

# *Demystifying the Dissertation*

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Imagine that you are observing production in a widget factory and that your view toward the end of the process has been obstructed. As a result, you witness only partial assembly and then, somewhat miraculously, a string of finished products. Given the complexity of their design, you become curious: What occurred in between? In the production of PhDs, this blind spot is the dissertation process. Because it is decentralized and largely privatized, the process remains hidden to most graduate students, leaving them unprepared to negotiate the multifaceted challenges of the dissertation stage.

At the MLA's first conference on doctoral education, in 1987, Susan Wolfson observed that graduate students are rarely taught how to become teacher-scholars, since the "implicit assumption that [graduate programs] teach subjects, not methods, marginaliz[es] discussion of pedagogy and of orientation to the profession" (61). Since then, many others have agreed that academe has been historically resistant to "professionalization in general and to professional training of graduate students" (MLA Ad Hoc Committee 191). In response, efforts by the MLA and other higher education organizations have sought to improve teacher training, job market preparation, and the subsequent orientation of new faculty members to their institutional roles and responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> But there has been correspondingly little discussion of the dissertation—the foundation of a scholarly career; a significant criterion in academic hiring; and, for too many, an obstacle to degree completion or the primary factor in attrition.

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At the 1987 conference, Paul Cantor drew attention to the dissertation as a “forgotten part of the graduate curriculum” (9). Yet like many, he discusses the dissertation primarily in relation to the job market, leaving aside the central question of what constitutes a humanities dissertation as well as how students should go about writing one. In the published proceedings of the MLA’s second doctoral education conference, held in 1999, no contributor takes the dissertation process as his or her theme (“Conference”). While there is some helpful information on the dissertation in the *MLA Guide to Doctoral Programs* as well as the *MLA Style Manual* (Gibaldi), these and other MLA sources (e.g., “Advice to Graduate Students: From Application to Career” and “Advice to Universities and Graduate Programs on Graduate Student Rights and Responsibilities,” both at [www.mla.org/documents](http://www.mla.org/documents)) do not substantively address the potential complications of the process. With one exception (Clark), the dissertation has not recently been featured in *Profession*, except in peripheral relation to other issues (Moore; Wicke). Larger studies of doctoral education, particularly those focused on attrition and diversity, likewise tend to gloss over the dissertation stage. Lest my list of works cited appears to contradict these claims, I should note that most of these sources mention the dissertation only in passing or not at all.

In the general absence of substantive conversation about the dissertation process, many graduate students turn to commercial self-help guides that do take the dissertation as their primary subject (e.g., Bolker; Sternberg). But, aimed at a general audience, these works cannot address significant differences in disciplinary and interdisciplinary norms that influence the production and evaluation of dissertations. Although such guides offer valuable advice on time management and writing, they do not confront the departmental issues that can make the difference between attrition and completion (Semenza’s chapter on the humanities dissertation is a recent exception).

What accounts for the relatively widespread omission of an issue so central to graduate education? In part, such an oversight simply follows from the resistance to professionalization. In addition, the Romantic figure of the humanities scholar as a lone genius leads many to believe that the dissertation is a private and idiosyncratic process best left to the individual or, at most, the committee. As a result, the process remains undertheorized. For example, a recent study across many disciplines suggests that many faculty members do not have well-developed criteria for the evaluation of dissertations and that, taken collectively, their values conflict with one another (Lovitts, “How to Grade”). Quite obviously, this study sheds light on how committees function: stories of graduate students caught in a conflict between supervisors are legion.

While writing a dissertation is indeed a highly individualized process, it is nonetheless an institution in the sociological sense, having recognizable features, practices, and norms. Although the relatively hidden nature of the dissertation process has negative implications for all graduate students, it especially hurts those who are underrepresented in academe. In this essay, I link discourses on attrition, diversity, and graduate education specifically to the dissertation process, suggesting that the process is both the most privatized or hidden aspect of humanities doctoral training and a potential site of institutional transformation. I describe the problems as I see them and offer solutions, some of which could be easily adopted at the individual or departmental level, others of which require more protracted institutional involvement.

### ATTRITION, DIVERSITY, AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

Perhaps because they often function institutionally as teachers, graduate students are a liminal group whose own education is often overlooked in discussions of pedagogy. We know far less about effective practices and outcomes of graduate study than of undergraduate education. We do know that only about half of entering humanities doctoral students obtain their degree after ten years (of course, these figures vary by discipline and program). My remarks do not apply to those who have made an affirmative decision to change careers. Rather, I am interested in those who drift away from their programs despite an expressed desire to complete the PhD.

