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Manifesto for the Humanities

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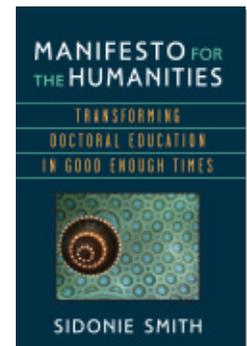
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Responding to Counterarguments

Of course, talk of dislodging the pride of place of the monograph dissertation raises all kinds of anxieties. While faculty may be intrigued by the idea of expanding forms of the dissertation, they understandably express concern about the potential downsides of allowing doctoral students to pursue alternative forms and experiment with alternative media and modes of scholarly communication. So let me take on the four major concerns, even if it seems counterproductive to introduce powerful arguments against the change I am advocating.

What's "Scholarly" about It?

One argument against expanding options for the dissertation constellates around the question of whether the long form is necessary for a dissertation to be "scholarly," and for the scholar to be credentialed in the humanities, which is what the PhD confers. Will introducing options erode the standard of excellence associated with doctoral training, substituting instead a PhD Lite?

Implied in this question about the PhD Lite is an abiding concern about the disadvantaged status of the humanities in the academy. The way to save the humanities from the assaults of deans and provosts, this argument goes, is to maintain traditional standards; and the proto-monograph dissertation is the thing that humanists do that distinguishes them from social scientists, scientists, and professional-school faculty. Humanists study books, they need to keep book culture alive, and they should put their money where their mouths are by writing them. To write them they need to have trained by writing the proto-monograph dissertation. Thus, to do away with the proto-monograph is to undermine the self-understanding of humanists, the intellectual preparedness of graduate students, and the value to the academy and to the public of the humanities. It is to concede the eroding importance of deep reading before a culture immersed in multitasking, networking, and distributed attention.

Scholarly inquiry in this argument is associated with the long-form book and its depth of thought, or what is termed a coherent intellectual project of long duration. The coherent intellectual project of the proto-monograph, requiring depth of research and scope of argument, trains students in the formidable habits of humanistic inquiry. Even as they call for greater recognition that doctoral students would benefit from preparation for multiple possible careers, then, Grafton and Grossman succinctly insist on maintaining the form of the proto-monograph dissertation: “We leave the feasibility of shorter dissertations in other humanities disciplines for our colleagues to assess,” they argue: “It’s in the course of research that historians firm up their mastery of languages and research methods, archives and arguments; and it’s while writing that they learn how to corral a vast amount of information, give it a coherent form, and write it up in a way accessible to non-specialists.”¹ Many of my colleagues across the humanities disciplines would add “amen” to that.

I want to put pressure on this notion of the equation of humanistic scholarship and long-form dissertation. Some may think they have a quick answer to the question of what is scholarly about a dissertation, and what is distinctive about the humanities dissertation, as Grafton and Grossman suggest above for the discipline of history: the long arc of a sustained argument; the deep engagement with the archive or fieldwork; the apparatus of citation of archival material and the scholarship of others; the rehearsal of familiarity with the history of the field; the sophistication of the method or theoretical approach; the elegance of the interpretation, that is, the deep reading; the independence of thought; the intellectual flair; the originality. But are these criteria of excellence only achievable and measurable in the long form?

Of these aspects of the scholarly, only the “long arc” seems to be realized *only* in the long-form proto-monograph. But wouldn’t the long-arc feature also be realized in, say, the composition of three or four 40-page essays or two 80-page pieces, all of which reach that stage of development where they are ready for submission to a scholarly journal for print or online publication? Wouldn’t the long-arc feature be realized in a translation project that combines theory and practice? Wouldn’t it be realized in a born-digital project that creates multiple pathways through a topic?

Length doesn’t ensure quality. So many pages, so much excellence. This default to quantification is an unintended consequence of fetishizing the proto-monograph. Often I’ve observed over the years that faculty, and I include myself here, are willing to pass a less-than-completely-realized and less-than-excellent-in-all-its-parts dissertation because of the desire to help a student who has lingered long beyond seven years, or faces loss of funding, or because enough of the dissertation shows enough promise of excellence down the line. I’ve observed that they, and I include myself here, are willing

to pass a dissertation that is rangy in parts, or repetitive throughout, or too rigidly theorized, or too slavish to certain interlocutors.

