

21st Century Doctoral Dissertations in the Humanities

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At this historical moment, the challenge facing faculty and programs invested in educating future generations of academic humanists is the conceptualization of a 21st-century doctoral education. It must be an education adequate to the lived realities of the academy now; to the energies of students who make the choice to pursue a doctorate; and to the intellectual, affective, and social attachments that drive the pursuit of excellence in scholarly inquiry and teaching. The imperatives are multiple: to be purposeful in sustaining passionate conviction about the value of advanced study in the disciplines of the humanities; to be flexible in adapting to the shifting environment in which that study will take place; to be strategic in addressing concerns about the high level of attrition, the continuing lack of diversity in the humanities professoriate, and the exploitative conditions of contingency in humanities disciplines; and to be responsive to the diverse aspirations, dispositions, and intellectual interests of those willing to do the time, find the funds, and endure the long haul.

Of course, agents of change need to be cognizant of the disturbing trends related to the current state of higher education in North America: the retreat from commitment to public funding, the din of attacks on the value of a liberal arts education and humanities degrees, and the consolidation of corporatist discourse and practice. And they have to move beyond mere critique, and the nostalgia that feeds a sense of enervation, to suggest why the times are good enough to effect change. They also need to assay the emergent ecology of higher education in which humanities doctoral students will pursue their goals. There are a number of profound shifts in the everyday life of academic humanists now—shifts at once quotidian and profound, often troubling and far-reaching. They relate to the evolving concept of the university; the epistemic infrastructure; the new media and modes of scholarly production and communication; the trend toward the “open”; the reorientation of learning environments; and the emergent profile of a possibly posthuman humanities scholar. Doctoral students themselves will benefit from a better understanding of the current forces affecting the life of professional humanists and the emergent identities and roles through which their life as scholars and teachers in the academy will play out.

What is fast becoming the “new normal” in the everyday life of academic humanists will require people to be intellectually nimble; conversant in digital media, networks, archives, and identities; energized by collaboration; flexible in their modes of address; imaginative in their pedagogical practice; and adept at telling the story about what they do. The challenge is to reorganize doctoral education to meet the imperatives and the opportunities of the 21st-century academy in good-enough times. And for me, the place to focus attention now is on that capstone project we call the dissertation, in the humanities the dissertation as proto-monograph.

The argument for embracing more flexible dissertation options proceeds from recognition that, in these good-enough times, it’s imperative to affirm the *intellectual mission* of the PhD as a project and redefine its paths of achievement. The current model is no longer adequate to the state of higher education, the state of the disciplines, and the nature of future jobs in the profession and in the greater humanities workforce. The quality, extension, and liveliness of scholarly conversations across humanities fields in the next decades depend on this redefinition as well as the vitality of the liberal arts in an academy pressured to pursue an instrumentalist vision of higher education. If doctoral study is to launch the careers of future

academic humanists and contribute to a robust humanities, then more flexible road maps through the degree, and a more flexible set of models for its capstone, are required.

Reaffirming that there is only one way of doing the dissertation—and that is as a proto-monograph—trains and constrains students in a one-model-fits-all version of doctoral education that is no longer adequate to the times. The current dissertation monograph remains inflexibly wedded to the traditional book culture format; and the habits of inquiry and production its conventional demands reinforce may not train doctoral students in methodologies enabled by, and skills necessary to navigate, this emergent environment. Remaining wedded to the dissertation monograph as an isolated venture will limit students' preparation for this increasingly collaborative scholarly world. Further, the model of success narrowly focused on one outcome—completion of the long-form proto-monograph and then a tenure-track position at an R1 institution—has run its course. It is exhausted; it is exhausting; it is no longer tenable in terms of student interests and prospects.

Doctoral students will enter many different kinds of institutions. Yes, a number of graduates will take up positions in R1 universities; they are collectively one of the largest sectors employing humanities doctorates. But many (about a third) will find academic teaching positions in regional universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges. And the latter educate around 44% of undergraduates across the United States. Others will pursue and find academic positions in libraries, institutes, administrative offices, student services, development, and outreach. Some will move to the nonprofit world of the humanities workforce; some to the world of government and public policy. Practically, graduate students need to optimize the range of opportunities they can pursue by recognizing the transferability of skills they already have and finding opportunities to gain skills they do not already command. If, as Alexandra Rausing argues, the new Alexandria of the future is an expanded network of knowledge producers inside and outside the academy, if the production of knowledge is an effect of the cloud and the crowd as well as professionally trained researchers and scholars, then preparing doctoral students for the larger humanities workforce will enhance opportunities for collaboration among intellectuals and researchers within and without the academy.