Disparities in attrition patterns suggest that the problem stems at least in part from inhospitable institutional norms and structures: women leave at a higher rate than men, racial minorities in greater numbers than whites, and humanities students more often than those in the natural sciences (Smallwood). Women now make up approximately half of humanities graduate students, but ethnic minorities remain significantly underrepresented in the humanities (including Asian Americans, who are often cited as overrepresented in aggregate data that fail to account for both disciplinary and intra-ethnic differences). Since fewer than half of those who complete the PhD find tenure-track jobs, we can further infer that roughly only a quarter of those who enter get the opportunity to establish a secure academic career. Faculty demographics suggest that a similar pattern of attrition exists on the tenure track: in disproportionate numbers, women and faculty members of color exit prematurely or are denied tenure (Trower and Chait). Viewed in this light, the doctoral system appears as a biased and wasteful treatment of human resources.

In contrast to the Darwinian view of attrition as a form of natural selection, research indicates that there is no difference in aptitude between those who leave and those who stay (Lovitts, *Leaving*). I hope my own near-exit story, below, will put a human face on this point. Belief in a meritocracy functions in the university, as it does in society at large, to obscure structural inequalities and systemic contradictions. Unfortunately, the inclination of higher education institutions to address the problem of doctoral attrition has been severely undermined by their increasing dependence on cheap graduate student labor and the shrinkage of tenure-track positions for graduates. If the university has an unconscious, its repressed wish would be this: it does not actually want all graduate students to finish their degrees, let alone quickly. Nonetheless, I proceed on the assumption that accepting students into doctoral programs ethically requires institutions to provide the necessary advising and instruction, broadly construed, for program completion.

At the 1999 doctoral education conference, Gerald Graff affirmed that graduate students are “in the dark about what they are supposed to do and afraid to ask out of fear of looking unsophisticated or naïve. The message they get is that if you are any good, you will *already know* the essential secrets” (“Conference” 1192). But minority or nontraditional students are least able to reveal their lack of professional knowledge, since the habitual misreading of an information deficit as a lack of intelligence can fuel negative cultural stereotypes. Such constraints may pervade advising relationships—both most crucial and most uneven at the dissertation stage—inhibiting the open questioning and exchange essential to teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if we ask, “Who loses when one is simply supposed to know how to be a professional from watching one’s parents or other role models?” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee 191), we see that the essential secrets of the profession are not equally hidden from all. Those who have the most uninhibited access to institutional insiders will eventually find out what they need to know.

Academe’s historical reliance on informal or privatized networks for professional development disadvantages not only those who may lack cultural access but also those who lack structural access, such as students employed primarily outside the department or those with family or other commitments that limit opportunities to socialize in department hallways. As many have noted, graduate student demographics have changed significantly in recent decades, particularly in the field of letters, which has become “primarily female, markedly older, and noticeably less white” (Mowder 233). In my own person, I represent all these categories as well as that of the student-parent. Having arrived at my PhD program orientation with my three-month-old in tow, I can affirm that contemporary graduate students face “different

obstacles to completion than those encountered by the typical doctoral candidate of 30 years ago, who was a 24 year old male” (234).<sup>3</sup> Yet as Louise Mowder notes, influential efforts aimed at reducing time to degree have neither pursued the implications of this demographic shift in the graduate population nor accounted for significant disciplinary differences.

I briefly note some key differences between dissertations in the natural sciences and those generated in education, (most) social sciences, and the humanities. These features seem generally consistent, although some variation exists within the disciplines:

Science graduate students may derive their topic from the larger research project of their advisers, with whom they work collaboratively; humanities students must develop an original topic, and they usually work in isolation.

Science graduate students are often funded for their dissertation research; humanities students typically fund their programs through teaching (usually the most labor-intensive introductory or writing courses) or other employment that may not comport with the demands of the dissertation stage.

Science (and some social science) dissertations may be a compilation of discrete articles; humanities dissertation writers typically develop a unified monograph, which poses particular writing challenges.

These differences demand careful attention, and yet, as Mowder notes, they have not been sufficiently addressed in institutional policies and practices.