The scholarly boldness and imagination needed for a coherent intellectual project can be stimulated, modeled, and intensified by gaining invaluable expertise in a range of forms, short, or middle state, or long; multimedia, born digital. To bring an ensemble of essays to publishable quality, students must find compelling topics, command the archive, survey work in the field, define the argument and its stakes, refine the methodology, establish the generative theoretical terms of reference, project possible structures of development, and deploy evidence and nuanced analysis. Then, too, there are depths of many kinds. Other kinds of depth are evidenced in experimenting with different scholarly voices, trying different modes of dissemination, working not only alone but collaboratively. And the deep attention required of a humanist in the academy and necessary to turn ideas into books, however performed or distributed, can be reinforced through rigorous conceptualization, research, and ideation that is required by whatever form may be appropriate to the topic and the project. There need not be only one way—the monograph dissertation—to gain scope, depth, and credential. The issue is the expectation and achievement of excellence of and in all forms and modes.

Moreover, the overvaluation of the proto-monograph as the most excellent form of a dissertation, as the real thing, can create problems down the line for those who enter tenure-track positions. And here I take recourse to my experiences as a dissertation chair, committee member, and department chair. Graduates often imagine that the dissertation they take away with them is just about a book. A little tweaking here. A little tweaking there. I've seen many assistant professors begin their probationary period with the weight of the monograph dissertation hanging around their necks as an albatross, in print form. They have brought with them a demonstration of tutelage and the promise of field expertise, not the draft of a publishable long-form book, however bold or sophisticated or deftly written. They have brought with them a long-form project that shaped itself around dialogues with faculty mentors, with major theorists in the field, with a powerful set of theoretical insights. They have brought with them a partially digested set of chapters, some of which are promising, others of which remain thin. They have brought with them a particular scholarly discourse and scholarly voice that is often, as William Germano observes, too careful, or too protectively opaque.² They have brought with them a compendium of reviews of the work of others. They have brought with them something that weighs as much as a book but leads to a modest payoff.

I have watched as they struggle for one, two, even three years to think beyond the structure, method, scope, theoretical scaffolding, and presumed ar-

gument of the dissertation to conceptualize a related but different project that will eventuate in a book contract. Some have to shed parts that pleased their advisors; some have to pare away the overelaborate apparatus through which they perform their bona fides by citing theorists in an exercise of stringing theory. Some have to eliminate chapters that only limply advance the argument, included for the best of reasons but executed with an often-plodding momentum. Some have to hone a scholarly voice that achieves its own intellectual idioms and rhythms and no longer echoes an intimate conversation carried on with two or three theorists whom they would extend or refute. Some have yet to find their larger argument, and discover they have only a set of brilliant close readings or deft theoretical riffs, not enough to carry the weight of a book. Germano observed this as well from his long experience as an editor, and it takes him a book to “map” the process of moving “from dissertation to book.” He sagely quips in his introduction, “Taking that dissertation and making it ‘more’ isn’t a straight path. It’s a curving route with loops and off-ramps.”³

In other contexts, I have observed a concerning pattern in postdoctoral trajectories. In reading applications for various fellowships and for entry-level tenure-track positions, I have observed too often the CV of a humanities scholar with nine to 13 years dedicated to one project: the three to seven years of the dissertation writing; one to three years of a postdoc. They enter a tenure-track position in which they will spend another three to four years finding a book contract, and continually revising. While it’s imaginable that a senior scholar could spend 10 to 13 years on a magisterial work, it is hard to imagine that 10 to 13 years spent on the idea of the dissertation doesn’t take its toll. Ideas that have become stale. An argument that is outdated, and “so five-years-ago.” A research design or methodology that is not adequate to the scope of the project. Writing that is overwrought and lifeless. Now, I’m aware of the trap of arguing from an N of four or five. But I suspect that others have observed this saga of the book too long incubated. There are those occasions when the long incubation eventuates in a stunning first book; but they are rare.

And here’s another problem for humanists in the insistence on the long-form dissertation as proto-book. Graduate students are encouraged, professionalized, to break out a piece of the dissertation—most likely, a chapter—and turn it into an essay. But the essay is a different kind of intellectual project; it is not the chapter. The essay has to have its own arc, its own bold argument; it cannot be merely a brilliant deep reading. It has to make its argument from the get-go, enable the reader to glimpse the stakes, and tell a compelling story, either explicitly or implicitly. There can be no long windup that keeps delaying the payoff. Many students make this transition successfully, publishing one, two, or three pieces while in graduate school. Only the

long-arc criterion for the dissertation prevents them from having satisfied the requirement for a dissertation. What kind of logic pertains in an argument that a student who has placed three or four essays in peer-reviewed journals (whether published or in press) still has to produce a 300-page work to get the degree? Better to acknowledge that such a student might find intellectual mentors in distinguished scholars who are brilliant in the short form and replete with the agility to move from idea to idea rather than remain constrained by the long form.

