

**From the Lectern:  
Reforming the Dissertation Process  
Howard Karger, PhD**

After being in the “business” for 26 years, I still ask the same question: “What’s the purpose of a dissertation?” The official party line is that a dissertation must be “original research that advances knowledge.” However, if that were the real criteria, then virtually no dissertation would pass muster. In fact, most wouldn’t even make it to the starting gate.

The majority of dissertations rely on a time-tested formula. Find a small research question, launch a study, and analyze the results. The ostensible purpose of a dissertation is to construct a stage where students can demonstrate how well they do the research dance.

Consequently, a good dissertation must be “scholarly.” In other words, dry, boring and virtually unreadable – and irrelevant – for anyone not on the dissertation committee. (I’m being charitable since many committee members also find it hard to stay awake when reading these tomes.) There should be no flamboyance, no extreme positions, and little or no controversy, except when tightly contained as part of an “academic debate.” Passion is forbidden since it reeks of subjectivity. In short, a good dissertation is tedious and students tread on dangerous ground when they fail to adhere to the “formula.”

Given the absence of passion, it’s not surprising that most dissertations die an ignoble death on a library shelf, eaten by indiscriminate insects with no literary taste. For many students, bound dissertations are an ego boost. “See, I did it.” For others, it’s “My work is important. I’m proud of it and I want it published.” This may explain why so few dissertations are reborn as books or articles. It may also explain why most dissertations fail to inform practice or public policy. Almost no one takes them seriously, least of all those intimately aware of the process. In the social sciences, dissertations have become a rite of passage rather than an avenue for important scholarship with ambitions to change policy and practice.

If we deconstruct “original research that advances knowledge,” we must examine two terms: *original research* and *advancing knowledge*. But what do they mean? If a dissertation committee held students to the “original research” part, then virtually no dissertation would be acceptable. Most professors, including myself, have rarely seen a dissertation that is truly *original* research, no less having done that kind of work ourselves. Since most good research emanates from existing studies or synthesizes them, the term *original* has limited utility anyway.

Personally, I can live with a dissertation that isn’t “original,” although I prefer one that is creative. In other words, a dissertation that’s out of the box. But undertaking a creative dissertation is out of step with the “formula” and therefore dangerous for all but the most intrepid students. Doctoral students get a clear message early on. Stay safe! Remember, no committee ever refused to sign off on a dissertation because it was boring.

The second part of the statement, “advancing knowledge,” is much more troubling. What constitutes “advancing knowledge?” Do particularistic dissertations that examine a tiny or insignificant facet of a topic necessarily advance knowledge? Do researching micro parts of a question eventually lead to a better understanding of a larger question? Maybe it does in the hands of a deft theoretician, but generally not. More often than not, tiny parts stay as tiny parts and do little to advance knowledge.

A major part of any dissertation is the requirement that a student identify the significance of the problem being studied, something that’s too often downplayed. Significance becomes a perfunctory part of most theses, one that is subordinated to the research design and

the hypothesis. Doctoral students quickly learn that what matters is the sizzle not the steak. In other words, the razzle-dazzle of the methodology is more important than the significance of the problem. It's therefore not surprising that many dissertations are descriptive, lack analytical content, and are superficial. Hence, they become a "show me" exercise rather than a bold foray into the terrain of new knowledge.

Another way to look at the "significance of the problem" is to ask a simple question: "So what?" Why should I or anyone else bother to read this study? Why is what you're saying important? Does your study lead to a new understanding of the problem? Does it shed light on anything worth knowing? To whom is this study important and why? Does anyone want to know or care about what you've come up with? In other words, what is the "so what" of the study?

Requiring a "so what" component for dissertations would raise the bar. Dissertations might then evolve from a "see I can do it" exercise into one where a researcher asks an important question that people want answered. It can move from answering relatively unimportant questions to tackling larger and more important ones. Adding the "so what" component can move a dissertation from a bound stack of papers occupying a library shelf to a document that larger numbers of people actually want to read. It would also make the work of dissertations more exciting for the student and the dissertation committee.