## THEORIZING THE HUMANITIES DISSERTATION

Deborah Stewart, of North Carolina State University, has said that we must think of doctoral education as a “wedge issue”—that is, addressing the inefficiency of graduate programs may enable us to fix a host of interrelated problems in higher education (Smallwood). Similarly, a critical examination of the dissertation process may go to the heart of interrelated problems in graduate education, particularly in the humanities. For example, if we take seriously Joseph Heathcott’s admonition that “departments continue to run doctoral programs on an outdated guild model” despite dismal academic employment statistics, then we must ask what purpose a dissertation now serves. And how should one view the relation between one’s dissertation topic and the job market or subsequent academic work? If we heed repeated calls for better theories of teaching as well as view teaching as a form of scholarship (Guillory, “Very Idea” and “Valuing”), then shouldn’t more humanities dissertations take pedagogy as their subject?

Even if we take the traditional view that PhD training should be wholly geared toward a scholarly career, we might still debate the dissertation’s present format. Must it be modeled on the book, or could it take the form

of discrete articles or a scholarly portfolio of some kind? If we are wedded to the monograph, is it “just a dissertation” or (given the emphasis on publication in hiring and for tenure) a draft of one’s first book? From his seasoned editorial perspective, William Germano describes the differences in these scholarly genres and their audiences and advises, “you won’t be able to transform a dissertation into a book manuscript without looking at your writing voice” (102). His recent guide *From Dissertation to Book* should not be deferred reading for graduate students, since it could productively alter the dissertation’s form from its very inception. At the level of process, we might also consider how authority transfers, quite literally, from adviser to graduate student. Eviatar Zerubavel argues that it is more intellectually productive to generate a draft of the whole manuscript before seeking feedback from an adviser (which of course does not preclude involving other readers in the meantime). So should more dissertation writers break from the common model of dutifully submitting successive chapters for review?

To elicit discussion on these and other relevant issues, I organized three national roundtables to take place this year at, consecutively, the conferences of the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA), the American Studies Association, and the MLA (a special session entitled “Theorizing the Humanities Dissertation”). Since the first of these events has already taken place, I can report that my initial observations have been affirmed: participants resoundingly agreed that the dissertation process needs demystifying and, quite possibly, restructuring. Their response is particularly telling given that women’s studies has been a field especially committed to pedagogy. Participants at the NWSA conference noted the difficulties, which exist in other interdisciplinary programs, of negotiating the dissertation process across multiple departments and heterogeneous methodologies. Such conference forums are important sites for theorizing doctoral education, because PhD programs are highly decentralized, unlike the legal or medical professions, whose national licensing requirements result in more curricular and procedural uniformity. It is my hope that analyzing the dissertation process from many different disciplinary and institutional perspectives will generate information about both problems and strategic responses that can be disseminated for our collective benefit.

## DEMYSTIFYING THE DISSERTATION

Researchers concur that early attrition is both psychologically and economically preferable to late attrition. Unfortunately, many doctoral students exit well after the completion of course work, some with all requirements met except for the dissertation. The Council of Graduate Schools has observed

that the dissertation is a major obstacle to degree completion in the humanities (Mowder 233). Certainly, given the disciplinary differences cited above, it is a major factor in the lengthier average time to degree in our fields. Thus it seems reasonable to assume that attrition at the all-but-dissertation (ABD) stage is related to the challenges posed specifically by the dissertation process. Why do students drop out after having come so far?

The sociologist David Sternberg suggests that ABD attrition results largely because graduate students are “*unsocialized* to the scope and meaning of [a] dissertation” (20) and therefore “even graduate students at the top of their classes [are shocked when] the dissertation does not necessarily follow smoothly.” As a result,

dissertation anomie is the occupational disease of the ABD. Structurally, it is a dislocation between stated official goals of a doctoral program, on the one hand, and the unavailability of means—particularly faculty personnel, tutelage and support—for the candidate’s successful pursuit of his goals. Psychologically, the dislocation is experienced by individual candidates in feelings of drifting, powerlessness and despair. (15)

According to Sternberg, this disjunction occurs because most people fail to recognize the structure of the PhD as “*two* separate programs, one ending with coursework [and] the other beginning with ‘applying’ [to] write a dissertation through submission of [the] proposal” (30). Many graduate students and advisers do not realize that these stages are “unreflexive to each other” (i.e., one’s performance in course work may have little to do with how well one negotiates the prospectus) and that “a *decision* to write” must be made, along with a serious “cost accounting” necessary for completion (31).

