length of program, and disillusion with research were highly ranked, while loss of financial support, personal treatment in program, and completion of the dissertation were ranked low as reasons for not completing the program.

<b>Table 6.</b> Reasons for not continuing a doctoral degree ranked according to mean (lower mean indicative of increased importance).			
Reason	Number of responses	Mean	SD*
Family considerations	7	1.71	0.95
Loss of advisor	3	2.00	0.00
Length of program	4	2.00	1.41
Disillusioned with research	4	2.50	1.00
Loss of interest	4	2.75	0.50
Other	9	2.78	1.71
Cost of program	4	3.00	1.00
Current job satisfaction	4	3.00	2.45
Did not complete the dissertation	3	3.00	2.00
Personal treatment in the programs	7	3.14	2.34
Loss of financial support	3	3.67	1.55

\*SD = Standard Deviation

Finally, in Table 7 (following page) I have provided some data from a companion survey that asked faculty at doctoral degree granting programs to indicate in a similar fashion why they thought doctoral students failed to complete their program. The faculty ranked failure to complete the dissertation, difficulty of the program, and family considerations, as those they thought most important. Faculty ranked current job satisfaction, loss of financial support, loss of advisor, and personal treatment as the least important reasons why people did not complete their doctoral programs.

<b>Table 7.</b> Reasons given by doctoral faculty for candidates not completing their doctoral program ranked according to mean (lower mean indicative of increased importance).			
Reason	Number of responses	Mean	SD*
Other	9	2.00	1.00
Did not complete the dissertation	57	2.22	1.61
Difficulty of program	48	2.72	2.17
Family considerations	37	3.49	2.26
Loss of interest	49	3.57	2.22
Length of program	46	3.61	1.96
Disillusioned with research	41	3.79	2.34
Cost of program	28	4.54	2.41
Personal treatment in the programs	26	4.87	2.99
Loss of advisor	23	5.57	2.64
Loss of financial support	23	5.67	3.14
Current job satisfaction	21	5.83	3.56

\*SD = Standard Deviation

## Summary and Conclusions

The present research sought to better our understanding of why people with a Master's degree pursue, do not pursue, or do not complete a doctoral program. The results showed that 42% of the respondents had seriously considered pursuing a doctorate, though only 1/3 of those actually applied for admission. Not surprisingly, personal and family reasons, and lack interest in research and teaching were important reasons for not pursuing a doctorate. The lack of interest in doing research loomed as a significant reason for not pursuing the degree, but lack of interest in teaching did not. Being accepted into a doctoral program was not highly ranked as a factor for those choosing not to pursue a doctoral degree. The data showing that 98% of those who indicated that they applied were accepted into a program also supported this. The reasons people gave for pursuing a doctoral degree were encouraging. The desire for greater knowledge and an interest in research were the highest ranked reasons, and this is as it should be.

Because CAPCSD surveys have shown that the number of people completing the doctorate is a particular issue, the data that related to why people did not complete their program were of special interest. Again, family considerations was ranked as an important factor as to why people did not complete their doctoral program, and such factors may be beyond the scope of faculty's ability to help. By contrast, loss of advisor, length of program, and disillusionment with research were also ranked high, and these are areas where a more proactive and sensitive faculty could make a difference. The present data suggest that lack of financial support, personal treatment, and completion of the dissertation were are not major factors preventing doctoral candidates from completing their degree.

The present data provide some hints about where our recruiting efforts may be more productive. Those with Master's degrees who are already associated with higher education, probably as clinical supervisors or as teaching

MAAs, were, on a percentage basis, more likely to have enrolled in a doctoral program. Also, those from hospitals and clinics were more likely than those employed in the public schools to enroll in a doctoral program. In this study, a higher percentage of males (41%) than females (10%) enrolled in doctoral programs. Since the average age of those entering a Ph.D. program was 32 years, perhaps focusing recruiting efforts around that age, say 28 to 36 years may be helpful.

### **Limitations**

Though the response rate was very good (79%) and the number of respondents over 300, there are some limitations to the study. First, the selection of potential respondents was not random. These were ASHA members, which makes them different from the nationwide population of people with a Master's degree. Second, in order to get a better cross-section of employment settings, selected cities were chosen for the study. The geographical representation of the respondents was balanced nationally, but rural and remote areas were probably under represented, thus diminishing geographical accessibility of a doctoral program as a reason for not pursuing a doctorate. In the final analysis the percent of respondents indicating that they had seriously considered pursuing a doctorate represents the best possible scenario as does the percent of those who applied to a doctoral program.