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The Dissertation Can No Longer Be Defended

By Stacey Patton

The dissertation is broken, many scholars agree. So now what?

Rethinking the academic centerpiece of a graduate education is an obvious place to start if, as many people believe, Ph.D. programs are in a state of crisis. Universities face urgent calls to reduce the time it takes to complete degrees, reduce attrition, and do more to prepare doctoral candidates for nonacademic careers, as students face rising debt and increased competition for a shrinking number of tenure-track jobs.

As a result, many faculty and administrators wonder if now may finally be the time for graduate programs to begin to modernize on a large scale and move beyond the traditional, book-length dissertation.

That scholarly opus, some say, lingers on as a stubborn relic that has limited value to many scholars' careers and, ultimately, might just be a big waste of time.

"It takes too long. It's too isolating," says William Pannapacker, an associate professor of English at Hope College and a critic of graduate education who writes frequently for The Chronicle. Producing a dissertation is particularly poor preparation, he adds, for graduates whose first jobs are outside of academe—now roughly half of new Ph.D.'s with postgraduation employment commitments. "It's a hazing ritual passed down from another era, retained because the Ph.D.'s before us had to do it."

Scholars cite numerous reasons for why the dissertation is outdated and should no longer be a one-size-fits-all model for Ph.D. students.

Completing a dissertation can take four to seven years because students are typically required by their advisers to pore over minutiae and learn the ins and outs of preceding scholarly debates before turning to the specific topic of their own work. Dissertations are often so specialized and burdened with jargon that they are incomprehensible to scholars from other disciplines, much less applicable to the broader public.
The majority of dissertations, produced in paper and ink, ignore the interactive possibilities of a new-media culture. And book-length monographs don't always reflect students' career goals or let them demonstrate skills transferable beyond the borders of academe.

**Nontraditional Approaches**

Some universities have started to make changes. Graduate programs in history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology the City University of New York, Michigan State University, and the University of Virginia, among other campuses, have put significant amounts of money into digital-humanities centers and new-media and collaborative research programs that can support students who want to work on nontraditional dissertations. They hold digital boot camps and have hired faculty with the expertise to train graduate students who want to do digital work.

Others allow students to write three or four publishable articles instead of one book-length text. Or they encourage students to shape their dissertations for public consumption. History students at Texas State University and Washington State University, for example, work on projects that can be useful to museums, historical societies, and preservation agencies.

Some graduate programs allow students to work collaboratively. Doctoral students in history at Emory University and Stanford University, among others, work together on projects with help from faculty, lab assistants, computer technicians, and geographers, who use digital techniques like infrared scans and geolocation mapping to build interactive maps that, for example, tell the history of cities and important events in visually creative ways.

These programs seek not only to move students beyond the single-author monograph but also to improve upon the isolating dissertation experience and to replace the hierarchical committee structure with the project-management style of collaboration that is required by many employers.

"The economic realities of academic publishing, coupled with exciting interpretive and methodological possibilities inherent in new media and digital humanities, mean that the day of the dissertation as a narrowly focused proto-book are nearly over," Bethany Nowviskie, director of digital research and scholarship at the University of Virginia Library, said in an e-mail.

While such efforts to modernize and digitize the dissertation are good, they do not go far enough to revamp doctoral education, many scholars say. To reduce time to degree and make other key
improvements, they argue, broader changes in need to be considered.

"You can't separate the dissertation from its context," says William Kelly, president of CUNY's Graduate Center. "We need to look at the degree as a whole and be student-centered."

Faculty and administrators, he says, should find ways to help students move more efficiently through graduate school from Day 1. Changes in the dissertation process are key, including focusing course requirements and exams more squarely on preparing students to write those dissertations, as long as that task remains necessary.

To help more students complete their Ph.D. programs, and to do so more quickly, CUNY has unveiled a five-year fellowship program that will aid 200 new doctoral students. Participants will have their teaching obligations reduced from two courses to one course per semester during their second, third, and fourth years. Their annual stipends will be increased to $25,000 from $18,000, in the hope that they will spend less time on teaching, grading papers, and outside work, and more on their own research.

