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A Brief History of Doctoral Discourse

It has been eight years since I defended my dissertation at the University of Virginia, where I completed two doctorates—one in US history and another in education—before embarking on my professorial career at Vanderbilt University. To the extent that experience counts for anything, I suppose I am qualified to write this brief history of doctoral discourse.

Hopefully the title will elicit a soft chuckle: “a *brief* history of doctoral discourse.” Everyone knows that there is almost nothing about the dissertation that is ever brief. I promise to try and keep this essay as short and on point as possible.

With this goal in mind, let me cut to the chase: the dissertation is the wellspring of scholarly communication and of the higher education enterprise itself. It is how disciplinary communities stake out their intellectual turf, stay together, move forward, and why they break off in new directions. In a real way it is the starting point of the entire knowledge production process and the main pathway whereby research—and the scholars who create it—gets spun out into the world. Within the university the dissertation is everything.

For anyone who has written a dissertation, I am not sharing trade secrets when I tell you it is a slow, plodding process that exacts a physical, psychological, and financial toll. The mere thought of “the diss” stirs up a flurry of competing emotions ranging from sadness to joy, and if you are like most people I know, not thinking about it at all is the preferred coping mechanism—if you can, that is.¹ The dull black binding with the gold-colored inlaid script; the signature page with the illegible scrawls; the heart wrenching acknowledgements; all those pages with all those words and equations; typefaces, spacing, and margins drawn to exact specification; and, of course, the punchy bouquet of ink, glue, and papyrus that only a dissertation emits. The dissertation is not easily forgotten.

In the United States the dissertation serves as the passport to a doctoral degree and a career in the academy, and has for a longtime. Like so much of our higher education system, the dissertation-doctorate was a German import brought here by American “Doktors” who studied at the great universities of Gottingen, Leipzig, Heidelberg, and Berlin in the nineteenth century.²

¹ One study indicated that the lack of research on the dissertation is due to the stress and trauma of writing one. For more on this, see William G. Bowen and Neil R. Rudenstine, *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 2.

² On the German roots of the dissertation, see William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 183–238. On the rise of the American

Smitten by *Wissenschaft*, or systematic research, and the impressive social status that it conferred, they incorporated the research doctorate into the nascent American university complex that awarded 3,500 Ph.D.s by 1900. Slowly at first, then rapidly around World War II when government investment in research and development exploded, graduate training rocketed to life. By 1960 doctoral production exceeded 10,000 per year, a number that has climbed to 50,000 today, in 273 distinct fields, from 297 different institutions, a third of which are classified as “RU/VH” (“very high research activity”) under the Carnegie Classification of Institutions.³ Although the country’s share of worldwide Ph.D. production has been eclipsed by China in recent years, the US remains the gold standard for advanced training, and in virtually all fields—from engineering and science to the social sciences and humanities—a dissertation is required to earn a degree.⁴

That is where the problems start, since most students who set out to get a Ph.D. never end up with one. And those candidates who do take more than eight years to finish, on average, and then several more years, on average, to land an academic job, that is, of course, if they land one at all.⁵ The misery of the academic labor market is nothing new, though with rare exception it has only been in the last several decades that scholars and learned societies, professional associations, philanthropic organizations, and some universities have taken a close look at graduate training and thought about ways to improve it.⁶ Different fixes have been proposed, though most reformers agree that increasing aid and benefits, admitting smaller cohorts, encouraging interdisciplinary work with practical rather than theoretical applications, and preparing students for alternative, which is to say, non-academic, employment, is a good place to start.⁷ All this in the name of cutting down the time-to-degree and shoring up a massive but

university, see Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (University of Chicago Press, 1965).

³ Chris Golde and George Walker et al, *Envisioning the Future of Doctoral Education* (Jossey Bass, 2006), 3; NORC, Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), available at [http://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/survey-of-earned-doctorates-\(sed\).aspx](http://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/survey-of-earned-doctorates-(sed).aspx) (accessed Nov. 30, 2015); Doctoral-granting University Data, Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, available at <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/descriptions/basic.php> (accessed Dec. 4, 2015).

⁴ David Cyranoski et al, “Education: The Ph.D. Factory,” *Nature*, April 20, 2011, available at <http://www.nature.com/news/2011/110419/full/472276a.html> (accessed Nov 21, 2015).

⁵ Leonard Cassuro, “Ph.D. Attrition: How Much Is Too Much?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2013, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Ph.D.-Attrition-How-Much-Is/140045/> (accessed Nov. 22, 2015); Dan Edmonds, “More Than Half of College Faculty Are Adjuncts: Should You Care?” *Forbes*, May 28, 2015, available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/noodleeducation/2015/05/28/more-than-half-of-college-faculty-are-adjuncts-should-you-care/> (accessed Nov. 22, 2015).

