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The doctoral dissertation and scholarly communication

Adapting to changing publication practices among graduate students

When I first began working with electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs), the conversation in libraries appeared to revolve around open access and publication embargoes. It seemed to me that the primary task for scholarly communication librarians in this area was to broaden access to graduate research while protecting future publication opportunities for individual authors. As graduate students begin to publish earlier in their careers, the relationship between the doctoral dissertation and scholarly publishing is evolving. Many students now include their own previously published work in a dissertation, requiring instruction in publication contracts and copyright transfer agreements at the point of submission to the graduate school.

There are repercussions to publishing as a graduate student for which our institutions are not well prepared, and to which we could apply our expertise. By engaging in the ETD preparation process, scholarly communication librarians have an opportunity to help graduate students navigate the complex infrastructure of scholarly publishing and offer valuable guidance that will be useful throughout their academic careers.

The perpetual crisis of the dissertation

What is the purpose of the dissertation, and why do we even distribute it in the first place? The dissertation itself is not a unified construct and has been in a perpetual state of "crisis" since at least 1960, when Bernard Berelson described shifting notions of originality and significance in graduate training among the "word disciplines" and the "data disciplines."[1] Is the completion of the dissertation a guarantee of a scholar's ability to carry out research, leading to an original and significant contribution to the field? Or is it a promissory note—a certification of research and analytical skills to be put to future use? Almost 60 years later, Berelson's question would receive conflicting answers among academics today. Recent framings of the dissertation have portrayed it as: "a hazing ritual," "a credentialing device," "a book's first draft," and, more ambitiously, the "wellspring of scholarly communication and of the higher education enterprise itself."[2]

Regardless of the mutability of the dissertation's purpose and any doubts about its significance, since the 19th century, American universities have required some form of publication for these works; indeed, the rise of university presses was a response to

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this requirement to publish dissertations.[3] In 1951, University Microfilms, Inc., began broad distribution of microfilmed dissertations, and by the late 1990s, they were distributed electronically through ProQuest's Dissertations & Theses Global database and, increasingly, institutional repositories. Dissertations are archival records tied to degree conferral and contributions to the scholarly record, and libraries are charged with preserving and providing access to them on behalf of their institutions.

For many, dissertations are also a source of future scholarly output—a fount of "draft" research that can pour forth articles, chapters, or an entire book. In this way, they have become a microcosm of graduate student anxiety around career futures and publication prospects.[4] In recent years, it would seem that humanities and social science scholars are worried about getting publications out of a dissertation, while STEM folks are increasingly concerned with getting publications into a dissertation.

Previously published journal articles as dissertation chapters

The practice of dissertation authors including their own previously published journal articles as chapters in their official submissions goes by several names: *composite thesis, sandwich thesis,* and *thesis-by-publication* are a few of the most common constructions. Whatever one calls it, the practice is overwhelmingly found in the STEM disciplines, where students tend to publish coauthored papers with their lab groups prior to graduation. A different, but related, practice is the "manuscript" option, in which a group of publication-ready papers form the dissertation, with the expectation that students will submit them to publishers after graduation.

Although this situation is not entirely new (as early as 2005 the Council of Graduate Schools included information about the practice in "The Doctor of Philosophy: A Policy Guide"),[5] it still takes many newer ETD practitioners by surprise. At my own institution, where graduates in the humanities and social sciences tend to outnumber those in STEM, the issue arose when our dissertation deposit workflow was altered to include a librarian consultation, surfacing new concerns as to whether students were complying with their publication contracts. The question of how to handle such dissertations is also a recurring topic on the National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations ETD forum email list, with requests for policy guidance in this area appearing every few months.[6]

Those of us who work regularly with students submitting their dissertations recognize the teaching opportunities presented when students are confronted with the personal consequences of copyright transfers. Some librarians direct authors to the Copyright Clearance Center's RightsLink service, while others have taken to compiling links to publisher policies, which often specify inclusion in a dissertation as a right retained by the author. Useful resources in this area include a compilation of publisher policies from MIT Libraries and a similar list from the Caltech Library.[7]

As with everything, practices and requirements vary across institutions. Some schools allow the publisher's PDF to be included, while others mandate that students use the author's version (pre- or post-print) and expand the material by adding an introduction, conclusion, and appendices. These decisions are typically made by the graduate school, but consultation with the library is key to maintaining the integrity of the scholarly record and ensuring that administrators understand any implications for public access to the work.

Including previously published material in dissertations also presents challenges for ProQuest. In March 2017, the company updated its ETD Administrator thesis submission system to ensure that authors do not attempt to register their copyright for a dissertation comprising publications for which copyright is already held by journal publishers:

> [T]he author must now first acknowledge that they are the sole author and

> owner of the entire graduate work being offered for registration. The copyright registration step has been changed to explain that requirement to the author, provide a link to examples of rejected registration requests, and ask authors to acknowledge the requirement before registering.[8]

As published works proliferate within dissertations, our workflows will need to adapt in unexpected ways, from how we prepare students to how we make their works accessible. What would it mean for libraries to approach dissertations as a portfolio of graduate publications? What effect would this have on our existing infrastructure and our attempts to increase access to ETDs?

Are dissertations publications?

These developments are complicated by the uncertain publication status of dissertations in general. Is distribution by ProQuest considered commercial publication? What about inclusion in the university's institutional repository (IR)? It seems clear that, prior to 1978, microfilming a dissertation was considered publication for copyright purposes.[9] Today, however, ProQuest hedges on publication, stating: "inclusion in the database *could be considered to represent a form of publishing"* (emphasis mine).[10] Our personal interpretations fall short with students attempting to decipher publication contracts.