The graduate center will also reduce enrollment across its graduate programs by one-fourth by 2015, to put more resources toward helping students succeed. CUNY now enrolls 4,200 doctoral students.

At the University of Washington, starting this fall, students in a doctoral program in Hispanic studies will be required to enroll in a new course that will help guide them in beginning preliminary work on their dissertation prospectus. They will also be trained in public forms of scholarship, so that their work will be more attractive to employers outside higher education.

The program will also alter exams, to make them directly relevant to students' dissertations. The tests will comprise three elements: an annotated bibliography of the books that are relevant to student's research projects, a 10- to 15-page dissertation prospectus, and a 90-minute oral exam.

Stanford has recently proposed changes in its dissertation requirements, in an effort to reduce the time that students spend in Ph.D. programs to five years, from an average of nine years now. The plans include adopting a four-quarter system and providing students with financial support during the summer, so they can use that time to make progress on their dissertations.

Departments would be required to provide clearer guidelines about
writing dissertations and to offer students alternatives to the traditional format, so that their academic work will match up with their career goals. Advisers would be called on to do a better job of providing students with timely and effective feedback.

A 21st-Century Dissertation

To the extent that dissertations have changed already, technological advances have been largely responsible. The rise of the digital humanities has opened up new interpretive and methodological possibilities for scholars and has challenged conventional understandings of the dissertation. Graduate students looking to take advantage of the interactivity of online platforms are doing digital dissertations that integrate film clips, three-dimensional animation, sound, and interactive maps.

One of those students is Sarita I. Alami, a fifth-year doctoral student in the history department at Emory. She is looking at the rise and fall of American prison newspapers from 1912 to 1980 and how prisoners used journalism to shape their experiences behind bars. Many novels and memoirs about prison life have been written for people outside prison. But Ms. Alami wants to provide a lens into prison culture through the words of inmates themselves, particularly how they discussed prison conditions and national and international politics.

She has done the usual work of reading scholarly articles and books. She’s spent time in prison archives analyzing thousands of newspapers to see how their coverage changed over time. But she is also taking advantage of a digital microfiche scanner that Emory recently acquired. Its algorithmic software processes large amounts of text and returns useful keywords, allowing her to better analyze prisoners’ use of language over time.

For example, at the height of the black-power era, she saw the use of words like "pig," "whitey," and "solidarity." "That was black-power rhetoric centered around prison activism," she says, "and it captures the anger, prison revolts, and rashes of violence discussed by outside media."

Much of her work, while taking advantage of new methods of analysis, will still result in a text-heavy, book-length document. But a big component of her dissertation, she says, will be a searchable online repository of prison periodicals, graphs, online exhibits, and explanatory text. On a Web site, she is documenting her research experience and introducing others to new digital tools.

Amanda Visconti, a doctoral student in her third year at the University of Maryland at College Park, entered the graduate
program in English with a background in Web development, information studies, and user testing. She hasn't yet started on her dissertation—which will be digital—but has experimented with a prototype digital edition of *Ulysses*, which allows users to read the novel's first two episodes with explanatory annotations and images that appear when the reader moves his or her mouse over words that might be confusing.

"Digital editions do a lot of things, but I'm interested in making them more participatory, meaning that readers get an interactive, engaged experience instead of a passive reading experience," Ms. Visconti says. "Producing a traditional, book-style dissertation wouldn't help me do the scholarly work I need to do. And it wouldn't present that work to others in a way they could test, use, and benefit from."

Alex Galarza, a fourth-year Ph.D. student in history at Michigan State, is working on a digital dissertation on soccer clubs of the 1950s and 60s in Buenos Aires, examining how they were connected to political, economic, and social changes in the city. Rather than produce a written text that readers would engage with only passively, he wants people to be able to interact with his work, to dig behind his documents to see the sources he's using and draw their own conclusions.

