Report by the Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of the Dissertation
University of Wisconsin-Madison
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Background

Scholarly research is in the midst of substantial change as a result of the proliferation of technological innovations, the promotion of interdisciplinary collaboration, and changing academic job markets (American Historical Association 2015; Blumenstyk 2015; Graff 2015; Jaschik 2009). Students are increasingly considering the utility of a doctoral education for jobs beyond the academy, and researchers across the disciplines are using “big data” with increased frequency and are incorporating more and new technological developments for generating, processing, and visualizing this data. Highly collaborative forms of research are developing in fields once dominated by “lone scholars,” and researchers in the humanities are exploring new forms of performance, public engagement, and graphic representation as valid approaches to scholarly communication (Smith 2015). In the face of these changes, thinkers of all varieties are contemplating the nature of doctoral education (e.g. Cassuto 2015) and, in particular, are paying attention to the nature of the dissertation.

Recognizing the new opportunities available within a rapidly evolving landscape, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Graduate School assembled a committee of faculty representatives from all four divisions (arts and humanities, biological sciences, physical sciences, and social sciences). The committee was charged with developing a series of recommendations, the purpose of which is to significantly enhance the flexibility of the dissertation and the dissertation development process. The committee met across the late fall of 2015 and through the spring semester of 2016 to ascertain what kinds of doctoral dissertation-related policy and practice changes might be warranted. The committee explored issues including: appropriate criteria for an acceptable dissertation, dissertation committee size, dissertation readers versus non-readers, the need for “external” committee members, the boundaries of dissertation presentation/representation, collaboration and co-authorship, public presentation of research, and data archiving. We read broadly on these and related issues, reviewed policies at other universities, and discussed policies and practices appropriate for our campus.
Principles

In our meetings, committee members concluded that it was crucially important to the success of any policies we proposed that we were sensitive to the history and culture of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and that any recommendations we made were attentive to the substantial variation in culture and practice across our four divisions. Thus, we have made every effort to put forward a set of recommendations that:

- Allow for appropriate flexibility across divisions and programs;
- Make clear that dissertation committees are largely responsible for determining what constitutes an acceptable dissertation in terms of content and form;
- Are attentive to the extensive demands on faculty time;
- Reflect awareness of the substantial demands on doctoral student time;
- Are responsive to the changing environment for knowledge production and the changing job market for recent PhDs.

Recommendations

1) **Dissertation Committee Size:** In acknowledgement of the increasing pressures on faculty time and effort, the *minimum required size of dissertation committees should be reduced from five people to four*. Programs are free to require more than the minimum number of committee members, if doing so is needed to enhance rigor or breadth of opinion. Three of these, including the advisor/dissertation director, should be members of the program’s graduate faculty. The fourth member of the committee will be the *outside member*. The aim of including an outsider is to expand the diversity of perspectives on the committee. Graduate programs will determine criteria for outside members, and these criteria should be specified in their graduate program handbooks.

2) **Dissertation Readers & Non-Readers:** Expectations of committee members and how many committee members read dissertations in advance of dissertation defenses vary by program. It is important to explicitly establish committee members’ responsibilities, and we recommend that *all dissertation committees should have at least three committee members designated as “readers.”* Readers are committee members who commit themselves to closely reading and reviewing the entire dissertation. The dissertation warrant should indicate who is a reader and who is not. While graduate programs cannot have fewer than three readers, they may require all members to be readers. The rationale for specifically designating non-reader status is to facilitate faculty participation in dissertations without automatically expecting the level of commitment associated with deeply engaging a PhD thesis. Given faculty workloads, designating a non-reader in some cases may permit faculty participation where engagement would otherwise be impossible.

3) **Dissertation Evaluation Criteria:** In an environment in which there is increasing attention to the clear specification of learning goals and mechanisms of assessment, *PhD programs should adopt “Standards for Examining Dissertations”* (see Appendix 1 for these standards). These standards will provide students with clear expectations and help ensure consistency in quality across students and programs. Programs may adopt additional criteria relevant to their fields beyond the broad general criteria we outline in
Appendix 1. Graduate programs should include their specific dissertation criteria (either those outlined in Appendix 1 or more disciplinary specific criteria) in their handbooks.

