

**NEH White Paper:
Rethinking the Traditional Dissertation**

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Summary

In this white paper, we survey the status of the dissertation and related aspects of graduate education in order to provide recommendations to departments and administrators at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We begin by articulating the capacities one might hope to find in the recipient of a PhD in the humanities, arts, or humanistic social sciences. We suggest that many of these capacities call for intellectual activities that extend beyond those associated with traditional proto-monograph dissertations. We also detail many of the benefits and challenges associated with current models. We then propose several possibilities for intellectual projects that might complement and extend the traditional proto-monograph in helpful ways. We also offer suggestions for assessing these emerging projects. We conclude with concrete recommendations for departments and administrators.

Definitions

Traditional Dissertation: By traditional dissertation, we refer to the model of a written document that incorporates original research, analysis, and interpretation framed within current debates in a given field. This document is typically designed to be a graduate's proto-monograph upon receiving a degree. Although traditional dissertations may rely on a variety of methodologies (critical theory, archival research, digital tools, performance studies, oral history), they represent findings in written chapters.

Hybrid and Alternative Dissertation: For our purpose, hybrid and alternative dissertations still rely on original research, analysis, and interpretation, and engage in current debates in their respective fields, but incorporate a more flexible approach to the form and/or media used to represent and share findings and create opportunities for academic work to be articulated through engagements with communities and public performances. The creator of the hybrid or alternative dissertation considers the goals of the PhD degree, and then thinks critically about the best form (which may or may not include components of the traditional dissertation) to express their particular project to their ideal audience.

Part I: The Capacities of a Contemporary PhD Recipient

Rethinking the graduate PhD should begin not with the final artifact submitted for evaluation but with the capacities and intellectual outcomes associated with receiving a doctorate degree. These capacities should be construed in ways that can be achieved through multiple pathways (e.g., a student can develop project management abilities by pursuing a variety of intellectual activities and creating a range of artifacts). Furthermore, these capacities should represent transferable behaviors that are relevant for lifelong intellectual engagement and future work in various fields and positions both inside and outside of the academy. In short, rethinking the dissertation should begin by articulating the profile, behaviors, and capacities of a contemporary public or private intellectual and communicator.

While unique aspects of a PhD recipient will vary from field to field, there are a number of shared outcomes that can be identified. The outcomes listed below represent established capacities identified by institutions actively working to re-envision graduate education (see the list from the [University of Michigan](#)) as well as characteristics that represent the mission of UNC-Chapel Hill. Not all of these capacities need to be fulfilled by every graduate, but all graduates should demonstrate strong abilities in many of these areas. In general, recipients of a PhD should be able to:

- **Analyze and synthesize** collections of information
- **Engage** in open-ended problem solving
- **Design and implement** research plans that include multiple research methodologies
- **Frame** questions and draw conclusions related to research
- **Translate** research to make it understandable to multiple audiences
- **Deliver** engaging performances and presentations
- **Teach** concepts and capacities to others
- **Compose** and communicate in multiple genres and formats

- **Engage** with communities to develop and share their research
- **Facilitate** discussions and coordinate collaborative activities
- **Work** in team-based situations, providing leadership or meeting obligations
- **Manage** and maneuver within complex institutional settings
- **Set and meet** deadlines for accomplishing complex projects.

Part II: The Benefits and Challenges of the Current Model

Before broadening our vision of the paths a dissertation might take, we highlight some of the strengths of the traditional dissertation. The traditional dissertation is an important form of knowledge production and a valuable opportunity for honing the research and writing skills of young scholars. It is, moreover, an opportunity to synthesize past research and reframe it in light of new scholarly developments. Perhaps the most significant strength of the traditional dissertation is that it allows scholars from various backgrounds, and with various skill sets, to evaluate the work of the dissertator. A traditional monograph, unlike many alternative models, acts as a common denominator enabling widespread engagement with and assessment of the research. Other benefits include training in research methods and opportunities, contributing original research to academic disciplines, and developing many of the desired capacities of a PhD recipient (as described above). Moreover, writing and defending a traditional dissertation allows PhD recipients to practice communicating in written and oral forms--integral types of knowledge production in the humanities.

