



# Dissertations and Doctoral Programs: *A Critique*<sup>1</sup>

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**Assertion:** The dissertation is the central organizer toward which the whole doctoral curriculum flows. It is generally seen as the culminating experience of a program of doctoral studies, but its purpose and significance should be evident throughout the courses, seminars, independent studies, and fieldwork for the degree.

**Concern:** Academic and professional doctoral programs are proliferating at an unprecedented rate. Many are ill conceived. Few scholars are specialized in the curricular issues, learning processes, and instructional procedures appropriate to making these programs fulfill their promises and potential.

Examining dissertations is a reasonably valid means to assess the qualities of a doctoral program:

The dissertation should emerge from the readings and the reflections on experience in the early phase of the program, become well focused and methodologically feasible in the middle portion of the program, and become the primary learning experience in the last phase.

If this emphasis on the dissertation is fulfilled across the whole program the most common misuses of the dissertation can be avoided. Lacking this emphasis, the dissertation becomes a chore to be fulfilled, a high hurdle to be jumped once in a lifetime. Some misguided students approach the task as if they were merely writing a book, doing a triple-length term paper, or struggling to use their extended range of esoteric and arcane vocabulary in order to make some rather trite point in a complex manner.

Specific problems in the doctoral programs emerged in the analysis of four dissertations, chosen for this purpose by the Dean. (The commentator sought no data on the criteria of these selections. So one could assume that these are the four best, the four worst, or a sample from across the range of qualities.) After studying these four dissertations, I conclude that there is evidence of confusion about the educational purpose or purposes to be served by the dissertation.

Students seem to approach the task with no particular acquaintance with its purpose. These four students seemed to pose for themselves various literary tasks that reflected essentially dissimilar style, standards, and procedures. This freedom could be claimed as a desirable feature of the doctoral programs at this institution, but in my experience I have come to associate it with the result I found here: a long, meandering treatise written from a highly subjective viewpoint and presented with an idiosyncratic style characteristic of amateurism in research planning. This reader found each to be an exercise in competent writing much as one would expect from a seminar participant's summary paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Ward. Dissertations and Doctoral Programs. An unpublished report from an accreditation site visit to an unidentified seminary, Fall 2001. Ward's comments are preserved here for their value in defining the purpose and indicators of doctoral dissertations and projects.

Perhaps indicative of the weakness of methodological skills, the persistent subjectivity seemed to be a substitute for rigorous analysis, critique, and exposition. In a literature-heavy field such as theology or missiology, the competency in dealing effectively with identifiable precedents in literature should be emphasized.

The heritage of these dissertations seems to have a European aspect and a theological aspect: *European*, in that the necessary methods of inquiry are not developed into the students through prior course work and deliberate skill-building exercises; *theological*, in that the task of creating a new book is undertaken as rewriting and “updating” of the materials already on the library shelf.

**Recommendation:** The following *purposes of the dissertation* should be embraced by faculty and students in order to increase the quality of the doctoral programs:

- To find a place for oneself in the historic flow of inquiry in one’s academic discipline.
- To apply inquiry skills (learned prior to the dissertation task itself).
- To contribute thought and analysis which can move one’s discipline forward.
- To exercise and demonstrate orderly and efficient uses of scholarship.
- To exercise and demonstrate respect for truth.
- To exercise and demonstrate the discipline that truth demands: objectivity, thoroughness, acknowledgment of sources.
- To select and use appropriate modes of inquiry (research procedures).
- To critique the flow of knowledge into which the dissertation fits.
- To earn the respect of professional colleagues by contributing worthy understandings that result from knowledgeable, sincere, and orderly inquiry.

Educational purposes of the two major types of doctoral dissertations:

1. The Academic Discipline Doctorate

- Contributing to the body of basic understandings in the discipline.
- Questing for new knowledge at the theoretical and foundational level.

2. The Professional Field Doctorate

- Contributing to the selection, planning, and evaluation of practical applications of scholarly understandings.
- Investigation of trends and contemporary problems with the intention of understanding the choices among practical treatments and applications.