Further, I would argue that there is no necessary correlation between writing a long-form dissertation and writing good “books” or a good long form of bookishness. There is a case to be made that it is often the short-form essay that generates the idea for a book, that books often come into shape through forays in several essays that try out arguments, expand the scope. And it is often the short-form essay, now online or in print, that brings attention to a work and gains a readership for it. It is through interlocutors responding to short forms of essay or conference talk that the horizon of a project expands, its methodology deepens, its theoretical framework becomes more precise.

Guinea Pigness?

A second argument asks whether doctoral students opting for alternative forms of the dissertation will be the “guinea pigs” of this experiment in radical change. I may quibble with the idea that this is radical change, but not with the concerns of graduate students who do not want to be disadvantaged in any job search for scarce positions, and not with advisors anxious that their students succeed.

In response to this concern, let me introduce another anecdotal observation from my experience of hiring tenure-track faculty at a large research university. Something like 100 to 300 applications come in, depending upon how the search is organized and what the field in play is. Members of search committees read the short forms: the letter, the research and teaching statements (if requested), and the writing sample. Successful candidates are successful because they write well in the short forms that are formulaic and the short form of the dissertation chapter that either convinces and excites or doesn't. This reading practice is also the case for committees charged with deciding on awards of predoctoral and postdoctoral fellowships.

I know I am overplaying here the idea that most of the information search committees get in the job search involves short forms. I was reminded by a respondent in one audience that letters of recommendation—which are very important in the job search process—are based on the advisor's knowledge and evaluation of the long-form proto-monograph. I should have remembered

this, since oftentimes the advisor does a better job than the candidate of presenting the stakes and arguments of the monograph dissertation. Even with this caveat, I remain convinced that promise and quality of mind and passion will just as likely come through to a search committee when students have opted for an alternative form of the dissertation. If a finalist for the position submits a set of discrete or interlocking essays, or a portfolio of several discrete forms directed at different audiences, search committees can get a fuller take on that candidate's scope of interests, maturity of scholarly voice, and flexibility of imagination. And it could be the case that such a candidate takes on the job market a list of publications already out or in press or under review. As noted in the last section, candidates with evidence of publications tended to fare better than others in the analysis of data gathered for *Educating Scholars*.⁴

A more concerning problem is that search committees may be reluctant to hire someone who does not have the proto-monograph not because they doubt the quality of mind or demonstration of promise but because they worry that there is not enough of a book project to ensure success at tenure time. Committees fear that a candidate who has not produced a monograph dissertation cannot assemble the publication record currently required for a successful tenure case. My rejoinder to this concern is several-fold. There is, of course, my observation above that the dissertation monograph is not a book, and that a long-form dissertation can become as much a burden as an unproblematic foundation for a mature and coherent intellectual project.

But to go further. This programmatic response assumes the book as the "gold standard" for tenure. A bolder approach is to advocate more flexible tenure criteria and take action to challenge the singular model of success for hiring and tenure. Pressing for flexibility, as the 2006 MLA task force report on criteria for tenure and promotion argues, will in turn change the concept of the alternative dissertation into an advantage for those with experience in multiple modes of producing scholarship, with a more elastic sense of the scholarly, and with expertise in the shorter-form argument.⁵

There have long been precedents for this flexibility in criteria within humanities disciplines. There are humanities disciplines, among them philosophy and linguistics, for which the short form is the conventional mode of scholarly communication. Some English language and literature programs already offer students the option of a creative dissertation. Doctoral students in rhetoric and composition programs use a variety of methodologies, including human subjects research, statistical methods, and ethnography to compose dissertations differently. The particular pressures of interdisciplinary doctoral programs lead students to different kinds of dissertations, even when in proto-monograph form. Collectively, multiple forms of the dissertation are already an aspect of doctoral education in the humanities.⁶ But, for

the most part, humanities programs have neither rethought graduate education tout court nor articulated a clear and purposeful vision of the dissertation as capstone.