⁶ For the earliest and most thorough study of the formative years of U.S. graduate education, see Bernard Berelson, *Graduate Education in the U.S.* (McGraw Hill, 1960). The more recent wave of interest was galvanized by Bowen and Rudenstine, *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.*, in the early 1990s, as well as by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Graduate Schools, which in 2010 launched The Ph.D. Completion Project.

⁷ For this distillation, see Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 141–55.

deeply divided academic labor force in which half of its 1.6 million members are “contingent faculty” of one classification or another.⁸ Over all, there have been a lot of reports and even more handwringing, though not necessarily that much coordinated action. Graduate education is an untidy business and universities have never been particularly well organized in this country. Institutional autonomy is prized above all else so most universities are still doing what they’ve always done: scouring the admissions pool for the most talented students and then bringing them in for what amounts to a lengthy apprenticeship in which there is a greater likelihood of failure than success.

At or near the center of this ongoing discussion is the Sisyphean task known as the doctoral dissertation—the heart’s blood of all scholarly communication. What is to be done with it? Should it be abolished? Or can it be improved? Does it remain an important vessel of scholarly intercourse? Or is it a useless relic of a bygone academic era? In short, what is the future of the doctoral dissertation? Does it even have a future?

To answer these questions requires a clear understanding of the mission of the modern research university that emerged after the Civil War. The architects of the institution, president-reformers like Charles William Eliot of Harvard, Andrew Dickson White of Cornell, and Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins, backed by wealthy Gilded Age tycoons, sought to upgrade the fusty old-time college with a less fusty university. Both models would teach students and serve society though it was the research function of the university that distinguished the two, at least until “research” suffused the entire system. Soon enough the Ph.D. became the required credential for entry into the academic professions and specialized research in one of the budding disciplines the key to staying there. President Gilman of Johns Hopkins, then and later one of America’s most fecund Ph.D. producers, captured well the professoriate’s new role, declaring in his *First Annual Report*: “It is their *researches* in the library and the laboratory ... which will make the University in Baltimore an attraction to the best students, and serviceable to the intellectual growth of the land.”⁹

Not just any research, however, but focused, independent investigation in a specific field of study. Exact requirements varied from school to school, one disciplinary department to another, but well before the charter members of the Association of American Universities (AAU) convened for the first time, in 1900, to hash out uniform Ph.D. requirements most schools were already following Johns Hopkins’ lead: two years of study beyond the BA in “one main subject” and “one subsidiary subject,” followed by oral and/or written exams, and the researching and writing of an “elaborate thesis” prepared over the course of “the greater part of an academic

⁸ Faculty data at all Title IV institutions in NCES, “Enrollment and Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2014,” USDOE, p. 10, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016005.pdf> (accessed Nov. 22, 2015).

⁹ Hugh Hawkins, *Pioneer: A History of the Johns Hopkins University, 1874–1889* (Cornell University Press, 1960), 65, italics added.

year.”¹⁰ Except for the comparatively speedy three-year time-to-degree, the other pieces of the Ph.D. puzzle, centered on the dissertation, have endured.

So too has the criticism of the degree. Not long after the AAU standardized doctoral requirements, William James of Harvard entered the fray, warning that the “Ph.D. Octopus”—the pointless over-credentialing of pedagogues—was about to capsize the university ship.¹¹ This never happened because neither James, a trained medical doctor who never bothered with a Ph.D., nor anyone else ever came up with a good substitute for it. The doctorate may have been “a sham, a bauble, a dodge,” as James bombastically claimed (ironically, at the time the M.D. was the bigger sham), albeit a necessary one to ensure the growth and success of the university and the professors who called it home.¹² Then as now, the main goal of doctoral education was to confer expertise by winnowing out the amateurs from the experts, and a rigorous test of intellectual mettle was perforce required to determine an individual aspirant’s qualifications for membership. The dissertation was, and remains, that test; you cannot have a university without it.

At the same time, the dissertation is not just any test but a major milestone marking the culmination of one private, cloistered phase of academic life and the start of a new, more public one. The dissertation typically begins in conversation between student and advisor, and for much of its formative period of development, as it moves from an idea to a proposal to a draft, the advisor and the committee, and perhaps a trusted friend, are the only people who read it. The dissertation, truth be told, is a selfish document, and the author guards it with great jealousy; it is written for the candidate and her committee and no one else.