On discovering Sternberg’s account late in my own dissertation process, I experienced the shock of recognition. After receiving a BA in English, I had worked in university career counseling, completed an MEd in higher education administration, and served as a dean of student affairs. Subsequently, while in the PhD program in English, I facilitated a university-wide seminar on pedagogy for graduate students of color; served as an undergraduate dean of academic affairs; taught widely in literary, American, and ethnic studies on many campuses; and completed my doctoral course work with academic, if not logistic, ease. Yet for all that, I was as mystified as any graduate student by the processes of academic professionalization in general and the dissertation in particular. It was precisely in the dislocation between course work and dissertation that I was offered and (temporarily) accepted a demanding full-time administrative position that could easily have turned me into another attrition statistic. I came within a hair’s

breadth of jumping career tracks, particularly as news of the academic job crisis continued to be trumpeted. But unlike many graduate students, I did not privatize my dilemma. Primed by my prior administrative training to think institutionally, I began to research the mysterious dissertation process alongside my official research on trauma narratives, becoming convinced by Sternberg's assertion that "the dissertation doctorate [may be] the least understood institution in American higher education" (5).

Chris Golde's study of ABD attrition provides a similar example in Jane, a student who paradoxically departed after a major program hurdle—the prospectus—was successfully completed. In retrospect, I believe I accepted the administrative job immediately after my prospectus stage in order to palliate the drifting feeling that Sternberg describes. But I doubt whether Jane ever came to a similar understanding: many who exit never shake off the narrative of personal failure, as I witnessed firsthand at the NWSA conference, when a long-term ABD poignantly described how her unfinished degree continued to haunt her. Apparently her committee could not agree on the direction her project should take; each reader demanded many revisions that did not accord with the feedback of other readers. After several rounds of this dysfunctional process, she threw up her hands in defeat and left the program. As a Latina, she reminded us that attrition carries an especially heavy burden for underrepresented students, who, in addition to feeling that they failed themselves, may feel they have let down their community. Students like Jane need to know that their institution bears considerable responsibility for the attrition.

Sternberg's analysis helps us read attrition differently: not as the natural demise of the intellectually inadequate but as the stalling that occurs when "virtually the entire support structure vanishes" (13). The problem is not necessarily that dissertation advisers are uncaring or unavailable (my own was and is a valued mentor) but rather that graduate students "don't know what they don't know": by virtue of their very condition as learners, they cannot formulate the questions whose answers would help them when they most need help. As a result, advisers may assume graduate students know more than they actually do about the process. For this reason, systematic orientation and instructional vehicles are crucial, particularly in the vulnerable transition from course work to the dissertation stage.

It is not ability that separates the ABD from the PhD. I nearly drifted away from my program, even though in many ways I was the best-case graduate student, nontraditional or otherwise: my parents are well-educated, and I attended an elite liberal arts college; since I am an Asian American, the model-minority stereotype frames me as hardworking and smart (although the stereotype often fuels the misperception that Asian

American students don't need help or advice); I excelled in course work and exams; I had both the financial and psychological support of a partner, along with reliable child care; my dissertation adviser and committee were cooperative; I had prior professional experience and a broad perspective on higher education. Yet I regularly struggled with the enormity of my juggling act and wondered whether I could finish my degree. If the decade I spent in my humanities PhD program often felt like touch and go to me, how does it work for single parents, for ethnic minorities viewed dismissively as affirmative action cases, for students with unsupportive advisers or dysfunctional committees, or for those working far too many jobs (to pay the bills) while pursuing the PhD?

Graduate students and recent PhDs closest to the problems are least able to solve them, because the demands of the job market and tenure track take precedence. In addition, graduate students and untenured faculty members may not feel free to critique institutional processes while in the position of being formally evaluated. Long-tenured faculty members may be unaware of how different the graduate experience today is from their own; even for those who get it, the task of program reform or mentoring graduate students tussles with many competing scholarly, teaching, and service demands. Until faculty members are encouraged through appropriate incentives and rewards to engage in such service, the professional training of graduate students will remain uneven and non-systematic. For all these reasons, it becomes crucial to integrate graduate advising into the curriculum and other formal program structures, to provide important information equally to all.

In her discussion of evaluative criteria for dissertations, Barbara Lovitts offers a key word: the implicit must be made explicit ("How to Grade"). Modes of explicit and formal instruction serve the larger goal of diversifying academe (whether on the basis of class, gender, nation, or race), because such practices offset the knowledge gaps generated by assumptions of a cultural common sense that allows too many things to go without saying. What follows are some ideas about what programs and students can do to ameliorate the problems I've described. Obviously, these recommendations must be adapted in ways that make sense at the local level; indeed, many programs already enact some version of these practices.