There is also evidence emerging across North America that criteria for tenure and promotion are slowly becoming more capacious, that successful tenure cases are being built around portfolios of scholarly work in forms and modes other than the book form, that committees are adopting guidelines for evaluating born-digital scholarship, that work in the public humanities, despite the formidable difficulties in gaining recognition for it, is beginning to find a place in tenure and promotion portfolios. Guidelines at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte, for instance, stipulate a coherent set of research questions, an ongoing research program of high quality, national recognition, a substantive body of work equivalent to the monograph-plus-article standard.⁷ Finally, there are departments that might welcome candidates with a broader range of scholarly experiences and facility in adapting multiple modes of communication, as became clear to me at an ADE Summer Seminar East when the chair of Iowa State University suggested to me that technology schools such as Iowa State and Georgia State could take the lead in innovation and that she was confident her department would be open to hiring people presenting an alternative dissertation. Granted, these are a limited number of exemplary cases; and they do not come out of elite universities; but they evidence the slow erosion of a singular gold standard.

And to return to the desirability and hire-ability of candidates demonstrating capacious thoughtfulness, experimentation, and flexibility across the board, let's remember that candidacies often go awry when applicants evince little excitement, limited inventiveness, and lackluster interest in teaching. That was my experience when chair. In that room, day after day, with one candidate after another. Candidates with good résumés hesitated when asked how they would design such and such a course and could barely get beyond the platitudes of pedagogical practice in talking about students in the classroom. Imagine how interesting a candidate would be who had written a scholarly essay on some aspect of classroom practice or who had developed as part of the ensemble dissertation a website at once scholarly and teacherly.

Where's the Graduate School in All This?

Some skeptics suggest to me that graduate schools are the problem; that programs can't make such a major change to dissertation requirements because the bureaucratic machinery just cannot accommodate such change; that graduate directors and faculty are hemmed in by forms and guidelines. In responding to this concern, it's important to ask: "Where is it written?"

It isn't very often that humanities departments provide students with a written description of their concept of the dissertation and its scholarly excellence. Oh yes, graduate schools commonly publish guidelines that govern requirements for the dissertation and its submission. Departmental guidelines often include requirements for the dissertation proposal, stipulations regarding the constitution of the dissertation committee, and the dissertator's responsibilities. These are matters of process, regulations. When explicit about the expectations for a dissertation, graduate schools invoke the discourse normative for the academy: it must demonstrate evidence of originality, broad knowledge of the field, and mastery of scholarly habits; make a significant impact on the field; and be of publishable quality. Sometimes departmental guidelines include substantive rather than solely procedural details of the dissertating process. Like statements from graduate schools, statements from departments, when they give a description beyond outlining a process, emphasize the normative discourse encompassing originality, breadth of scope, argumentation, voice, expertise, and contribution to the field.

Most often written descriptions of the dissertation are silent on much that is important at this crossroads in the humanities and the academy. They do not address issues related to the diversity of forms of scholarly communication, the diversity of audiences to which one's discussion of scholarship might be directed, or the importance for future careers in the academy of telling good stories about how scholarly and teaching interests intersect and inform each other. There is little information apparent in material provided about new modes of digital scholarship—archives and archive building, database research, new methodologies, new options for argumentation and display, and the emergent logics of scholarly presentation. In other words, there is no evidence that the discourse of scholarly communication rather than publication has begun to penetrate into the presentation made to students of the work of the humanities scholar. In addition, information about the maximum page length of proto-monograph dissertations is offered without discussion of the current state of scholarly publishing and the new business models being piloted by academic presses.

Ultimately, most graduate schools don't say anything about lengths of humanities dissertations. They would get in a heap of trouble with many humanities graduate directors if they did. In linguistics and philosophy, for instance. And in some disciplines outside the humanities, there has been a shift in the concept of the dissertation, as there has been in economics, which moved from the concept of the monograph dissertation to the concept of the ensemble of three publishable essays.⁸ The conceptualization of the dissertation is an issue for departments to decide, not graduate schools.

What if faculty tried to think the dissertation through but also beyond the

terms cited in department meetings and along office corridors? Does the definition of the dissertation capture the new ecology of scholarly and pedagogical activities? Does it project the pleasure of the scholarly and not just reproduce the conformity of the exercise? Does it allude to the distinctiveness of the dissertation as a performance and not seek recourse in some obligatory terms yoked together in guidelines? Does it capture the riskiness of intellectual adventures? Does it deepen the concept of “originality” by recognizing the dialogic nature of scholarly inquiry and the synergy of people working collaboratively? Does it speak to the different kinds of expertise a dissertation project demands and hones?