A more traditional approach to his dissertation, he says, wouldn't provide an experience nearly as collaborative. He and a faculty mentor created the Football Scholars Forum, an online "scholarly think tank" that includes a group library, film database, audio archive, academic directory, syllabus repository, and online forum where researchers discuss monographs, articles, films, and pedagogy.

Mr. Galarza is a graduate fellow at Michigan State's digital-humanities center, which has 15 full-time employees, and he has received $2,000 in travel grants to attend digital-humanities workshops. Other than the scholars he meets at digital-humanities conference circuits and institutes, though, he doesn't hear many graduate students talk about incorporating digital methods into their dissertations. Most of his peers, he says, are neither exposed to those methods nor encouraged to try them.

Had he not received encouragement from faculty mentors at Michigan State, he says, he, too, probably would be writing a traditional dissertation. "If you don't have a program, mentor, and peers that are demonstrating that these are real possibilities," he says, "then it's hard to part from what everyone else around you and what your adviser tells you to do."
Barriers to Change

If most people agree that, after decades of debate, it's time to finally do more to revamp the dissertation, then why isn't such change widespread? The majority of graduate students are still sticking to the monograph version of the dissertation, producing static texts that are hundreds of pages in length and take roughly five or six years to complete.

The barriers to change are many, faculty members say. Graduate students themselves are part of the time-to-degree problem. More and more Ph.D. candidates intentionally linger in departments, in order to write exquisite theses, which they hope will help them stand out in a brutal job market.

What's more, many programs are behind the curve on technology, and many do not have professors with the skills to train students to do digital dissertations. On more than a few campuses, little, if any, technical support or clear guidelines exist for students doing digital dissertations. Nor do the usual dissertation books and workshops provide much help to those students.

Meanwhile, some scholars say the traditional approaches to the dissertation aren't necessarily in need of overhaul at all, even if digital and other nontraditional formats may be preferable for some projects. Anthony T. Grafton, a historian at Princeton University, argues that some of the proposals for changing the dissertation and reducing time to degree could affect the quality of students' projects.

"For me, the dissertation makes intellectual sense only as a historian's quest to work out the problem that matters most to him or her, an intellectual adventure whose limits no one can predict," he says. "There's no way to know in advance how long that will take. Cut down the ambition and scale, and much of the power of the exercise is lost."

Many other professors say that until the tenure process no longer requires the publication of book-length works, scholars in the pipeline will continue to follow the traditional formula for writing dissertations. Some students complain that when they create a digital dissertation, they must also produce a text version. Many campus libraries have not ironed out the wrinkles in terms of submission, guidelines, and repositories. And the extra work, of course, doesn't tend to lessen the time to degree.

Ms. Visconti, the Maryland student, says she has had to defend her decision to do a nontraditional dissertation to academics who don't seem to think that digital projects on their own are scholarly enough. Some people assume, she says, that projects like hers are
For more than 25 years, I have encouraged my doctoral students in cognitive psychology to write dissertations in a length, style, and format that allows them to be submitted as journal articles. In my experience, advisers and committees vary in this preference, but it has always seemed to me the best way to prepare students for their careers.

"There is the lingering opinion that writing monographs is the only scholarly act," she says. "Other activities, such as coding, designing, scholarly editing, and experimentation, are pre- or postcritical."

Ms. Alami, at Emory, says the measurement of student success is still usually the traditional monograph. But in the long run, she believes, she will benefit from the digital skills she's acquired. She's lucky, she says, to work with an adviser who pushes her to try new approaches. But her situation is not the norm, she acknowledges, and there is far to go before the dissertation is truly modernized.

"Even if faculty members are agreeing that things need to change with the dissertation," Ms. Alami says, "they usually end the conversation by saying, 'We're not there yet.'"