## WHAT PROGRAMS CAN DO

*Secure informed consent.* Provide applicants for admission and those new to the program with updated statistics on attrition, typical length of the dissertation process, time to degree, and job placement.

*Create cohort orientation structures from matriculation through the defense.* Many departments already have established formats for teacher training and supervision; additional strategies could include courses or programs on the history and current state of the profession, research and publishing methods, the job market, and of course the prospectus and dissertation. Whether part of the for-credit curriculum or in other forms, such group programs foster a sense of community while leveling the advising field.

*Design a formal bridge between course work and the prospectus and dissertation.* Some programs now design comprehensive exams with an eye toward helping students shape a prospectus. Some also offer prospectus-writing courses for credit or prospectus and dissertation writing workshops. For other ideas, see the dissertation-related “promising practices” link at the *Re-envisioning the Ph.D.* Web site hosted by the University of Washington.

*Forge connections between generations of graduate students.* The dissertation process remains hidden in large part because advanced doctoral students don’t always mingle in the same institutional spaces as predissertation students. Faculty members could invite dissertation writers to present their work in relevant graduate classes; candidates completing their degrees could invite students at earlier stages to attend their defenses. Such tactics render dissertation work more visible, while fostering a more vibrant intellectual community.

*Go virtual.* Most departments now have a Web site. Make sure there is a page specifically devoted to the dissertation process, with a bibliography of helpful guides (e.g., Bolker; Semenza; Sternberg; Zerubavel), links to online dissertation resources (e.g., those available through the Rackham Graduate School at the Univ. of Michigan), and the institution’s own formal degree requirements. To foster intellectual community, the site could include a registry of recently completed dissertations and those in progress, so students and faculty members alike can connect with others who share similar critical approaches and interests.

*Develop explicit evaluation criteria and disseminate them to advisers and students.* Here the goal is not to prescribe uniformity or to limit autonomy but to challenge department members to develop conceptual language about the purpose and form of the dissertation and how its quality might be determined (Lovitts, “How to Grade”).

*Provide examples of good prospectuses and dissertations.* While dissertations are available at the library, departments could combat the “out of sight, out of mind” tendency by making some diverse samples readily available in the graduate lounge or through Web links at the department’s page for dissertation writers. Just as we teach undergraduates the structure of essays, graduate students need to become familiar with the forms of successful dissertations (see Clark’s helpful discussion of the prospectus as a genre).

*Consider a funding structure that releases students from teaching during (at least part of) the dissertation-writing phase.* In such a paradigm, however, it is important that students remain intellectually and socially connected to the department through other programs.

*Create strategic overlap between student teaching and research.* If students cannot be funded for full-time dissertation research and writing, then a more harmonious overlap between teaching and scholarship might help. As is well known, the most labor-intensive courses are typically staffed by graduate students, who begin with the fewest pedagogical and institutional resources. There are good reasons for experienced senior faculty members to teach beginning students and for advanced doctoral students to teach specialized courses in their research areas, at least occasionally.

*Be sensitive to work and family issues in scheduling, orientation, and policy making.* Many academic meetings take place after formal day care ends. Consider whether it is absolutely necessary for such events to take place at those times. In addition, many institutions do not consider the financial, housing, and social needs of student-parents when orienting them to the program. Likewise, programs should consider whether the institution might do more to ease the financial burden for those with dependents. As they do for faculty members, institutions should have parental leave policies for graduate students and alter the statute of limitations accordingly (indeed, departments should consider whether existing time limits are fair to humanities students in general).

*Reward faculty members for excellent advising; hold negligent advisers accountable.* It is well known that graduate advising falls below scholarship and teaching in most institutional reward systems and that dedicated advisers and teachers become heavily overburdened while those who evade service garner more time to pursue their own interests. Thus, graduate faculty members with high advising loads might be given release time from teaching or other service engagements, provided a research assistant, or rewarded by other means that make sense in local contexts. Faculty members who do not fulfill their advising obligations should be asked to take up other institutional tasks and should be held accountable at their evaluation time.

## WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO

*Inform yourself.* Ask your graduate program director for information about the average length of time for dissertation completion, as well as time to degree and job placement. Peruse the dissertation-related materials in this article's works-cited list well before you reach the dissertation stage. Ask advanced students and faculty members for helpful strategies.

