Episode 67 – The Future of the Dissertation – An Interview with Dr. Julia Kent

Brian Mitchell: Welcome to Grad-Post. I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

This is part three in a series on the dissertation: what it is, what it's becoming, and what it could be. Part 1 focused on what a dissertation is, and some of my thoughts on what it should be. Part 2 was some advice on how to help you prepare for the Dissertation Defense. Today, I'd like to call on a friend and colleague from the Council of Graduate Schools, Dr. Julia Kent, Vice President of Strategy and Program Innovation, to discuss how the dissertation is evolving. Welcome, Julia!

Julia Kent: Thank you, Brian.

Brian Mitchell: So, let's start simple. What are some differences between, say, an electronic thesis or dissertation, a digital dissertation, and what are called born digital dissertations?

Julia Kent: So, I actually consulted some colleagues at ProQuest about this, ProQuest being the company that is the repository for most dissertations, electronic dissertations in this country. And one of the things I learned is that there is actually quite a lot of overlap between some of these terms. So, the most common or popular term for an electronic dissertation or a digital dissertation is an ETD. That stands for electronic thesis or dissertation. And this typically refers to what you called a “born digital dissertation” or a dissertation that was always in digital format. It was never a paper dissertation that was then converted to digital format. But to complicate matters, the term for a dissertation that was previously in paper format, but then subsequently digitized is also a digital dissertation. As I understand it, the term ETD isn't used for a dissertation that was previously on paper, and when ETD is used, most people in libraries or graduate schools will take that to mean a dissertation that was always in digital format.

Brian Mitchell: Okay, so the dissertation is evolving, and it's kind of taken on different forms and formats. Can you give me some examples of alternative formats to the ETDs? I'm thinking of things like maybe graphic novels and sign language videos, those types of things, but there's certainly others.

Julia Kent: Sure, there are actually many possibilities, and some are much more established than a lot of people realize. I want to say, starting out, that there is a lot of variation in institutional policy. So, not all institutions will recognize these types of dissertations or allow students to submit them. And so it's important, as you're starting the research for graduate school and starting a dissertation, that you ask what your institution's policy is. But one of the most common alternatives is what is sometimes called an “article-based” or “three-paper dissertation,” where, instead of writing a long monograph or a collection of chapters, adding up to one long piece of writing, the student produces several scholarly articles that are related, usually with an introduction and a conclusion that ties them together. That's already quite common in a lot of fields.

But there are also a lot more innovative examples. So, in humanities, people have experimented with

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developing, for example, a curated digital archive; a mapping or visualization project in the digital humanities. A digital edition of text. We have also heard about something called the “ensemble dissertation” where a student might produce several different but connected products, that together kind of add up to a dissertation. And these things might include a traditional research article, a digital project, a public scholarship component, and even a teaching portfolio in some cases. And the key is that together they demonstrate the breadth, the depth, and the rigor and the originality that we typically expect from a dissertation.

Brian Mitchell: There were recently some ADA compliance standards released for dissertations. What are some of those standards and really who enforces them?

Julia Kent: So this was actually a topic of a recent CGS webinar. And what happened is that the Department of Justice issued a new rule under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act that establishes a specific technical standard for the accessibility of web content produced by state and local governments, and that extends to public universities. In practical terms, an electronic dissertation needs to be usable with assistive technologies like screen readers, where most of us are familiar with those. So, for example the document needs to have a heading structure and reading order that people who need that to read a document can use. There needs to be explanatory text for images, figures, and graphs. Multimedia components of the dissertation need things like captions and maybe audio description. So those are some of the concrete examples that were discussed in the webinar.

Brian Mitchell: And what's the status of that standard? Has it been fully implemented? Are institutions still trying to implement it? Kind of where is it in practice?

Julia Kent: There have been some extensions of the deadline for having the standards fully implemented.

Brian Mitchell: Okay, speaking of extensions, maybe we can talk a little bit about embargoes. This is pretty common for dissertations, especially in the sciences, but also in some of the humanities and social sciences. What's an embargo on a dissertation, and what are the perceived benefits of having an embargo?