Once the dissertation is signed, sealed, and delivered it enters its public phase of existence. The document, now repackaged as a book-like bound volume, is made available in the library stacks, online via Proquest, or for purchase, unless it has been embargoed. It is ready to be read, and read it will be by search committees and fellow specialists and by a few “proud” loved ones and family members (who never really read it). Some of these dissertations will yield articles, chapters, and books that propel their authors into fulltime jobs and, fingers crossed, tenured appointments. Of these a small subset of especially talented scholars may produce work that has a major, transformative effect on an entire field of study, changing the way fellow professionals and graduate students will think about and conduct their own research in the future. An even smaller subset—the best of the best, or maybe the luckiest—will make a profound

¹⁰ John Higham, “The Matrix of Specialization” in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920*, ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 11.

¹¹ William James, “The Ph.D. Octopus,” *Harvard Monthly*, XXXVI (1903), 1–9, cited and discussed in Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (University of Georgia Press, 1962), 397.

¹² The dire state of medical education was subsequently exposed with the release of the Flexner Report in 1910, written by Abraham Flexner with support from the Carnegie Foundation.

“discovery” that reaches beyond the confines of the academy, that comes, improbable though it may seem, face-to-face with “regular people” who may now benefit from its wider circulation.¹³

Admittedly few dissertations ever achieve this level of impact. To the contrary, most dissertations remain buried in the stacks collecting dust, quiet and forgotten testaments of the grit and determination of the students who wrote them. It is for this reason that we are debating the very purpose of the dissertation as a vehicle of scholarly discourse. If few dissertations are ever read, if their public life remains shrouded in mystery, what is the point? Why not entertain other modes of certification? The dissertation is an historical construction after all, so maybe we should try something else? Updating and improving it, we have been told, might help both the dissertation and the universities that award them better meet society’s changing political, economic, and intellectual demands.

The push for a “new dissertation” has been especially pronounced in the arts and humanities, an area I know well, where time-to-degree is longest and the market for tenure-track jobs, or any job requiring doctoral training, is tough to crack. In recent years there have been task forces, reports, books, and articles aplenty that have probed the dissertation dilemma and posited possible solutions to it, including everything from casting it into the proverbial “dustbin of history” to “re-envisioning” it for 21st century.¹⁴

To my knowledge there is not any firm data on where the academic profession stands on this matter, but I would wager that most faculty members have barely thought about it. As the direct beneficiaries of the existing model, who have the jobs they have in large part because they wrote a “good” dissertation, why would they? Among those who have contemplated the future of the dissertation, whether as a scholarly subject or as a member of some professional association task force, my sense is that most faculty favor renovating and expanding the model rather than bulldozing over it.¹⁵ Hence calls for “soft” alternatives to the sole authored magnum opus, such as the portfolio model, the “digital” thesis, and the group-based capstone project where students meld theory and practice in order to solve a real-world problem.

These are several of the ways in which the traditional dissertation has been “re-envisioned” in the last decade. Each of them still requires lots of time and resources, and whether they will improve on the model we already have, or just diminish its value, is anyone’s guess. Yet I think it is crucial that we continue to think about the future of graduate education and the role that the dissertation should play in it. And we need to be open to the possibility that a new

¹³ For an enthusiastic defense along these lines, see Jonathan R. Cole, *The Great American University: Its Rise to Preeminence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected* (Perseus Books Group, 2009).

¹⁴ Stacey Patton, “The Dissertation Can No Longer Be Defended,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 11, 2013, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Dissertation-Can-No-Longer/137215/> (accessed Dec. 3, 2015); “Re-envisioning the Ph.D.,” available at http://depts.washington.edu/envision/project_resources/Ph.D._career/resumes.html (accessed Dec. 3, 2015), cited in Menand, *Marketplace of Ideas*, 141.

¹⁵ The most well publicized recent study was issued by the Modern Language Association, Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature (May 2014).

and better model, more appropriate for the demands of our own time, might yet emerge from the experiments now underway.

To get it right we will have to move beyond the dissertation, however, and ruminate on an even bigger issue: the future of graduate education and the difficult governmental and financial dynamics that now surround it. Is our society committed to higher learning and willing to invest in it? Do we believe in scientific and humanistic inquiry? Or have the worsening budget cuts and the crippling political partisanship of the last several decades irreparably damaged our capacity to create new knowledge to change the world? And, closer to home, what responsibility must we, the faculty and administration, bear for the wanton overproduction of graduate students in fields that are simply incapable of absorbing new initiates? Can we build a better and more efficient university than the one we have now? Or can that only be achieved at the expense of the creativity and spontaneity necessary to produce cutting-edge research? Do we understand our social mission and are we willing to defend it? These are fundamental questions, and how we choose to address them will determine both the fate of the dissertation and that of the American research university.