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Having gone through the traditional process myself, I'm all for switching to something else. I also wish that universities would cease talking about "preparing doctoral students for other careers" and start admitting they're preparing doctoral students for careers in which they don't need doctorates in the first place.

Henry Adams
Most persons do not need the doctorate in the first place. Many who are scholars do need a research degree, however, and in many areas of research the dissertation is quite appropriate. As a political theorist/philosopher, I learned a great deal while researching and writing my dissertation, although it was a rough three years from start to finish. I cannot speak for other fields or for other scholars.

Frankly, I suspect that a lot of persons who want to change academe should never have gone into careers in academe in the first place.

I don’t think the dissertation requirement should be removed. It demonstrates that the author can do original research that moves the field forward in a clear, coherent and useful way, and can produce new knowledge that is relevant and timely to scholarship. It is specifically geared to those who will do research and teach in an academic context. The fact that schools have advertised their Ph.D’s as relevant to some other context, which they are frankly not, and have oversaturated the market, is a sign of the corruption of filthy lucre, rather than any deficiency in the system. A professor is someone who can produce new knowledge, and can communicate their enthusiasm for the process to advanced students, not someone who can make a documentary.

"The fact that schools have advertised their Ph.D’s as relevant to some other context, which they are frankly not, and have over-saturated the market, is a sign of the corruption of filthy lucre, rather than any deficiency in the system." Amen to that, and do not expect many Ph.D. programs to extinguish themselves or retract their extravagant claims.

"the author can do original research that moves the field forward in a clear, coherent and useful way"

I can think of no better way to summarize the purpose of graduate school. Whether or not one chooses to call it a "dissertation" the final product should meet this standard.

Faster, cheaper, quicker . . . doctorate studies? Really? Making the "dissertation" more meaningful and useful makes great sense. Dumbing down the requirement to truly demonstrate a very high level of professional and academic competence should be rejected! Please!

Exactly. Making the process "quicker" does not make it "better." I know in the five years it’s taken me to reach the end of my doctoral program and dissertation, I’ve matured in my writing, in my scholarship, in my research critique, and as a person. Making the Ph.D. into something else doesn’t make it better, it just makes it easier for all those who have whined "this is too hard!"

I would tell the complainers, "Buck it up, and do your dissertation. If you don’t do your..."
The dissertation can be a very useful process of learning how to frame questions, match the problem with collecting proper data, analyzing the data rigorously and interpreting results. That critical thinking process is pertinent to most professional situations, inside or outside of academia. The biggest problem with dissertations that take more than 2 years is the quality of advising and preparation. Students can begin working on dissertation background material and methodology within the 2nd year of doctoral study. The first year should be reserved for exploration, and mind-stretching. By the 2nd year, methodologies, and possible topics can be explored within existing courses, and a dissertation proposal [along with qualifying exams] taken in the third year. Often an article can be written based on the literature review, along the way.
Depending upon the dissertation topic, no more than 2 years of work should be needed to complete a good dissertation. The results: completed doctoral work with 4 or 5 years. Students need guidance. Programs should be organized to assist students in a stepwise manner to move through the stages of learning this complex, and important set of professional skills -- the highest level of critical thinking.

Some students, those with families, children or working, will take longer. Our program (one of the top in the country in our social science field) has been graduating students with an average time to degree of 5 years for about 20 years. This is not only possible, but practical and useful for faculty and students alike.

For historians, even with an accelerated early program of the sort you suggest, two years of work on a dissertation is unrealistic in almost all cases. I got my degree in a program that insisted I take my general exams at the end of two years. It then took 2 years to research the dissertation (in the US & abroad) and another year to write it. A five-year degree like mine was, & remains, unusually fast for a historian, and I nearly killed myself to do it. I note that in the article historians are frequently cited as examples and none (from the career stage described within it) seem likely to finish in 5 years even with the changed expectations. In fact, from my experience in doing some digital research myself, working extensively with digital materials adds time to the research process, not reduces it. (The digital information raised lots of new questions that I then had to think about how to answer, rather than answering questions I have already posed.) And one of the young scholars cited (the one researching the soccer teams) appears to be compiling data, but is he going to analyze it himself? Compilation without analysis does not a dissertation (or an accomplished scholar) make. I concur with Tony Grafton.

