Do We Still Value the Dissertation?

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Image: Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

The philosophical halls are ringing lately with an argument over the virtue of graduate-student publication. J. David Velleman, a professor of philosophy at New York University, started the clamor in July when he posted "The Publication Emergency" on a philosophers' blog, "The Daily Nous."

Velleman makes a simple but radical two-part proposal:

- First, philosophy journals "should adopt a policy of refusing to publish work by graduate students."
- Second, to give teeth to the ban, Velleman suggests that philosophy departments "adopt a policy of discounting graduate-student work in tenure-and-promotion reviews."

These policies, wrote Velleman, would "halt the arms race in graduate-student publication." He is catching a lot of flak for his suggestions (with more than 250 comments on his post). I sympathize, because I floated a similar idea a few years ago. Mine was conceived as a thought experiment — I never imagined I could actually effect a policy change. I wanted to see if we could imagine a world in which graduate students didn't feel forced to publish before their time.

Many readers didn't take it in that spirit. Ironically, some graduate students saw my proposal as an attack on their freedom. Velleman is receiving some similar criticisms. Such attacks don't recognize the extent to which Velleman is advocating *for* graduate students, who are caught in a system that's simply brutal. If they want to compete for the few tenure-track jobs that are out there, they have to publish while they're writing their dissertations. Doing so, however, not only puts extra stress on students in an already stressful period of their training but also can interfere with the ripening of those same dissertations.

First, some perspective: Velleman's suggestions can't become policy without widespread, virtually unanimous support — and even if that support were in evidence (which it most decidedly is not), his proposal would require

unified cooperation among all philosophy journals and department personnel committees. Does anyone really think that's possible?

We should take Velleman's post for what it is: a provocation. In this light, his thoughts can inform a larger discussion of the gantlet that faces graduate students — not just in philosophy but in other disciplines, too.

But let's imagine for a moment the world Velleman is calling for — one in which graduate-student publication would be forbidden. It won't happen, but what if it did? What if it could?

Keep in mind that the main job of graduate students is to write a dissertation. Behind Velleman's hypothetical publication ban lies an assumption that the dissertation doesn't much matter — or that it matters only if the student can publish chunks of it in high-profile journals before hitting what's left of the academic job market. That's a pretty dim assessment of the value of a dissertation, and implies that a new scholar's application for an academic job gets a hearing only if he or she has published enough.

Velleman's argument reminds me of a related and familiar complaint in academe: that requiring a book for tenure outsources promotion decisions to university presses. The decision to publish (or reject) books written by assistant professors, in effect, decides their tenure cases ahead of time. If graduate-student publication is what matters in hiring decisions, then the same argument applies: hiring committees essentially outsource their scholarly judgment to journal editors.

By accepting (or rejecting) graduate-student submissions, the editors effectively pass judgment on the students' dissertations — verdicts that hiring committees then accept without looking at the dissertations themselves.

Does that happen? Sometimes, surely. Numerous professors protested in response to Velleman's post that other attributes — such as demonstrated teaching ability — matter in hiring decisions. But very few of the hundreds of comments to the post had much to say about the dissertation.

It wasn't always that way. At one time, the dissertation mattered very much to hiring committees.

An emeritus professor in the humanities who worked for years at a high-ranking public university described hiring practices in his department during the 1980s and 1990s — a time when the academic job market had already tightened.

"We requested extensive writing samples from the dissertation," he said, "usually two chapters." And every member of the committee would read them. "We would ask: Is it fresh, interesting, consequential, learned, well written? We cared about possibilities of publication, but we didn't automatically dismiss someone who saw only the germ of a book there. That sometimes guaranteed reach and intellectual ambition."

In the 1980s, most job candidates who were A.B.D. hadn't yet published. "In rare cases," the professor recalled, an applicant "might have published an article, and of course we would read that as well. Certainly it was seen as a plus if published in a selective journal, but not if we didn't find it compelling."

Ultimately, he said, "We gave more weight to the dissertation than to a published article."

In an eclipsed world where graduate students wrote their dissertations and didn't publish, the dissertation mattered more — and that's the world that Velleman is encouraging us to imagine. It's a return to futures past.

Velleman calls the current situation a "publication emergency," but it's really more of a time-to-degree emergency. Publication takes time. Adding articles to a CV multiplies the years that students spend in doctoral programs, where they usually earn apprentice wages and take on debt.

"I was 26 when I was hired," said the emeritus professor. "The average age of the people we hired was probably 28 to 30." Today, with time to degree still hovering around the nine-year mark in humanities doctoral programs, new

professors start earning a real salary only in their mid-30s. Often, they're older than that.

When graduate students respond to the pressure to publish in graduate school, they postpone their professional launch and literally pay to do so with money they don't have. It doesn't take a philosopher to recognize that as unethical.

But as a number of Velleman's commenters pointed out, a ban on graduate student publication would give more influence to institutional prestige in faculty hiring. "Hiring committees use publication volume and venues as a way to judge the excellence of candidates," wrote one commenter. "Take that away and committees are going to lean even more heavily on the prestige of the candidate's grad department." Right now, "the only way for low-prestige students to get an advantage over high-prestige students is to out-publish them."

Asked another poster, "As a graduate student not going to NYU [where Velleman teaches, and the home of a highly-regarded philosophy department], without a single publication, how do I distinguish myself?" Besides publications, "almost all other indications point purely at the reputation of the school you came from."

A professor in a less-prestigious philosophy department raised similar concerns. "From my viewpoint," he wrote to me in an email, Velleman's proposal completely "ignores the concerns of graduate students at low-ranked or unranked Ph.D. programs. If my graduate students weren't permitted to publish, they'd lack all sorts of opportunities to develop intellectually and pursue their professional goals."

So the publication emergency that's also a time-to-degree emergency is also a prestige problem. We probably shouldn't be surprised by that, because problems that arise in graduate school tend to connect to each other. But what to do?

How much should the brand name on a degree matter? If we're so concerned with Ph.D.-program rankings that we don't take the time to look at a graduate student's actual work until late in the screening process, we might ask what sort of intellectual integrity our hiring decisions have.

Like all of the problems that Velleman identifies, this one offers no easy solution. The debate over his ideas points not so much to a student-publication ban as to the need for a collective look within. It's time that faculty members honored the work that graduate students do by actually scrutinizing it — as opposed to demanding that they produce more and more of it, and then publish it under prestigious banners.

In this spirit, we might consider a dissertation comprising a couple of articles. This suggestion — which has periodically surfaced in recent debates over graduate-school reform — would take the dissertation back to its 19th-century roots, when it was envisioned as a short publication (not a book) in the making.

A dissertation made up of a small number of articles would acknowledge the reality that graduate students face, and alter their degree requirements to meet it. Such a change would meet our students where they *are* — which is a move we make far too rarely.