However, the traditional paradigm presents several challenges. First, the proto-monograph often lends limited utility to the student, the audience, and the field at large. Dissertations are not frequently published, and, if published, are written for an academic audience, which may limit the impact of the student's work. The style of a dissertation monograph is different than that of an academic journal article or even published book, presenting another obstacle to publication and distribution of the work.¹ Furthermore, dissertations are unlikely to be cited in academic journals, creating a disincentive for students to create publication-ready work.

Second, dissertations as monographs commit graduate education to one line of disseminating new knowledge. This print-based form is poorly suited for knowledge production that now includes work with data; media that includes sound, images, and motion; research into digitally mediated spaces and augmented reality; scholarship that involves performance; or academic engagements with communities--to name a few emerging possibilities.

Further, the traditional model assumes graduate education to be preparation for a career in academia. As many students' goals lie outside of the academy, doctoral-level education as is may not be preparing them to achieve their career goals. The current model also assumes the value of graduate education to be in the product and does not allow for the appreciation of the process that led to this finished product. Therefore, when re-envisioning the dissertation, it is worth considering the experiential and procedural elements of graduate education as well as broadening our definition of what constitutes the final dissertation project.

¹ <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6275&context=etd>

Part III: Emerging Models for Alternative Dissertation Forms

The traditional proto-monograph dissertation form has served two major purposes for doctoral students: to train them in discipline-specific research methodologies and to allow them to contribute original creative research to their disciplines and to the academy. However, as the challenges we have outlined above suggest, questions of efficacy and accessibility related to the traditional form have already opened conversations about potential alternative and hybrid forms for a dissertation product. Many of the conversations about alternative dissertation forms focus on an alteration in evaluation from product-oriented evaluation (i.e., how does this dissertation extend a specific body of knowledge?) to process-oriented evaluation (i.e., what are the skills and capacities that are gained and honed by the processes required by a certain form or product?). Indeed, the importance in focusing this section on changes to dissertation forms is informed by the impossibility of changing what we expect from a process until we allow a change to its product.

What follows is a sample of the possible forms that an alternative or hybrid dissertation product might take. This list is formed from conversations with graduate students in a variety of fields across the humanities at UNC-Chapel Hill and from the work and publications of [The Graduate Center at CUNY](#), [HASTAC](#), the [PhD Lab in Digital Knowledge at Duke University](#), and the [Rackam Graduate School at the University of Michigan](#). Emerging models for alternative/hybrid dissertations include:

- **Multiple published journal articles** forming a compendium of the student's contributions to multiple disciplines and sub-disciplinary study
- **Digital scholarship** which includes a range of possibilities from a fully interactive website to databases to maps to digital recordings of video or audio to searchable catalogs of images, among many other possibilities
- **Digital processes** which focus on methodologies necessary to develop knowledge and research products. These processes include coding, TEI markup, and image cataloging, among many other possibilities
- **Community outreach** to be demonstrated in an approach to scholarship that focuses the learning, discovery, and sharing of student's scholarship on involvement with a community
- **Public engagement**, to be demonstrated and evaluated in terms of the translation of scholarly applications of academic knowledge into practice- and publicly-oriented research, teaching, and other forms of engagement
- **Performance, film, creative writing, and other artistic forms of research** to be captured in non-print forms or demonstrated through engagements with public audiences
- **Oral history** including the processes of oral history collection and archival creation, preservation, accessing
- **Collaboratively written or made products** in which multiple graduate students and faculty work to produce a project and/or monograph through shared research, analysis, and production processes.