I would take it a step further and argue that preparing a student for a non-academic career in less time than it takes to complete a Ph.D. is a perfectly good reason to offer a terminal, non-thesis masters degree program. I also think that if writing the dissertation is taking too long and is perceived as isolating, that's not a problem with the dissertation but the mentor guiding the student's work. There is no need to languish for 6, 8 or 10 years on a dissertation. It should begin the day you enter graduate school. Each chapter begins with the proposal, and should end in a publication, or at least manuscript submission. By the time the actual research is completed, there should be little left to write other than the results and discussion of the final chapter and the overall discussion pulling the entirety of the work together. Of course, this works better when students actually meet with their committees on schedule and use that as deadlines for progress...just like the working world where work product is due on deadlines.

"Having said all this I will observe that if the PhD program is trying to prepare students for non-academic careers then the dissertation may be a waste of time but that is not supportive of retooling the dissertation or, worse yet, eliminating it. Instead, there should be non-academic doctorates for applied scholarship Many universities already offer several varieties of vocational doctorates for just this reason." Yes. Yes. And Yes. Thank you.

On some level this is the book I plan to write, but on another level, Patton completely ignores some critical issues: process and professors. Digitizing is fine, but process is the real problem.
Producing a dissertation comprising chapters that are (nearly) ready to submit as refereed publications has been trending for 20 years, and is now commonplace in the life sciences. Some dissertations include already-published papers, sometimes in a pocket in the back cover. In many European institutions, all or most of the dissertation must be in press to receive the degree. Refereed publications are regarded as important credentials for any job in most sciences.

Some business programs have moved to a three-article requirement in place of the dissertation. Scholarly books and monographs are not valued in business schools. Articles in the "top" three or 10 or 15 journals are. So the thinking is that the doctoral student shouldn't do a dissertation which will be cut up into articles but instead proceed straight to the articles.

An alternative would be for B-School P&T committees to value a variety of evidence of scholarly accomplishment. This won't happen unless there is a fundamental change in AACSB accreditation teams. That won't happen because too many senior faculty, chairs and deans are invested in the current system.

People keep re-inventing the wheel. The multi-part dissertation has been standard in many science fields and in economics for decades. The movement to shorten time to degree and to reduce the number of doctoral students in the humanities—the only fields mentioned in this article—has been going on for decades. The fact that the Graduate Center at CUNY has finally gotten around to doing what most people have been doing for a while doesn’t warrant the attention it’s been getting. The interesting question is why it took them so long to get there. New technologies do bring new opportunities, to be sure, but the real issue will be how to take advantage of them while preserving the scholarly integrity, depth and value we associate with the best research. That’s a different conversation.

Part of the point of producing original scholarship is to push the boundaries of what we know and understand. The arguments against rethinking the dissertation as an exercise seem to be remarkably status quo—why can’t academy change to incorporate other forms of media as scholarship? What I see in the above is not necessarily the replacement of the dissertation’s rigor, but more of a focus on expanding it from the 2-D universe it exists in to the current 3-D universe that we inhabit today. If you do interviews, why can’t the audio files be linked to the text within the document? If most scientific discoveries require collaboration, why not learn how to collaborate as part of the process? I agree that in order for this to change, the academy must also embrace alternative forms of scholarship suitable for promotion and tenure. Civic engagement and organizing, radio or film documentary, multi-media searchable databases are all examples of powerful tools useful to more than the very select groups who read scholarly research. The question may be not what is wrong with rethinking the dissertation but why, in the wake of exponential changes in information production and consumption, it has taken this long to consider new and innovative ways of being. Isn’t that what academics are supposed to do - question and push boundaries?