*Decide whether you really want a PhD.* Until the system changes in ways that suggest otherwise, there is only one good reason to pursue a PhD: to study or teach particular subject matter. Do not matriculate if this is not your primary motivation. If you realize such work is not for you, leave sooner rather than later (assuming that departmental attempts to improve matters or that transfer options have failed).

*Think positively and act constructively.* Graduate students can fall into unproductive cycles of lamenting their (all too real) problems: surround yourself with stimulating people who can renew your faith in your quest. If your department lacks sufficient social or intellectual enrichment programs, ask administrators to offer them or host them yourself (e.g., a thematic lecture series or groups formed for writing, directed study, or shared avocations).

*Don't worry about finding the perfect dissertation topic.* Focus instead on choosing a dissertation area that can sustain your interest through the early faculty years and to which you can bring your own perspective (see Sternberg on this issue).

*Choose advisers and committee members strategically.* Unfortunately, students must sometimes choose between scholarly expertise and mentoring skills in an adviser. Although in theory a specialist can offer the most informed feedback and a big name can open doors, those doors will not open if you do not finish your degree. As much as you can within specialization norms, select your advisers on a behavioral model: judge them by what they do, not according to their cultural or scholarly identities. The best advisers will make time for you, listen respectfully, respond thoughtfully, provide reasonably prompt feedback, and prioritize the goal of degree completion.

*Develop a financial plan for finishing.* Apply for funding or, in the absence of a fellowship, consider a loan to cover a finite, full-time writing period aimed at completion. The debt you incur may be preferable to the angst of struggling for many years to write part-time while employed at multiple jobs.

*Develop a time-management plan.* At the dissertation stage you need to write on a regular basis, even if, and especially when, employed elsewhere (see Bolker; Semenza; Sternberg; Zerubavel). Many, if not most, graduate students have completed their dissertations while juggling several commitments. With planning, you can too.

*Save your freshest time for writing.* Whatever your preferred writing time, arrange your teaching, employment, or child-care schedule to protect it. Defer all other tasks until you've logged in your writing time, and use low-energy hours for routine tasks such as housework or updating your bibliography.

*Get support.* Give family and friends information about the dissertation process so they know what you're up against (Sternberg's introduction is a

good place to start). If they don't already know these sources, give your advisers Joan Bolker's final chapter and the University of Michigan's *How to Mentor Graduate Students*: both have been written expressly for advisers and can help foster a productive discussion. Join a writing group or otherwise socialize with graduate peers who understand what you're going through. Ease your schedule by getting extra help with child care and housework if you can afford it or by constructing labor exchanges with friends.

*Get a life.* Practice healthy work habits, since your juggling act will only intensify after you have finished the degree (Hall). Cultivate physical fitness to offset the many hours spent hunched over your books or computer. Although it may seem counterintuitive while a large project looms over you, researchers suggest that people are more productive when they devote some time each day and at least one day a week to other pursuits (Moody, *Demystifying* 5).

### BREAKING THE CYCLE: DIVERSIFYING SCHOLARSHIP

In her contribution to the 1987 doctoral education conference, Helene Møglén highlighted the promise of scholarly work “not readily categorized according to traditional fields” to “change the form and substance of both undergraduate and graduate education” (87). Metaprofessional analysis is just such a category. It is not a coincidence that most dissertation guides have been written by scholars trained in education, psychology, or sociology: these are disciplines with a scholarly, not service, interest in institutional practices. Such a pattern suggests one major obstacle to making improvements to graduate education from within the humanities: disciplinary and promotion processes do not sufficiently value metaprofessional or pedagogical scholarship. In closing, then, I briefly consider the ways in which interrogating the dissertation process invites us to rethink existing scholarly values.

Mowder writes that the institutional system “brought to bear [on] ‘graduate student[s]’ . . . demands that they shape and reorder not only their interests and intellects, but their very lives and definitions of self in order to be considered as full participants within their fields” (229). As Robert Ibarra suggests in his study of Latino/a academics, the stakes of such disciplinary socialization are highest for underrepresented students, whose very identities hang in the balance. But as Jonathan Mulrooney made clear years ago in *Profession*, part of what has disappeared in an increasingly professionalized climate is the very figure of the student: “rarely can [graduate students] voice professional identities still in process, still learning. . . . A graduate student’s identity must be figured in relation to the past, to what has been experienced and achieved and can be com-

modified and demonstrated as such, rather than in relation to the future, to what is uncertain, unclear, possible.” As Mulrooney rightly observes, this is a “depressing way to live” (258). It is also a poor way to think.

