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Promoting Open Access to American graduate research

Open ETDs are essential for the future of Graduate Education: two recently published views

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This week, two new papers situate openness of ETDs as an essential component of effective graduate education in the 21st century. Written entirely independently, these two works in combination articulate the power and promise of the ETD experience as an opportunity to empower the newest generation of scholars to make meaningful and impactful contributions to their disciplines and to society as a whole. By educating graduate students about the myriad authorship and dissemination choices available in the digital age, and by honoring student's choices once they are so informed, the true purpose of graduate education can be transformed and fulfilled.

Comments and critiques of these papers are welcome here on the Free US ETDs blog.

Please share your thoughts!

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In "Opening the Dissertation: Overcoming Cultural Calcification and Agoraphobia", Carnegie Mellon scholar Denise Troll Covey links the struggle to make dissertation research open with the crisis in doctoral education. Her provocative thesis is that legacy practices and conventions left over from the days of print and microfilm are inhibiting the transformation of doctoral education enabled by the digital age. The author argues that opening all dimensions of the doctoral dissertation, not only through open access but also in terms of the work's representation — "the structure, media, notion of authorship, and methods of assessment" — can save doctoral programs from extinction. A decidedly grim vision on the surface, Troll Covey's message is actually quite hopeful and empowering:

"If higher education institutions acknowledged and invested heavily in remedying obsolete

practices in doctoral education, the remedies would reverberate throughout the academy, accelerate advancement in the disciplines, and revolutionize scholarly publishing.”

What makes Troll Covey’s Call for Action both compelling and challenging is that it implicates the entire community of stakeholders in graduate education: universities and their professional associations; learned societies; graduate faculty; academic libraries; and those harried students themselves. The truths she transmits about the state of doctoral education, drawn on highly reputable sources such as the **Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate** (hereafter, CID), are just so terribly inconvenient for us all. The changes for which she passionately argues are expensive and time intensive, requiring engagement, effort, mindfulness, questioning assumptions, and risk taking. Isn’t it just so much easier and simpler to retain the status quo, however doomed that reliance on certainty and comfort may be?

In the December 2013 issue of **College & Research Libraries News**, Texas A&M associate professor Gail Clement (yes, yours truly) addresses but one dimension of Troll Covey’s “openness” principle for graduate works. In “American ETD dissemination in the age of Open Access: ProQuest, NoQuest, or Allowing Student Choice”, the author argues for student choice in disseminating the hard won fruits of their graduate education [FN1]. This paper focuses solely on the open access dimension of graduate scholarship, “an important first step” to breaking down the barriers to opening graduate scholarship identified by Troll Covey but “insufficient to end the crisis.” Nonetheless, first steps can be essential catalysts for systematic change.

The *CRL News* column opens with the observation that “a stark incongruity in the treatment of academic scholarship” exists at most American campuses today. Faculty are free to publish in whatever vehicle suits their needs and goals, in conformance with well-respected standards of academic freedom and disciplinary practices. By contrast, graduate students are mandated to comply with commercial exploitation of their scholarship through a single for-profit reseller of graduate works. This double standard sends loud and clear messages to graduate students about the lack of respect or confidence in their own choices in disseminating their hard won scholarly outputs. It undermines the sense of intellectual agency gained by allowing students to chart their own destiny for the products of their own minds. It denies graduate students the opportunity to fulfill the central purpose of graduate education, according to the CID (citation via Troll Covey) : to prepare as stewards of their disciplines.

According to Troll Covey, the CID:

“defines stewardship as both a set of roles and skills that ensures competence and a set of principles that provides a moral compass. PhD recipients should be highly accomplished at generating new knowledge and critiquing knowledge claims, considering the legacy of their discipline, and transforming knowledge through creative application and effective

communication to different audiences and in different media.”

These two recent papers address openness for graduate works and their respective authors, Troll Covey and Clement, have independently arrived at the same conclusion. In the considerably more articulate words of the former:

“Digital dissertations are an unprecedented opportunity for faculty and students to embrace openness, develop digital literacy, learn what it means to steward their discipline in the digital era, and drive needed changes in scholarly publishing. Free of coercion to transfer copyright, free of the print literate constraints of a publisher’s submission guidelines, the dissertation is the ideal venue for experimentation. Student who have produced the new breed of dissertation, who have experienced and exercised the new range and power and intimacy of digital technologies, will be comfortable with openness. And they will not tolerate the current confines and commercialization of scholarly publishing. There will be no going back.” (page 553)

[FN1] The graduation requirement to make ETDs openly accessible via the university’s own repository also limits student choice, but it is a necessary one given the institution’s obligations to retain a record of each student’s successful fulfillment of degree requirements according to the universities own published guidelines. Moreover, deposit of dissertations and theses with the library or archives of the granting institution represents a convention in American graduate education that dates back over 100 years as reflected in the earliest minutes of the AAU and the continuing policies of its spinoff, the Council of Graduate Schools.



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