Julia Kent: That's a great question. So, an embargo is when your dissertation research may not be made public for a certain period of time. So, students will sometimes submit it to the ProQuest database, in line with their university's requirements, but they place an embargo on it, meaning that people will not be able to search for or find or read the dissertation. The idea behind it is to protect intellectual property. Often this is an issue that emerges when a student is working in industry or with a startup venture on campus and either the student or the company that they're working with wants to have the time to file a patent and get credit for their innovation or idea or research before the research is made public and other people can't sort of steal the idea. I've heard from my colleagues who work with industry a lot, that it's best if these kind of agreements are worked out in advance of the dissertation, especially if the student is working with a company, so that, you know, the student doesn't graduate and is eager to share their research, and then comes to find out that the company does not want to allow them to share their findings. And so, working that out in advance makes a lot of sense.

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Brian Mitchell: This is starting to occur in other disciplines, though, like in areas where the writer may consider writing a book or a monograph later on, and they're concerned about what is still their intellectual property, that is, someone maybe stealing their creative work. Are there any differences outside of the STEM fields, or science fields with respect to the embargo?

Julia Kent: You know, I have certainly heard that concern discussed, in the context of the humanities. And a concern that, you know, a student wants to be able to publish their first book or some articles, before the ideas are made public. And I think one of the things I've heard from the Dean community is that perhaps that concern has gone a little too far. Part of being an intellectual and a scholar is putting your ideas out there and being willing to engage in debate and discussion with other people in the field. And if you wait until your first book is published to do that, then you actually miss the benefit of being able to be a part of that scholarly conversation.

Brian Mitchell: Exactly, so I would just interject that, you know, I think actually putting it out there does provide you some protection, whether it's a copyright or establishing your ideas, and so there's some pluses and minuses, I guess, to that approach. So just to finish on embargoes here, these are for specified periods of time, correct? It might be 6 months. What's kind of the common embargo time, and what happens after that embargo expires?

Julia Kent: Typically, it's enough time to apply for a patent in the sciences, which can take a year or more. And sometimes if the patent doesn't get filed in enough time, someone will try to extend the embargo.

Brian Mitchell: Okay, so you mentioned your role at CGS. I remember way back in 2016, when I was Dean in Residence, we had a workshop on the future of the dissertation, and I found it very interesting and intriguing. What were some of your main takeaways from that meeting? I'm thinking of things like, you know, the publishers had comments on kind of the future of their field and the impact on what the dissertation could become. That's just an example. What did you take away from that workshop?

Julia Kent: One of the biggest takeaways is that the dissertation is actually a really useful way of tracking changes in doctoral education as a whole. We started with some very basic questions. What is the dissertation for? Who is its audience? What should a student learn by producing one? Those were really the kind of organizing questions for the convening. A related sort of idea is that we needed to separate the purpose of the dissertation from its traditional form. So, the dissertation has a really important function. It demonstrates that someone can conduct rigorous research and make a contribution to knowledge, but that doesn't necessarily require a traditional single-author book manuscript. And this was an idea that was not only coming from the publishers, but also from the scholarly community that was present at this workshop. In some disciplines, it may make perfect sense for someone to continue writing that monograph, especially if they're looking for a certain kind of career, but in others a portfolio or the ensemble of projects that we were talking about earlier, a team-based project might actually be more consistent with how knowledge is produced in the field or communicated in that field, and more consistent also with the students' career aspirations.

A second takeaway was that the dissertation really ought to prepare students for the job or the career that they're actually going to enter. If collaboration is how research actually happens in industry, or even

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in academia. Doctoral education shouldn't necessarily force students to work in isolation on their research.

And I think the third takeaway from that project was about audience and impact. So, by 2016, dissertations had largely moved from paper dissertation sitting on library shelves to electronic documents that could be discoverable, that could be, you know, researched, and accessed by people all around the world. And that raised questions about open access and preservation and embargoes, but it also created an opportunity to think about the dissertation as something that is meant to communicate knowledge and not simply as a credential that measures a student's conclusion of their doctoral education.

