

Council of Graduate Schools Future of the Dissertation Workshop

*Bonfire of the Humanities*

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In the Humanities especially, dissertations have come to play a dual role, both as a credentialing device and as a book's first draft. This is a dangerous pairing in the current publishing climate. Publishing scholarly books, especially those peer reviewed and selected by a university press, continues to be the gold standard of quality for scholars. It is a measure of scholars' worth in the academic economy, a short-hand for excellence on a CV during searches and in tenure cases. This, however, gives editors remarkable power, and it holds scholars hostage to commercial forces.

The fact is, as editorial director of a large university press, I am a member of a small but influential group of individuals. Unintentionally, in the current state of the academy, this group has gained control over the scholarly careers of your students. We pick who gets published, and a nod from one of us means a chance at an academic career. This is not a role any editor wants to play, but it is one you have ceded to us. If I were you, I would be very concerned.

For a junior scholar that first book is often based on a dissertation. Having spent years researching and writing a dissertation, a new Ph.D. is then coached to "turn it into a book." This is an essential next step because it is the book that secures a job and possible promotion. As arduous a task as it is to create a piece of original, thoughtful, and nuanced scholarship that earns a Ph.D., however, it is even more difficult to land a coveted university press contract. The numbers bears this out: there are about 5,000 new Humanities Ph.D.'s awarded annually. At my university press, one of the largest, we publish about 175 new books annually, only 60 of which

are in the Humanities, and only a handful are based on dissertations. There are only about 125 other university presses most of which have even smaller title outputs. Why is this?

The reality is that most Humanities dissertations have almost no commercial value. They were never intended to, of course. There was a time when they had a decent shot at being published and sold to academic libraries in sufficient quantities to allow a press to sustain this operation. With the loss of the library market (a book that once may have sold a thousand copies to libraries may now only sell 200), even presses with a scholarly mission have had to look elsewhere for revenue. The withdrawal of subsidies from parent universities further forced presses to avoid books that, although based on excellent scholarship, do not have enough market potential. Perhaps the greatest pressure comes from the overall decline in book reading, and scholarly book sales reflect this.

One effect of this is that scholarly presses have already pulled out of entire fields of Humanities simply because the market could not support books in those subjects. This is true, for example, in creative writing fields, languages, and some of the Social Sciences. Another result is that university presses have become incredibly selective about the books they do publish. This selectivity, however, isn't based just on the highest quality scholarship, but now on the economic viability of the product as well. To merit publication, a book has to sell beyond a narrow group of scholars. This commercial turn has serious implications for the Humanities dissertation.

For one, advisors allow graduate students to select topics and write dissertations that need to be turned into books, but for which there is no longer a large enough market to support. There was a time when a Humanities dissertation decently reworked stood a good chance of finding its way into print. The current reality is different: to get published a dissertation has to either be extraordinarily good or aimed at a broader readership. Second, we expect these students to spend

an inordinate amount of time (and money) creating these works much of which will be excised from the book manuscript if it does get published. Third, considering the larger ecosystem, we measure scholars' value—their employability and even “tenurability”—on the increasingly unrealistic chance they will get published. By tying the credential to the book, we shift the measure of academic quality to market forces.

How could you change the current state of things? First, stop assuming a dissertation is the first draft of a book. Occasionally it is, but often it isn't. What if a degree could be awarded for a body of work including a number of substantial journal articles? This shift has already happened in fields like Philosophy partly as a response to the absence of book publishing opportunities. A side consequence of this would be that scholarship would appear faster and enliven their disciplines.

When a scholar does decide she is ready to write beyond her narrow specialization, she would do so without the burden of having to make it comply with the requirements of the dissertation, which often run counter to the needs of the publishing market. She will have the freedom to write something meaningful and relevant.

Second, if you insist the dissertation must become a book, then why only approach the gatekeeper—the university press editor—at the *end* of the journey? Wouldn't it be better if young scholars consulted with leading editors in their fields before crafting a dissertation proposal? Advisors, at the very least, could introduce their students to editors, facilitate those conversations, and get students thinking beyond their defense.

How might this change the dissertation? The editor could offer clear-eyed advice about topics and approaches most likely to earn publication. To any project, editors apply a simple question, “so what?” As part of any topic selection, students should be able to answer with

remarkable clarity what it is about their work that matters. We should be as rigorous in challenging this claim as we are with anything else in their work.

Third, in measuring the importance of any piece of scholarship, let's stop considering its container. Sometimes a print book is the most effective container for a text, but it is also the most expensive one. By adhering to the idea that it is a *print* book (as opposed to something digital) that signifies legitimacy, we impose a higher cost on presses. This, in turn, means presses can publish fewer print monographs. If hiring and promotion decisions did not carry a bias for a print volume as "a real book" as opposed to an electronic one (even if fully peer reviewed and copyedited), presses could afford to publish more scholarship for smaller markets.\*

In our current environment, relying on the dissertation-based book as an academic credential runs into the hard market reality of publishing. For decades, university presses have been strong partners in the scholarly endeavor by selecting, nurturing, and publishing excellent scholarship and, by extension, in credentialing scholars. It is essential now to uncouple those activities if we want to sustain those efforts.

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\*This point is explored with great clarity by Matthew McAdam in his essay "Deans Care About Books," *The Hedgehog Review*, July 29, 2014. [http://iasc-culture.org/THR/channels/Infernal\\_Machine/tag/university-presses/](http://iasc-culture.org/THR/channels/Infernal_Machine/tag/university-presses/)