

The Completion Agenda, Part 5: Your Publishing Plan

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Advice

What will you be expected to publish from your dissertation?



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By David D. Perlmutter December 04, 2016

My dissertation — all two volumes and 750 or so bound pages of it — sits on a shelf in my office and could be accurately characterized as both a success and a failure.

On the one hand, the completed version earned the approval of a committee and meant I could put "Ph.D." after my name forevermore. My dissertation also assisted me on the job market since its title and topic — with some rebranding — fit a tenure-track opening that I was hired to fill at a major research university.

On the other hand, my dissertation was a flop in a crucial respect — one that candidates couldn't possibly get away with in today's brutal job market. I finished my doctoral program in a state of mental and physical exhaustion and did not publish as much of my dissertation as I should have. Sure, I extracted a few papers. But it would be 10 years later — after I'd earned tenure — before I produced a book that drew on my dissertation research.

I am not alone in under-publishing early in my career. In this series on completing the dissertation I have been exploring the ins and outs of that uber-document. So far we have covered [finishing a submittable draft](#), [defending](#)

the document successfully, making revisions after the defense, and using your dissertation to advance your job hunt. Now we turn to our final topic: publishing.

Get an early start. I wrote two academic papers while I was a master's student and a couple more during my doctoral years. At the time — late '80s, early '90s — that level of productivity was considered pretty high in my field. Today I am a dean, and top candidates for tenure-track openings at our college routinely have published at least six articles and served as a co-principal-investigator on grant projects (often with their advisers).

Quality still counts. A heavily cited, prominent, high-impact piece in a top academic journal will quicken the pulse of a search committee as well as a promotion-and-tenure committee.

Across all disciplines, the research component of the tenure bar keeps getting higher year after year — and not just at large research universities. Even small liberal-arts colleges have raised their publishing expectations for new faculty hires.

Early on in your doctoral training — even if you haven't thought of a topic yet for your dissertation — you need to gain a detailed understanding of publishing norms in your field. What, approximately, should you plan to publish from your dissertation if you hope to have any shot at a tenure-track job or other postdoctoral appointment at your ideal institution?

The answers, of course, will vary wildly, depending on your field and your institution. A colleague in chemical engineering said she expects "four to six first-author publications" from her students, adding, "I don't let any of my students graduate without four." A physicist described how one of his students had hundreds of published papers before graduation — albeit with hundreds of co-authors under the group "lab" authorship system. Post-Ph.D., your dissertation should still be a gold mine from which to draw publications, at least for your first few years in the profession.

Don't rely on one source (or one advice column!) to explain the publishing norms in your discipline. And always assume that by the time you go up for tenure, the research expectations will be even higher than what you're finding now.

Once you have some sort of estimate of what exactly you will need to plumb from your dissertation in terms of quantity and quality, it is time to get real. Not every dissertation is amenable to producing the number and quality of publications you might hope for. Not every adviser or department will provide the required intellectual, material, laboratory, or funding resources you need. Above all, will you have the time and focus to accomplish ambitious goals?

The Completion Agenda

In any academic career, the first supreme hurdle you face is finishing your dissertation. This series explores how to get it done.

Let me take an ideal case from my field. A doctoral student I know is a qualitative researcher of media. She is looking at a particular global-communications phenomenon via five case studies, each of which will be a chapter in her dissertation. The goal here is that, once written, every chapter can be pulled out — with not too much effort — and submitted as an article to a good journal.

Dissertations in other fields may be much more splintered and sectionalized, but the point is the same: Write the



dissertation as if a substantial amount of its contents will be published beyond the document itself. A welcome trend at some departments is actually allowing a dissertation to comprise a collection of published or publishable pieces.

Know where to publish. It's not just about the number of publications. All of my sources from every field agree: Quality is vital.

You learn very early in graduate school that not all publishing venues are equal. In my case, I learned that listening to my father, who was a professor. I have a rather vague memory of hearing him talk with a colleague about the best journal to submit a paper to. Today, I have several boxes of my father's correspondence, typed on onion-skin paper, and can read about his submission strategy. I wasn't surprised that it is the same one I advocate for graduate students and tenure-trackers now: Go for the best — if you have the time and confidence that you have a plausible shot at it.

To find out which ones are "the best," you must have good intel. A tenure-track scholar I know in a social-science field had published several articles in a particular journal when he was a graduate student. When he started his job, he met with his new department chair and several senior professors who said, in short: "We hired you despite the fact that you published in [that journal]. We know you couldn't help it." It turned out that the rookie's adviser — once a luminary in his field — had not published anything of consequence in decades, so his sense of the highest-ranking or even emerging journals in his subfield was archaic.

A dissertation is not an end in and of itself -- if you hope for an academic, research-oriented career.

Hence the importance of networking, even when you don't have a social network. There are many articles and essays — as well as charts, blog posts, and other sources of data besides personal consultations — about what kinds of journals render the most prestige to what kind of scholarly production.

The same goes for book presses. Ideally, if you are in a field where a dissertation needs to become a book, you should be conceiving it as a book before you write it as a dissertation. Identifying your target presses is essential for the execution of your idea.

Know when to publish. Suppose you are a promotion-and-tenure committee evaluating two assistant professors in your department. Let's say this is a social-science field, and the target guidelines of the department are neither vague nor exact — something like "one to two major articles a year published in highly ranked journals in our field or a relevant subfield." Candidate No. 1 published nothing in her first year, but thereafter kept up a steady pace in terms of both quantity and quality, even accelerating with some major publications in her final year. Candidate No. 2 technically published the same number of articles, but they were all in his first two years with nothing thereafter for four years — even the "under review" list dried up. He didn't offer any extenuating circumstances, either — like, "I'm finishing a book that I am going to submit to a press."

The natural inclination of a departmental committee — and of all the subsequent committees and administrators who vote on tenure cases — is to view the "ascender" (Candidate No. 1) with greater favor than the "descender" (Candidate No. 2).

As a dean at a research university, I am extremely cognizant of the fact that we promote and tenure as a prognostication of the future as much as a recognition of the past. When you award someone tenure, you are making a potential 40-year investment of money, space, and time — with the expectation that that person will continue to be productive to the last day of his or her employment. Everyone is wary of the phenomenon, which unfortunately is not rare, of the person who gets tenure and then decides to coast.

Expectations and outcomes of where to publish from your dissertation differ widely among fields, departments, institutions, and even individuals. There are only two overriding pieces of advice I've heard from every accomplished scholar I've talked to since my dissertation limped to completion some 20 years ago:

- First, quality still counts. A heavily cited, prominent, high-impact piece in a top academic journal will quicken the pulse of a search committee as well as a promotion-and-tenure committee.
- Second, a dissertation is not an end in and of itself — if you hope for an academic, research-oriented career. Unless you're a trust-fund dilettante just getting a doctorate for the fun of it, you must first prepare to publish from your dissertation and then actually publish. Don't follow my lead of letting fatigue and distraction deter you from the real goal that lies beyond the dissertation.

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