Brian Mitchell: Let's talk a little bit about artificial intelligence and its impact on the dissertation. Some institutions are embracing AI, others are kind of moderating its use. How do you think AI will affect not only the final written product of the doctoral study, but also the research and scholarship that goes into it?

Julia Kent: Yeah, this is really a timely question. And I reached out to my colleague Matt Linton, at CGS, who is doing a lot of work in AI and has a lot of expertise in this area. We talked about sort of three different issues.

One is sort of the speed of dissertation research. So, in many cases, technologies are accelerating really quickly, and I've heard of some cases where you know, an experiment or a project that might have taken three months to do can now be done in a few hours or a day using AI. And that gets the community kind of excited about the idea that this will shorten the dissertation for students, or speed up completion. I think that's an interesting possibility, but the other side of the coin is that AI may also just create new research problems and methodologies. It may also change the nature of the research questions, and so we can't assume that having these tools at our disposal will necessarily mean that the research goes faster. It may just mean that it goes in a different way.

The second thing we talked about was an increase in collaboration. So, a lot of AI research is interdisciplinary and may require a team-based approach, and so I think the question is there, does this lend itself to more team-authored dissertations or collaborative dissertations than we saw before? Again, it's a question, not necessarily an answer, but I think it's a really interesting one.

And then the final thing we talked about was research integrity and the documentation of AI use. One really interesting approach that a CGS member is using to ensure research integrity in this area is the University of Laval in Quebec. They have a requirement that graduate students who are writing both theses and dissertations need to log all uses of AI for those products. So they have to log the model, what the prompt is, and why they wanted to use it for their research. And every student who submits a thesis or a dissertation has to submit that log as part of the dissertation, even if they didn't use any AI. It's just a component; it's a requirement. And I think one of the benefits of that approach is that it doesn't just make a blanket statement outlawing the use of AI, but actually just requires students to be really transparent

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and thoughtful about how they're using it. As Matt was mentioning today, it may also sort of decrease the sort of lazy usage of AI, you know, if you're gonna have to log it, you might think a little bit about whether you really need to use it.

Brian Mitchell: Interesting. Well, thanks to you, and thanks to Matt for your insight into that. It's evolving, and we'll certainly come back and see how it evolves over time. Anything else you want to add about, kind of, how dissertations are evolving? Anything that we may have missed? Any thoughts you have?

Julia Kent: You know, going back to the event you mentioned, from 10 years ago, one point that was really interesting that emerged is the need to be more explicit with students about what is expected from the dissertation. One of the papers in that final proceedings that we issued argues that clear criteria for what constitutes doctoral-level work could really help demystify the dissertation, rather than leaving students to kind of figure out what the standards are that may have been sort of implicit. And I think that connects really well to CGS's more recent work on trying to clarify expectations for doctoral students and what is sometimes called the hidden curriculum. Kind of looking back 10 years later, I'm really struck by how much that earlier conversation is still going on. It's not just about alternative dissertation formats but being a lot clearer with students about what they are actually expected to learn and demonstrate as part of doing this really huge and important project that is really a key part of the degree.

Brian Mitchell: So that gets to the heart, I guess, of the advisor-advisee relationship, in part anyway, and, you know, I could see ways that enumerating those outcomes of the dissertation, if you will, could be incorporated into things like individual development plans more explicitly. And so it really touches on a lot of different aspects of being a doctoral student.

Well, thank you so much, Julia. I really appreciate your time and your expertise, and it's been great having you today. Thank you.

Julia Kent: Thank you for having me.

Brian Mitchell: And thank you to my audience for joining me today. Visit my website at GradPost.com for more information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree. And remember, every degree counts.

Links

https://cgsnet.org/webinar/making-dissertations-theses-accessible-considerations-for-graduate-deans-related-to-the-april-24-2026-ada-title-ii-deadline-for-digital-accessibility
https://cgsnet.org/insight/the-future-of-the-doctoral-dissertation
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