So let's design the humanities dissertation of expansive possibilities, of which the monograph form will be one among several options. Some students will pursue the traditional dissertation; but they will also recognize that there are other options and thus other kinds of preparation important for their future careers. Some will opt for alternative models if that option is available to them, and they will surprise advisors and graduate directors with their conceptualization of this capstone to their studies. The most common alternative to the long-form dissertation is the "suite" of three or four essays, a concept of the dissertation on the table for at least two decades. A suite might involve a theme and its variations; or a set of distinct essays, probing different topics, using different methods, elaborating different theoretical frameworks and approaches.

And there are other projects that could be combined into an ensemble dissertation involving multiple components. Here are several possibilities: Preparing a teaching portfolio, including an extended essay on pedagogy and a design for sequenced courses geared to different levels, class sizes, and audiences; writing a metacritical essay on the intersection of scholarship and teaching in the classroom; pursuing a project of "public scholarship"; addressing issues of the humanities and public policy. An ensemble dissertation might combine a scholarly essay of original research of 80 pages; a metacritical essay on teaching in the field; an essay on theorizing digital curation; and an essay on the experience of community-based

scholarship; all of which would evidence flexibility in communicating scholarship in different voices, media, and venues. Or, given the affordances of new platforms for scholarly communication, the dissertation project might involve an edition of some text or corpus of texts with multiple components to it. The expectation of research “scope” of a capstone project would derive from the depth of thought, sophistication of methods, and intellectual ambition arrayed across multiple modes and media assembled in the ensemble dissertation. For students in language and comparative literature units, a dissertation project might include a translation of a formerly untranslated scholarly or literary work or a new kind of translation of an already-translated work. The translation could be accompanied by a robust introduction that situates the work historically, or generically, or theoretically, or geographically, and an essay critically engaging theories of translation as a practice.

Then there are the new opportunities for born-digital dissertations. This mode of dissertation involves conceptualizing, mapping, composing, displaying, and offering metacommentary on a digitally envired scholarly project, often of significant value to other scholars, teachers, and students. Such projects might be, and are being, conceived under multiple rubrics, one of which would be “curation”; others might be ideation, multiple pathway argumentation, visual mapping, multimodal syncopation, interactive reading, and tool building. And there are other possibilities imaginable, such as documentary film or the creative dissertation of mixed modes.

However the dissertation is configured, whether as the long-form proto-monograph or some alternative ensemble of modes, projects, and vehicles, the prospectus stage of the doctoral study will take on a more dynamic, rather than formulaic, dimension. No longer a formality to get through, with a nod to the recognition that the proto-monograph will be very different in the end so the prospectus doesn’t much matter, the prospectus in a time of choice could become the occasion to think about the content of the project and the vehicle together. As a graduate fellow at the Institute for the Humanities here at Michigan recently observed to me, “How beneficial it would have been to think through why I was writing a monograph for the form of my own dissertation—what specific skills I wanted to gain from writing a monograph, the rationale behind presenting my work in monograph form, etc. If doctoral students, with their advisers, were invited to think about and then make a case for the form they wanted their dissertation to take, I think this could be quite helpful.”

In addition to a broadening of the options for the dissertation, there will be changes related to courses and to coursework. Programs might rethink the normative packaging of doctoral education in 3-credit courses. Across the curriculum as a whole and across particular courses, alternatives to the seminar paper could be introduced. These alternatives might include collaborative essays; series of collaborative essays; collectively produced glossaries of terms and concepts; a cohort essay project; a grant application addressed to a real grant program; a deep reading journal; a creative portfolio; a lecture for an undergraduate survey course. Given the emergent ecology of scholarly communication in the humanities, seminars might be organized around a double format analytical project, with submission of scholarly objects in traditional print form and in a multimedia environments such as Wordpress or Scalar; a visualization or mapping project; a curation; a term-long blog; and other options.

The professionalization of doctoral students might be expanded to include opportunities for internships, internally with professional staff in libraries or presses, or museums or public relations offices; and externally with cultural institutions or public policy centers or the for-profit sector. Programs might expand the network of the people critical to successful doctoral

education by identifying humanities professionals and others across the academy as mentors, tutors, teachers, and collaborators: humanists in libraries, in digital humanities centers and labs, in university publishing units, in tech labs. And, in concert with the initiatives of graduate schools and departments across North America, programs might provide opportunities for doctoral students to gain new skills and competencies increasingly important for humanities scholarship and practice and transferable to other careers graduates might imagine.

There is so much to be gained by expanding the repertoire of possible kinds of dissertation. I am convinced that the availability of more flexibility in programs, projects, and pathways through the doctorate will attract more diverse cohorts of students. I am convinced that humanities departments and doctoral programs will gain in creativity, cross-fertilization of ideas and practices, energized learning communities, and more satisfied students. I am convinced that, with an ensemble dissertation project, students will expand their critical, theoretical, and methodological perspectives and their collaborative sociability as they work with multiple mentors. I am convinced that the dissertations produced will be of higher quality than many of the proto-monographs delivered to faculty after long years of forcing five chapters to their less-than-compelling conclusion. I am convinced that doctoral programs will become more innovative, inclusive, and vibrant.