The dynamic Mulrooney describes might be understood not only as the discursive contradiction generated by the oxymoron “student professional” but also as that between the scholar and the intellectual. I am reminded of Jean-François Lyotard’s self-stylization as a “perpetual student” (Olson and Worsham 11). How well does the profession’s conception of scholarship accommodate the figure of the intellectual as a student and the critical openness being a student suggests? Does graduate education in general, and the dissertation process in particular, cultivate the student in the professional, the intellectual in the scholar? Have doctoral programs understood that “we need to teach our students [what] we ourselves need to learn—how to find our way in a heterogeneous field that resists unification” (Armstrong 105)? The dissertation may be the moment at which we most want to encourage graduate students to speak as students—that is, as questioning intellectuals rather than as experts. Unfortunately, as Catharine Stimpson observes in a larger discussion of graduate education, “current dissertation practices inadvertently discourage creativity as much as they encourage research,” leaving many aspiring intellectuals “cognitively and psychologically entombed” (“Conference” 1144). Ironically, then, although our fields boast many theorists of literary genre, we interrogate our own scholarly forms less often.

Fortunately, efforts are under way in the MLA and elsewhere to do just that. For example, a national consortium of institutions, drawing in part on Ernest Boyer’s seminal work on redefining scholarship, has formed a task force “to reconsider what constitutes excellence at tenure time,” particularly in order to better reward “public scholarship” (Cantor and Lavine). These and other observers have recognized that narrow definitions of scholarship actively inhibit the retention of diverse graduate students and faculty members, whose cultural difference often informs their professional interests, institutional roles, and scholarly methods (Trower and Chait). A diversification of scholarly norms and evaluation criteria from the dissertation through tenure would have an ameliorating effect on early-career faculty members of color and women in particular, who disproportionately bear service responsibilities on many campuses. Simply put, if different—yet equally valuable—kinds of work counted for academic advancement, emerging professionals who are underrepresented in the institution would not be in the structural bind of being in constant demand for their teaching and service in the diversity field while expected to publish prolifically in other content areas.

Since graduate students represent academe's future, the way they are educated matters a great deal. The dissertation may be a significant institutional wedge that enables a rethinking of how we orient and train graduate students from the point of matriculation through the defense. In scrutinizing this largely privatized aspect of doctoral education, we might begin to break the cycle in which,

by reproducing versions of our own schizophrenic selves through our graduate programs, we ensure the impotence of the next generation of undergraduate teachers, the increased marginalization of certain groups within the academy of literary studies, and our own separation as citizens and intellectuals from social engagement and commitment. (Moglen 86)

Shifting the balance in humanities programs from implicit to explicit, and from privatized to more formal modes of instruction and professionalization, may hold the key to the retention and promotion of diverse students and faculty members in the humanities. The resulting improvements in teaching, learning, and knowledge production will lift all boats, generating more collegial and productive institutional communities. Far from operating at the expense of academic excellence, a full-fledged commitment to training and retaining diverse graduate students will itself be the innovation that ensures the healthy future of academe in general and humanities study in particular.

## NOTES

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1. Some helpful resources for new faculty members (and graduate students who should be exposed to what awaits them) are Garcia; Germano; Hall; Lang; Moody, *Demystifying* and *Vital Information*; and Sorcinelli.

2. See the University of Michigan's excellent guides on mentoring graduate students in two versions: one for graduate students and the other for faculty advisers (resp., *How to Get* and *How to Mentor*). As they point out, graduate students must take responsibility for securing good mentoring, which should be seen no longer as a traditional dyad but rather as a multifaceted function served by a team of advisers, each of whom may meet different needs at different times. With Moody's *Vital Information*, these guides productively address the needs of nontraditional and minority students.

3. The former Harvard president Larry Summers's controversial hypothesis (in 2005) that innate gender differences explain the underrepresentation of women in science has spotlighted the gendered assumptions of academic culture as well as the tensions between career and parenting clocks. While some believe that academics should defer parenthood until the tenure track, many others argue that graduate school may be the most flexible, if financially constrained, time to start a family. Either way, programs must respond to the reality that graduate students increasingly shoulder family responsibilities.

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