4) **Public Performance**: In many graduate programs on campus, a dissertation defense involves two elements: a public presentation of the research and a closed discussion between the student and her/his dissertation committee. Some programs, however, only require the closed meeting. We believe that the public performance element of a dissertation defense is an important aspect of a student’s professional development and a valuable way to mark the ultimate graduate school milestone. *We, therefore, recommend that the Graduate School require programs to include some sort of public presentation or performance organized in conjunction with the dissertation defense for all PhD students.* The time and place of the public presentation should be submitted to the Graduate School in advance. *We recommend that the Graduate School develop a mechanism for disseminating information about all upcoming public dissertation defenses on its website.*

5) **Collaboration on Portions of Dissertations**: Much scholarly research involves substantial collaboration. In the absence of a specific policy and established practices, questions of student contribution and even plagiarism sometimes arise. Consequently, *the Graduate School should establish a policy on collaboration in dissertation research* (see Appendix 2 for our proposed policy). The key guiding principle is that students should feel free to collaborate as appropriate (with faculty, students, and others) to advance their scholarship, but should also be prepared to document the nature of that collaboration to ensure that the dissertation committee can confidently assign due credit to the student whose dissertation is being evaluated.

6) **Co-Authored Dissertations**: It is already common for a single student to submit a dissertation containing abundant co-authored content deriving from collaborative research, but it is currently required that each student submit a unique dissertation. We believe that *the Graduate School should establish a policy enabling dissertations by multiple graduate students* (see Appendix 3 for our proposed policy). While at this juncture, dissertations co-authored by multiple students are likely be rare, we believe that in a highly collaborative scholarly world such flexibility is valuable. In such cases where students do pursue co-authored dissertations, special safeguards are needed to ensure fair treatment of all co-authors and to appropriately judge whether those authors deserve the degree.

7) **Co-Advised Dissertations**: The informal practice of co-advising is common on campus, and co-advising of dissertation work often provides substantial benefit to students. Given the work required of co-advisors, *we recommend that the common but informal practice of co-advising students become a formal option, including an opportunity for co-advisors to be designated on dissertation warrants.*

8) **Data Access & Openness**: Questions of data sharing and ownership have become central matters of discussion among scholars of all sorts. As an institution committed to discovery, debate, and innovation, we also believe in enabling the greatest and easiest possible access to information of all sorts. *Thus, barring Institutional Review Board or
other restrictions, we believe all data produced as part of a dissertation should be freely available (potentially after some limited embargo period), consistent with best practices for data management (See, for example: https://www.dataone.org/best-practices). The determination of what constitutes data meeting this standard should be left to the discretion of dissertation committees. Students must make their data easily accessible through mechanisms established by research funders or by submitting the data to other disciplinarily appropriate databases. When existing repositories are not available, the Graduate School should work with the UW-Madison Library to enable storage through a UW data repository.

9) Alternative Dissertation Formats: Alternative dissertation formats (e.g., multimedia, digital, graphic) can provide opportunities for creativity and innovation in critical inquiry. New formats might better accommodate the nature of a dissertation’s material or its method of argumentation, push the boundaries of a discipline’s scholarly work in helpful directions, and make such doctoral work more accessible to wider audiences. Producing a dissertation in an alternative format may also better support or prepare doctoral students for careers outside of a higher education track. A broad set of formats is potentially available for dissertations that would result in accessible, accurate, and durable descriptions of the research conducted (consistent with Appendix 1). Graduate programs should decide on the formats that are appropriate for their disciplines and make such information available to current and prospective students in their graduate handbooks. The Graduate School should provide information on its website about alternative dissertation formats that students might explore.

10) Scholarly Community: Scholarly work done by UW-Madison graduate students highlights the value added by this University to the state, nation, and the world. The UW-Madison home page should highlight with a small banner each day’s dissertation defenses. Links here will go to the Graduate School website, which should provide more details including place, time, authors, and abstract. In promoting the scholarship of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in this way, we strive to highlight the work done by our students to the general public. Thus, titles should be appropriate for general audiences.
Appendix 1
Proposed Standards for Examining Dissertations*

An acceptable dissertation completed in partial fulfillment of the PhD degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison must have the following attributes, as recognized by the student’s dissertation committee:

1) **Focus**: A dissertation must clearly articulate a research problem or problems, a question or questions. It must specify the limits of the dissertation’s investigation with respect to theory, knowledge, or practice within the field of study.

