

The Completion Agenda, Part 4: Finishing and the Job Hunt

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Advice

How are you using your dissertation to move your career forward?



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By David D. Perlmutter August 12, 2015

One of the sadder conversations I have had in my 15 years of writing about academic careers is, unfortunately, a common one. It usually happens when I'm at a workshop or a conference and people approach me who are enduring a rocky patch in graduate school, on the job hunt, or on the tenure track. At some point I will ask them, "How are you using your dissertation to move your career forward?"

And the answer is usually either, "I'm so burned out I don't want to think about it anymore" or "What do you mean?"

Here's what I mean: A dissertation should be a thoughtful intellectual contribution to knowledge in your discipline. But it must also be a tool for you to succeed in your career, first in finding a tenure-track job (or postdoc position) and second on the tenure track — assuming those are your goals.

So far in this series on the dissertation we have covered [finishing a submittable draft](#), successfully [defending the dissertation](#), and [making revisions](#) after the defense. Now we turn to the crucial next step: what your dissertation can contribute toward your being hired.

If you wait until you've finished the dissertation to gauge how it can help you get a job, that is usually too little, too late. Coincidentally, just before writing this column I spoke to an M.A. student planning to apply for our Ph.D. program. We discussed how the mere choice of a title for your dissertation can affect your job hunt five years down the line. So even if you are just drafting your introduction, with pages and pages to go, consider the following.

Your dissertation defines you ... for better or worse. The overarching principle to keep in mind when you are evaluating how your dissertation can propel your employment prospects is that it is, in essence, your avatar — for life. When a search committee culls the long list of applicants, it will first note your pedigree (university and adviser) and your dissertation topic.

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.

In so doing the committee wants to answer a fundamental question: Are you what you say you are? If the job opening is in "20th Century Chinese Art" and your dissertation topic is "Craftwork in Upper Silesia in the 14th Century" and your adviser is a well-known scholar in Danish pottery, you can understand that the committee might decide to pass on your candidacy.

In some fields like math or history there might be hundreds of candidates in the pool. Many of their dissertation topics (and advisers) will plausibly fit into the target zone of the position. If your dissertation title diverges greatly from the job description, you come off as a desperation candidate, someone applying for anything regardless of fit. And desperation is never attractive, either in love or career climbing.

Focus your research, but broaden your career. When I first went on the tenure-track market, I caught on to the "dissertation titles matter" insight. Many people asked me what my topic was, and their interest in me waxed or waned depending on the answer. Since then I have had hundreds of conversations about dissertation titles, especially on what I like to call the "broadness imperative."

Let's take an exchange I had a few years ago with a doctoral student in my field of communications. To protect his identity, I won't give you the real title of his dissertation. But let's say it was this: "The Objectivity Paradigm Among War Reporters Covering the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922." In talking to him it was clear he was passionately interested in, well, the objectivity paradigm among war reporters covering the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922.

No problem there intellectually. But I pointed out to him that no tenure-track jobs that year had sought a "scholar of objectivity paradigm among war reporters covering the Greco-Turkish War 1919-1922 to research and teach classes on the same."

"Then I guess you could say I'm a journalism historian," he replied. OK, that's a broader description, certainly. Journalism history is a subfield of our discipline, and has its own divisions at our national conferences. In fact, I consider myself in part a media historian. But the broadness challenge still was there for him — there are very few tenure-track jobs in any given year that are actually labeled "journalism history."

The longer we talked the more he broadened. He was also studying how changes in international politics and relations affected journalism. He had a professional background and could teach the ever-vital introductory skills courses, in his case in video and web design. The theories he was applying were sound and current, so he could also teach theory and methods classes.



By the end of our discussion we had identified a half-dozen job titles and subareas — including hot ones like international communication and political communication — for which he could apply without twisting himself into something he was not. He even created a reasonable before-the-colon title for his dissertation that conveyed his potential fit to scan-and-skim search committees.

So while your dissertation is going to stereotype you, you want it not to do so with such narrowness that you shut yourself out of too many positions.

Make clear that you will finish. If the search committee is willing to offer you a position, it will almost always do so in anticipation that you will have your Ph.D. completed by the time you start the job. As I have noted before, the phrase "degree completed by," when used in a job ad, is not as precisely defined a term as one would imagine.

The consequences for not finishing the degree by your start date can run from the inconvenient (e.g., a lowered salary and a delayed start to your tenure clock) to the catastrophic (not being allowed to start — that is, being "pre-fired"). For example, a young acquaintance of mine who defended her dissertation in July is starting her career in a tenure-track position at a small liberal-arts college. Her "report for duty" date is August 18. She honestly does not feel she can finish the revisions necessary to please the committee, and herself, by then. She has worked out an agreement in writing (which should always be the case) that she will start as an instructor in the fall and convert to the tenure track the semester after she deposits her completed dissertation.

Employers want to know the state of your dissertation and its nearness to completion. How do you inform them of its status? First and foremost, spell it out in your cover letter. Give the expected date of your defense and perhaps even include a short description of how far along you are. Second, make sure your adviser and other members of your committee — who are, after all, also your references — are aware of, and agree with, your stated prognosis and timeline for finishing.

Are you cutting edge? A few years ago, at a workshop I ran on academic job hunting, I met a doctoral student in a social-science field related to mine. He had finished his dissertation and was on the job market. He was struggling not only to find a position but to publish anything. Because some of my interdisciplinary research overlapped with his, I began to be concerned the more he detailed the topics and themes of his dissertation. I stuck to practical advice, but later on that week contacted some friends of mine who were respected leading scholars in his discipline. They confirmed my supposition: The young man was not "cutting edge."

When choosing a dissertation topic, you have to balance innovation and accretion. Apparently the young man was studying a topic that had been "done to death." When I listed the title of his manuscript, and even read the abstract aloud, my colleague on the phone sighed and asked, "Who let him do that? That's been done exactly that way 20 times." Thus, his dissertation was likely to become a dead weight for his career. It turns out that he had been in a doctoral program that was light on productive scholars keeping up with the field.

Over all, a dissertation — or rather its title and topic and the name of your adviser — is likely to be the primary data from which others develop their first impression of you as a researcher as well as a teacher. You want to make sure that search committees, faculties, and administrators at the places you want to work understand not only what you have done with your dissertation but also what you can produce from it in the future.

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By David D. Perlmutter

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