



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DOCTORAL CANDIDATES

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As universities began to close their campuses due to COVID-19, the focus was primarily on transiting to online courses. University emails, newspaper articles and academic blogs all talked about the difficulty of quickly transitioning to online courses to ensure the students were successful. Gradually other aspects of the university were focused on other areas, such as the use of telehealth for clinics that offered students clinical experiences. It was important to continue to provide clinical opportunities for students as well as continue to serve current patients. One aspect that seemed to be overlooked was the impact COVID-19 would have on the research of doctoral students.

As a doctoral candidate, the last few semesters prior to graduation typically focus on completing a dissertation. Many areas of research in speech-language pathology require the recruitment of human subjects and face-to-face interactions with the participants. As COVID-19 forced states into lockdown, the ability to recruit and run subjects for research was halted. Research that relied on services offered at hospitals, such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), was no longer viable for the foreseeable future. At first, there seemed to be less concern on the impact COVID-19 would have on completing dissertation research. The hope was that soon researchers would be allowed back in the hospitals and research labs to continue their research. As the months progressed, the likelihood of that goal diminished. Target subject numbers that once seemed feasible to obtain prior to graduation were no longer within reach. Doctoral candidates and their committee members were now faced with the decision to extend the stu-

dents program or to modify their dissertation projects to allow them to graduate on time.

I quickly found myself in the same position. As COVID-19 closed the campus of my university, I was not immediately concerned with the impact it would have on my dissertation research. I was confident that within a few months I would be able to continue to run MRI scans and reach my targeted recruitment numbers. I was naïve to think that my research progress would not be impacted by COVID-19. Within a few months, I realized my research timeline was no longer going to be achievable. I began to discuss my options with my mentor. Would I have to extend my program if I can't reach my targeted subject numbers? When will I even be able to resume my research? My mentor, program director, and dissertation committee members were all incredibly supportive and helped me navigate these unusual circumstances. A decision was made to revise my research aims and reduce my recruitment numbers. These decisions will impact the power of study and may have implications on future publications but will allow me to graduate on my original expected graduation date. I feel confident with this decision given the support I have from my mentors in the department. Hopefully research in all fields of study will resume in the near future. However, the long-term implications of COVID-19 on research for doctoral students is unknown.

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