

A COMPARISON OF DISSERTATION CHARACTERISTICS

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ABSTRACT

In 1960, Bernard Berelson [1] wrote a book, *Graduate Education in the United States*, reporting the results of a study using a series of questionnaires completed by faculty and others at institutions of higher learning. One of the more intriguing aspects of the book is Berelson's assertion that doctoral dissertations and their literature reviews could be made shorter. This paper reports preliminary results of studies using actual dissertations in various disciplines and across time.

INTRODUCTION

Using online dissertation databases, for example, *Dissertations and Theses Full Text*, it is possible to determine objectively

- the length of a dissertation (measured in pages),
- the quantity of references in a dissertation,
- the grade level [4] and readability [3] of all or any part of a dissertation,
- the name of the university granting the doctoral degree,
- the Carnegie classification [2] of the university granting the doctoral degree, and
- collective differences in any of the above
 - over time and
 - between disciplines.

This paper suggests certain techniques and measures which might be useful in the work of evaluating

- a given dissertation or set of dissertations or
- a given degree program or set of degree programs.

METHODOLOGY

Using the filters provided by *Dissertations and Theses Full Text*, thirty records at a time (reflecting the limitation of the software) were extracted, each record containing information on one completed dissertation. Groups of 30 records included the following:

- Business administration, Capella University, 2010,
- Business administration, other than Capella University, 2010,
- Management, all universities, 2000,
- Management, all universities, 1990,
- Management, all universities, 1980,
- Education, Capella University, 2010,
- Education, other than Capella University, 2010.

Page counts were available for each record. Reference counts were available only for most of the records beginning after 2000.

Tests were conducted to determine whether statistically significant differences exist between, inter alia:

- page counts for Capella University and other universities in 2010,
- reference counts for Capella University and other universities in 2010, and
- page counts for all universities, 1980 v. 1990 v. 2000.

RESULTS

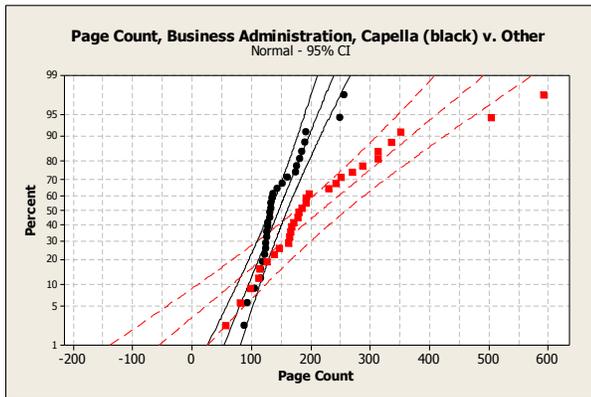


FIGURE 1: Page Count, Business Administration, 2010, Capella (black) v. Other (red)

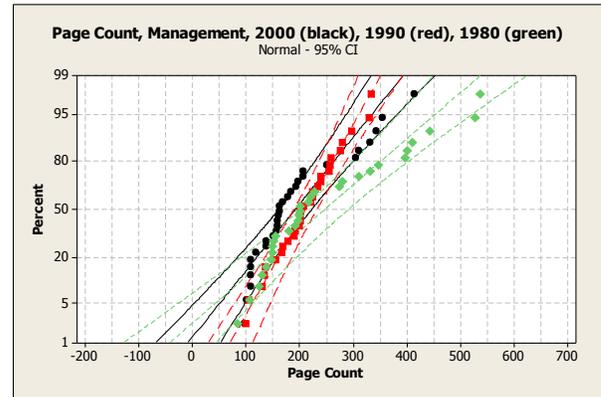


FIGURE 2: Page Count, Management, 2000 (black), 1990 (red), 1980 (green)

Figure 1 shows graphically that the data for Business Administration in the year 2010 are not normally distributed. Black indicates Capella University data points, red indicates the data points from other universities. In a similar manner, for all universities, Figure 2 shows data points for Management: black for the year 2000, red for 1990, and green for 1980. Only the data points for 1990 are normally distributed. The Mann-Whitney U test found a significant difference in page counts for the 2010 data; the same test found no significant difference at the .05 level for the page counts in Figure 2.

The same analysis was performed for reference items in Business Administration dissertations: No significant difference was found at the .05 level between dissertations at Capella University and dissertations at other universities. Page counts for education dissertations were significantly different between Capella University and other universities. No significant difference was found for reference items. Space considerations preclude mention of other analyses performed on the data.

REFERENCES

- [1] Berelson, B. *Graduate Education in the United States*. [n.p.] McGraw Hill, 1960.
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