Chapter 4

Alternative Dissertation Formats: Preparing Scholars for the Academy and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes that alternative dissertation formats be considered; namely a more creative, flexible model while still maintaining high intellectual standards for the academy. We specifically identify several options in this chapter: a three-paper dissertation with distinct yet cohesive manuscripts suitable for publication in scholarly journals, a lengthy one-paper manuscript, a novel, and a portfolio. The format must be suitable for both the discipline and the future faculty or administrative role.

INTRODUCTION

Between the years 1999-2000 and 2009-2010, the number of doctoral degrees granted in the United States grew from 106,000 to 140,000, an increase of 40 percent (NCES, 2012). These degrees included Ph.D.’s, Ed.D’s, and comparable degrees at the doctoral level. Regardless of the doctoral degree, the dissertation was likely a part of that terminal degree. In fact, “the first doctorate awarded on American soil required a dissertation, and to our knowledge, so has every ‘earned’ doctorate awarded here since” (Duke & Beck, 1999, p. 31). Given the prevalence of the doctoral dissertation in American higher education, one would think that the dissertation formats would be as varied as the institutions and programs from which the degrees are conferred. However, the majority of dissertations follow a similar five-chapter format and are typically only published in the institutional library.

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This book chapter proposes that alternative dissertation formats be considered; namely a more creative, flexible model while still maintaining high intellectual standards for the academy. We specifically identify several options in this chapter: a three-paper dissertation with distinct yet cohesive manuscripts suitable for publication in scholarly journals, a lengthy one-paper manuscript, a novel, and a portfolio. The format must be suitable for both the discipline and the future faculty or administrative role. Our list is certainly not exhaustive of dissertation formats; we simply want to draw attention and flexibility to dissertations which have long had a “characteristic of the one-size-fits-all approach to doctoral study” (Cassuto & Jay, 2015, p. 83). Cassuto and Jay (2015) continued, “Put simply, graduate students aspire to (and often get) a range of jobs, but most of them write the same kind of scholarly dissertation” (p. 83).

Indeed, recent discussion within the academy regarding the emergence of the nontraditional doctorate (Archbald, 2011) and reconceptualization of the professional doctorate not-with-standing (Storey & Hesbol, 2014), this chapter seeks to examine the alternative path to the dissertation specifically.

The alternative dissertation format is supported by a recent report that was published by the Modern Languages Association (MLA, 2014) in which the MLA recommends that institutions of higher education “reimagine the dissertation.” In accordance with the MLA, we agree that “An extended research project should remain the defining feature of doctoral education. [However,] departments should expand the spectrum of forms the dissertation may take.” (p. 2).

The MLA report was just published in 2014, but the calls for expanded definitions of dissertations are not new. Bernard Berelson wrote one of the seminal books on graduate education in 1960. In this book written five decades ago, Berelson called for a new dissertation format that was easily publishable for a wider audience. He wrote, “The article-length dissertation is just common sense and is long overdue” (p. 183). Berelson also lamented that very few of the doctorates earned in 1947-1948 published any parts of their dissertation in the following decade: “30-40% in physics, psychology, and mathematics, 20% in history, 10 to 15% in education. If something could be done to reinstate the publishing requirement, it might have an important effect on the merit of doctoral dissertations” (p. 177). Therefore, the goals of the flexible dissertation format are twofold: First, alternative dissertations may better prepare students for future roles as faculty and administrators in their fields, and secondly, alternative dissertations may provide greater dissemination to a wider audience.

Likewise, Duke and Beck (1999) encourage consideration of two key questions when engaged in the decision process of alternative dissertations;

1. Will the format of the dissertation make it possible to disseminate the work to a wide audience; and
2. Will writing the dissertation in this format help prepare the candidates for the type of writing they will be expected to engage in throughout their career? (p. 33)

These guiding questions, the nature of the doctoral discipline, and the intended outcomes and subsequent placement of the candidates within or outside the academy, provide useful lenses toward exploration of varying forms of dissertations. Gardner and Mendoza (2010) remarked that the process of preparing doctoral students rests on the responsibility to prepare scholars for their future roles. The author’s further note that the socialization into disciplines varies in numerous ways and as such, the preparation for the nature of how one engages in the work of a discipline fluctuates. Thus, consideration ought to be extended to include variation in the manner in which the culminating experience of a doctoral program is engaged, i.e. the dissertation.