Students and faculty benefit from a description of the dissertation that is worth reading. That asks its interlocutors to become different kinds of readers and writers. That’s not about details of submission. That’s not pro forma. That’s not an expression of “It goes without saying.” That is, itself, a teaching document, and a microform essay, signaling so much about doctoral education that is so often treated as if it is transparent. Such a description would tell a story about what doctoral study is about; and about what the life of the academic humanist is about. It would breathe life into the intellectual project of the humanities, and recognize how diverse are the passions, experiences, visions, and learning modes of the students who seek to become academic humanists.

The Cart and the Horse?

As all the reports and white papers and interpretation of data so dramatically capture, the times are roiling in the academy, in the humanities, and in doctoral education. Transitions are by definition hard to negotiate. They throw into dispute what is the horse, what the cart. Where is the optimal place to make change first, in the disciplines, in graduate education?

Some faculty will argue that changes in the concept of the dissertation cannot be introduced before new attitudes toward bookishness and the new modes of doing and communicating scholarly work take hold in the disciplines, and in the practices of senior faculty. Not before those changes are factored into tenure and promotion guidelines and criteria. Not before search committees begin to value different profiles as they read candidate files. Not before posted job descriptions project new ways of describing needs, professional expertise, and fields. And not before the elite schools take the lead and authorize the legitimacy of multiple kinds of dissertations.

Oh my. I find this an exhausting list of “not before.”

My argument back is that the change cannot await the checkoffs on this list of before, cannot await the imprimatur of the elites. It is time to find

another aphoristic figure and proceed on multiple fronts simultaneously. Changes to the dissertation in particular and graduate education more generally will come on a variety of fronts, indeed, are coming on a variety of fronts, and from a variety of institutions. The directions of change are multiple and intersecting.

Incoming doctoral students are bringing with them practical experiences working in digital environments, commitments to public scholarship, demands for an inclusive climate, willingness to take risks, new kinds of expertise. Responding to the emergent environment of humanities scholarship and teaching, students are pushing faculty beyond their comfort zones and normative terms of evaluation. Faculty at all ranks are beginning new projects in digital archive-building and recognizing the requirements of successful collaborations. Faculty in media studies are building new platforms for scholarly communication. Others are advocating more capacious criteria in evaluating scholarship. Professional organizations are issuing reports and mounting online toolkits. Librarians are putting together workshops for faculty anxious to get training in new skills. Graduate schools are offering symposia on multiple future careers. Enlightened administrators are directing new attention to the humanities, and resources for program development. Elite schools are initiating change, as some humanities departments are doing at Stanford and UC-Irvine with their projects of the five-year doctorate. And programs in flagship state universities have introduced new initiatives, such as the new doctorate in Hispanic studies at the University of Washington that welcomes alternative forms of the dissertation.⁹ These changes are not taking place at all institutions, or evenly within institutions. But they are taking place.

Change is not reducible to cart and horse. It's a dynamic system, full of tension and risk and rewards. It is troubling and animating. It is good for you and hard on you, more so for some than for others. I came into my academic career working with feminists at the University of Arizona to start a women's studies program; and I hope to go out of my academic career seeing a 21st-century doctoral education taking hold.

What Is to Be Gained?

Flexibility, expertise in code-switching, the ability to think deeply and across disciplines and networks at once, these are habits of mind that can be cultivated through producing alternative forms of the dissertation. And the academic humanities will need these habits of mind as faculty and students innovate and adjust to the new book, itself performative, multimodal, distributed, interactive, and perhaps even distributed across time, successively updated and revised as needed. These dispositions, these scholarly habits, these intel-

lectual skills, will enhance the attractiveness of students on the job market, as will the demonstration of excellence in whatever form of dissertation they produce, discrete article-length pieces or interlocking essays, born digital online environment or print based book, or however it might be configured or communicated.

Thinking beyond the proto-monograph does not mean proposing a PhD Lite. On the contrary, it just could be that perpetuating the singular mode of the proto-monograph dissertation in the next decades may end up reproducing a PhD Lite inadequate to an environment of higher learning that has changed radically, in ways that excite, in ways that distress, and in ways that remain unpredictable. And failing to redefine the intellectual mission of the doctorate to encompass how academic humanists research, write, and teach now might make doctoral students on the market different kinds of guinea pigs. The operative values should be originality, excellence, impact, and promise in whatever form or mode is appropriate to the topic and the project—not the quantification of 250–500 pages, or 85,000 to 140,000 words.