2) **Appropriateness**: The methods and techniques applied in the execution of the dissertation must be recognized as appropriate to the subject matter and as fitting, original, and/or aesthetically effective.

3) **Clarity**: The dissertation should communicate complex ideas in a form and manner that is clear and understandable to area specialists and, as appropriate, to readers beyond the specialty area.

4) **Durability**: The description of the research and its major conclusions should be in a durable form (written or otherwise capable of being permanently archived).

5) **Novelty**: The dissertation should embody scholarship that makes a substantive contribution to the field of study. The ideas, concepts, designs, and/or performances should move beyond the current boundaries of knowledge within the field of study.

6) **Connectedness**: The dissertation should demonstrate a professional level of familiarity with, and understanding of, contemporary work in the field.

7) **Quantity**: The dissertation should demonstrate an appropriately comprehensive investigation of the student’s research area or artistic form.

8) **Documentation and Replicability**: Documentation in the dissertation should be sufficiently thorough and of an appropriate standard and made available to ensure that the dissertation provides a useful starting point or reference for subsequent researchers, scholars and/or artists.

9) **Professionalism**: A dissertation should reflect high ethical and professional standards.

*In developing these criteria, we drew on “The University of Melbourne Additional Information for Examiners when a Candidate is Submitting a Dissertation and Creative Work for an MPhil or Masters by Research Degree.” Available at: [http://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1465213/ExaminersInformation_CreativeArts.MPhil-and-Masters.pdf](http://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1465213/ExaminersInformation_CreativeArts.MPhil-and-Masters.pdf) Accessed: April 9, 2016. In addition, we drew on the graduate level learning goals adopted by the UW-Madison Graduate Faculty Executive Committee on November 14, 2014. Available at:
Appendix 2
Proposed Policy on Collaborative Work in Completion of the Dissertation

Many dissertations involve substantial collaboration. Despite the fundamental importance of collaboration, established norms and practices lead scholars to insist on distinguishing the roles of individual researchers. Collaborators may include a mix of faculty and students and conceivably others outside of academic settings. The Graduate School should adopt the following policy for dissertations involving collaboration and co-authorship:

a) A dissertation can be composed, in part or as a whole, of co-authored work. Graduate programs are responsible for determining a mechanism to establish whether an individual student’s contributions to the dissertation are sufficient to warrant granting the doctorate. One, but not the only mechanism, would be to require that the dissertation include one sole authored chapter that summarizes the research described in the other chapters of the dissertation and explains the student’s role. Whatever mechanism is chosen, the program should provide details in its graduate student handbook and educate graduate faculty to ensure that students are fully informed about the policy.

b) Additionally, the Graduate School requires that each individual co-authored portions of a dissertation be associated with an unambiguous statement of the student’s role in its design, execution, and analysis. Such statements should be signed by the senior author (or, if s/he is not available or is the student, then the advisor should sign). We also recommended that other students who coauthor this work be invited to review and sign this statement.
Appendix 3
Proposed Policy on Co-Authored Dissertations

Collaboration is a central organizational feature of many areas of research, and it is now common practice for students engaged in collaboration to complete individual dissertations that contain co-authored chapters. There may, however, be occasion where two or more collaborating students work so intimately together that it would be more appropriate to submit a single co-authored dissertation. This policy makes co-authored dissertations possible.

Dissertations can be co-authored by two or more students provided that:

- At the time of preparation of the dissertation proposal, the students and their advisor(s) prepare a document for submission to the Graduate School for approval by a Graduate School Associate Dean. This document should include two key components:
  - A statement of rationale, explaining why the work proposed is best done by the students co-authoring rather than by collaborating and writing individual dissertations.
  - A written agreement that clearly specifies the roles of the students in carrying out the work leading to and including the written dissertation, outlining plans for subsequent publication (including authorship order), and clarifying ownership of intellectual property. The agreement should specify what will happen should the collaborative work not be productive or break down for some reason. The students, the dissertation advisor(s) and the dissertation committee should sign this agreement.

- Individual defenses are held by each of the co-authoring students.
References