After reading this article, I have arrived at the conclusion that if anything is "broken", it is the (mistaken) perception by some that a dissertation is "too hard". Various whiny reasons seem to be given for this, which quite frankly don’t really seem to hold water. Perhaps for a degree *other* than a doctorate in philosophy, they may have merit.
As other posters have commented, the problem really seems to lie with sheisty graduate school admissions, and mistaken perceptions on the part of the student.

1 person liked this.

115thDream 46 minutes ago

People defend them all the time...nearly every day in some seasons.

Like Reply

missouledhead 39 minutes ago

I agree that perhaps the monograph length traditional length dissertation should be rethought. But the basis of it -- original, sustained research -- shouldn’t be. These projects show original research (standard in the STEM and even some social science fields) works. My concern is that with the cries to reduce time to degree, schools will simply do away with the work involved in a dissertation, and then PhDs will be what? Masters?

Like Reply

Rael64 34 minutes ago

I'm all for something other than the dissertation (and MA thesis too, since most are expected to be ridiculously long too for the sake of being practice for the dissertation). But I would hope that standards are held (made) high, and a strict ethical standard is held too. Too many published papers with professor's names on them as it is; the 'new' dissertation formats should not be publishable works with committee member(s) names attached.

And for god's sake, get a proofreader. (That goes out to most journals too; do you have no money for editors, just publish stuff As Is?)

Like Reply

archives_guy 21 minutes ago

Dr. Patton: You have some interesting ideas regarding the topic of doctoral dissertations, many with which I agree. By way of understanding your own experience, I've sought to read your dissertation from Rutgers and find that, although it is an electronic resource, you have restricted people from reading it. (http://mss3.libraries.rutgers....) Is that simply due to an ownership/profit perspective--which I totally understand-- or another reason which is not clear to me?

Like Reply

cmorton001 15 minutes ago

The dissertation is a time honored tradition that needs to remain as the centerpiece of a doctoral education. I agree with others who have said that examples given in the article describing alternative types of scholarly inquiry just do not seem to measure up. The one particular approach leaving readers to come up with their own conclusions is just so much postmodern educational tripe. When completing the dissertation I was required to conduct scholarly inquiry leading to particular conclusions. Others could, and have, come after me and tested my findings.

We live in a world where people want things quickly. There are reasons that a dissertation is the way it is: 1) it is to incite scholarly discourse. The topic must be such as to spark discussion among scholars and people with vested interest in the topic. 2) it is produce endurance. We as scholars must be prepared to endure criticism and skepticism. The dissertation provides for this in an ongoing fashion. Some may call it hazing. I would rather call it being in the refiner's fire honing a time honored craft that I may practice in the future.

We need arguments that are interesting and spur discussion. But we need professionals that can and will stick with their assumptions and hunches until the are proved or disproved. The
dissertation is excels, in my estimation, in this endeavor. I will never forget the feeling of accomplishment and elation when my dissertation director called to discuss my project. He continued to give me advice concerning my impending defense. When I asked when I would be finished with the refinements he said: "you have been through for two weeks, what we have been doing is called academic discussion". That is where the dissertation should lead.

While I generally agree that the dissertation for many students is a "waste of time" and far too insular for today's societal demands, the problem with this article and others about the changes in doctoral education is that it feels one sided. The dissertation is entry into a scholarly community, and the many who see it as a rite of passage into quality research are on the hiring committees at universities. While many doctoral students are willing to abandon the goal of faculty work entirely by the time they complete, it is still seen as the ideal and one that students attempt to cling to, and often reasonably aspire to. So would this mean students need to do both a dissertation to prove scholarly worth and something more contextual that gives versatility in career options? Or should they just move away from dissertation and hope for an enlightened hiring committee? All this to say, the problem isn't about simply changing doctoral education; it is about changing the way knowledge is created and understood in relation to the institution. That can't be done by changing one policy; it requires more serious restructuring.