Part IV: Evaluating Emerging Dissertation Models

A number of criteria have been established for evaluating digital scholarship in the humanities. Broadly, these recommendations call for a shared responsibility between dissertators and committees. For dissertators, this responsibility involves some level of translation work that can help committees recognize ways that projects meet the outcomes associated with the PhD and the dissertation, even when the final product of that work may be unfamiliar. For committees, this responsibility involves a willingness to learn about new modes of knowledge sharing, efforts to bring in outside expertise to assist with assessment of unfamiliar work, and a commitment to helping candidates avoid having to unfairly replicate alternative/hybrid intellectual work to make it fit with older paradigms.

In addition to these broad responsibilities, dissertators and committees should commit to:

Facilitating the evaluation of projects in the mode or mediums in which they are produced.

This might entail inviting committee members to participate in public activities, meetings between dissertators and committee members to jointly explore projects in non-print media, enlisting outside experts with background in non-print media, and working with original project files or software necessary to develop non-traditional projects.

Accounting for collaboration and shared work. For dissertators, this might involve spelling out various contributions to collaborative projects and acknowledging software, databases, platforms, etc. that support intellectual work. For committees, this might entail a willingness to consider and reward work that involves multiple authors or that extends materials that might not be produced originally by dissertators.

Focusing on intellectual outcomes. In negotiations related to assessment, dissertators and committees should aim to make judgments based on the intellectual work and rigor accomplished by the dissertation, rather than the shape of the final product. Outcomes like exploring a research concern with depth, extending existing paradigms with new knowledge, or demonstrating ethical and original research should form the basis of mutual explanations and judgments between dissertators and committees.

Considering alternative measures of impact and value. Dissertators should be able to articulate the scope and potential impact of non-traditional projects. Committees should be willing to consider metrics beyond those typically associated with potential publication to evaluate the potential impact of a project.

Part V: Recommendations

To conclude, we would like to introduce actionable items to address the problems with the current dissertation model raised in this paper. These actions can be addressed within a timeframe of six months to two years. Although these recommendations derive in part from concerns related to the proto-monograph in the humanities, arts, and humanistic social sciences,

we also encourage the University to create incentives or directives for promoting alternative/hybrid dissertations in all fields. Many of these recommendations call for change at either the level of departments and faculty culture or administratively.

1. **Goal:** Allow non-scholars to serve on Ph.D. committees in addition to the current composition requirements set forth in the UNC-CH Graduate Student Handbook. **Action:** A committee should be formed whose goal is to edit the graduate school handbook paragraph titled, “Committee Composition” (p. 27) to address this matter.
2. **Goal:** Incorporate discussion of multiple options for fulfilling the PhD into degree criteria (e.g., written and oral examinations, prospectus defenses, etc.) that are part of the PhD curricular timeline. Dissertation-oriented components of the PhD timeline should not be based on the assumption of the proto-monograph as the default project. Committees should consider how a range of models might give the student the skills or end-goals they need/desire. **Action:** Develop directives for departments to revise their graduate handbooks and procedures to explicitly call for open-ended discussion of multiple models for candidates. Introduce an optional post-exam, pre-prospectus committee meeting where students interested in pursuing a hybrid dissertation can submit a two-page summary of their research goal with a brief explanation of how they will bring that goal to fruition and engage in open-ended discussion to identify the best model for the final PhD project.
3. **Goal:** Establish a dissertation-completion fellowship (or grant) to fund graduate students pursuing hybrid dissertation work. The grant should require that the recipient presents his or her research to the granting body as well as in a public forum to foster broader engagement. **Action:** Form a committee to apply for funding to establish the grant if funding is not already available.
4. **Goal:** Develop evaluation standards for alternative/hybrid dissertations. **Action:** Form a committee of faculty and graduate students to codify recommendations; develop directives for departments to revise their graduate handbooks and procedures to include criteria for evaluation.
5. **Goal:** Create a means for the preservation of hybrid dissertations. **Action:** Require any student pursuing a hybrid dissertation to meet with the special collections librarian following the approval of his or her prospectus to consider options for how the dissertation may best be preserved.