We need concerted action by our institutions to concretize the relationship between graduate works submitted to fulfill degree requirements and their published counterparts. Universities could adopt open access policies that would compel publishers to allow use of articles in a dissertation, removing any uncertainty for students. For those who do not publish in advance of graduating, universities could endorse the Council on Publication Ethics guidelines that theses be treated as preprints, with ETD collections in IRs considered, essentially, graduate student preprint servers.[11] This may suffice for the journal disciplines, but it does not adequately address scholarly monograph publishing, which remains a key issue in fields such as history.

The rise of composite theses may render ProQuest's publication services redundant, ultimately ending its reign over traditional dissertation publishing. Incidentally, the company appears to be focusing its attention on two areas: workflow, through continued development of its ETD Administrator tool, and digital publishing, by sponsoring events to reimagine the doctoral dissertation for the digital age.[12] The ability to accept fully digital graduate works would be an enormous change for ProQuest, but it is potentially a viable form of content that is not easily subsumed by journal publishers.

Conclusion

The place of the dissertation within the scholarly publishing ecosystem is shifting, and librarians must recognize these changes and the effect it has on our submission and distribution systems. I worry that ETD policy discussions have become a niche concern within the broader scholarly communication conversation, despite the centrality of these works to graduate education and scholarly publishing.

Meanwhile, practical questions abound in graduate offices that would benefit from librarian expertise. Should publications be used verbatim or will they be reformatted and integrated with a larger theme? What about coauthorship? Can we mint DOIs for these works, and how? These issues are best addressed by professionals concerned with the integrity and function of the scholarly record, not a commercial vendor who seeks dominance in the discovery marketplace or an administrator who is primarily concerned with maintaining student records.[13]

The imperative for students to publish stems from an increasingly competitive job market, and though librarians already support graduate students with scholarly communication literacy efforts, a closer integration with the dissertation deposit process

could strengthen these initiatives.[14] It is essential that we reach out to graduate student authors and our administrative colleagues well before the final dissertation is deposited with the library. As librarians engaged with the future of scholarly communication, we must also attend to the material conditions of dissertation deposit, distribution, and publication in order to confront the corporate enclosure of this vital area of scholarship.

Notes

1. Bernard Berelson, *Graduate Education in the United States,* The Carnegie Series in American Education (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), 174.

2. Council of Graduate Schools, "Proceedings of the CGS Future of the Dissertation Workshop (January 2016)," http://cgsnet.org/future-dissertation-workshop.

3. Gary A. Olson and Julie Drew, "(Re) Reenvisioning the Dissertation in English Studies," *College English* 61, no. 1 (1998): 58, doi:10.2307/379058.

4. Jill Cirasella and Polly Thistlethwaite, "Open Access and the Graduate Author: A Dissertation Anxiety Manual," in *Open Access and the Future of Scholarly Communication: Implementation,* ed. Kevin L. Smith and Katherine A. Dickson (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/286.

5. Council of Graduate Schools, *The Doctor of Philosophy Degree: A Policy Statement* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools, 2005), 32, http://cgsnet.org/publication-pdf/2538/doctor_of_philosophy_degree.pdf.

6. National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations ETD forum email list, https://groups.google.com/a/ndltd.org/forum/#!forum/etd.

7. "Thesis Content and Article Publishing | Scholarly Publishing-MIT Libraries," accessed November 6, 2017; George Porter, "LibGuides: Publishers' Thesis Policies: Publishers' Thesis Policies," accessed November 6, 2017, https://libguides.caltech.edu/c.php?g=512672&p=3502561.

8. "Changes to Register U.S. Copyright submission step," Training and Support-What's New, ProQuest ETD Administrator, March 2, 2017, https://secure.etdadmin.com/cgi-bin/main/notifications.

9. Gail Clement and Melissa Levine, "Copyright and Publication Status of Pre-1978 Dissertations: A Content Analysis Approach," July 2011, 17, http://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/149190.

10. "Dissertations-ProQuest Dissertations FAQ," accessed November 12, 2017, www.proquest.com/products-services/dissertations/ProQuest-Dissertations-FAQ.html.

11. Virginia Barbour et al., "Discussion Document for Best Practices on Issues around Thesis Publishing" (Committee on Publication Ethics [COPE], March 2017), https://publicationethics.org/files/u7141/best_practice_for_issues_around_theses_publishing%20%281%29.pdf.

12. See "The Future of the Doctoral Dissertation | Council of Graduate Schools," accessed November 6, 2017, http://cgsnet.org/future-doctoral-dissertation; The University of Iowa Libraries, "Beyond the PDF: Planning for the Future of the Dissertation," accessed November 6, 2017, https://www.lib.uiowa.edu/beyond-pdf/.

13. For an overview of ETD stakeholders, see Richard Fyffe and William C. Welburn, "ETDs, Scholarly Communication, and Campus Collaboration: Opportunities for Libraries," *College & Research Libraries News* 69, no. 3 (2008): 152–55.

14. See Colleen Flaherty, "Renewed Debate over Whether Graduate Students Should Publish," *Inside Higher Ed,* August 23, 2017, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/08/23/renewed-debate-over-whether-graduate-students-should-publish; Barbara Alvarez, Jennifer Bonnet, and Meredith Kahn, "Publish, Not Perish: Supporting Graduate Students as Aspiring Authors," *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 2, no. 3 (August 1, 2014), doi:10.7710/2162-3309.