Hispania Guest Editorial: Reflections on Hispania’s Annual Dissertation List

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Hispania Guest Editorial

Reflections on Hispania’s Annual Dissertation List

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Hispania has featured an annual list of doctoral dissertations in literature and linguistics in Spanish and Portuguese for decades. The dissertation list indicates content focus and the number of students completing doctorates. The list provides information about the history of our profession and may shed light on the current and future trends in doctoral studies in Spanish and Portuguese. Recently, members of the AATSP Board of Directors discussed the creation of an online searchable database of dissertations, and the first step towards this goal took place in the September 2015 issue of Hispania (98.3), when the 2014 list of dissertations was published on Hispania’s Open Access page on the AATSP website (see www.aatsp.org) instead of appearing in the journal in the September issue, as was the custom. To this point, there had been very few changes in the practice of gathering and reporting dissertation information for the AATSP. There is a consensus around the profession that gathering this information is helpful for both beginning and senior scholars in our field. At the same time, there are questions about the true scope and reach of the list because there are no objective data on its completeness and accuracy. Nonetheless, departments in universities that offer PhD degrees in Spanish and Portuguese continue to submit reports on their dissertations year after year.

The first list of theses dealing with Hispano-American literature appeared in Hispania in May of 1935. Sturgis E. Leavitt compiled a report that detailed theses year-by-year dating back to 1915, including titles for both Masters and Doctoral degrees. Leavitt stated two purposes to the list: “to give some indication of the interest” and “to aid others who may turn to this field” (169). Leavitt proposed that registering a thesis topic in Hispania should create a clearing house that would prevent duplication: “with so wide a field before one, it seems hardly advisable to follow far in the footsteps of another,” as he noted that one case of repetition had already been resolved (169). Thereafter, the “News and Notes” column of the October 1935 edition advised:

Each year after the Master's degree has been awarded, the author, title of thesis, and college should be published in HISPANIA. When the Ph.D. thesis has been actually begun, the author, title, college, and adviser should be 'registered' in the same place; and later, when the degree has been conferred, the item without the adviser's name should appear again. (334; format in original)

Leavitt continued the yearly task of compiling the thesis lists until 1944, and L. Lomas Barrett (one of Leavitt’s former students) became the list compiler in 1945. In 1950, Barrett began to include titles of only PhD dissertations, stating, “it seems of dubious value to devote space to publicizing M.A. theses unless they represent genuine research” (119). William J. Smither assumed responsibility for the annual list in 1951, and a series of AATSP members have maintained the lists to this day.
The question of completeness has weighed on the compilers since the first publication. In the 1930s, Leavitt wondered if his request for thesis reports was reaching all of the relevant departments. Smither may have sounded a little more accusatory in 1956, writing, “Response from the questionnaires may be regarded as average, replies having come from 37 of the 45 universities usually active in the Hispanic field. None of the very large departments is unrepresented, but certainly the purposes of the lists can best be filled by completeness” (195). Claude L. Hulet recognizes certain limitations in 1965: “Chairmen of departments that give PhD degrees in the fields mentioned, but who were not contacted in the most recent survey, are urged to communicate with the compiler” (263). It would be easy to update the language to repeat this request today.

The current compiler makes no effort to tabulate participation the 89 departments in the United States and in Canada on the current mailing list the annual reminder to submit their data. It appears that the compilers long ago gave up attempting to include data from universities in other countries. Today, some international departments submit dissertation reports because of personal contact with the AATSP, but there is no systematic effort to request information from universities outside of the domestic AATSP membership. To be sure, all confirmed reports are published each year, regardless of the country of origin, and it is certain that email notifications and online submission forms now make it possible to produce a more globalized list.

Without doubt, it has been possible to gauge the ebbs and flows of our profession with the number of dissertations reported each year. In 1959, Smither wrote, “In the past three years, the number of completed dissertations listed here has declined from 52 in 1957 to 40 in 1958 and to 36 in the present group” (219). One can read his enthusiasm for the future in 1963 when he reported, “The 91 new titles appearing in the ‘In Preparation’ section of this list is the largest collection ever announced in a single year” (333). Subsequent lists grow to cover more pages year after year. In the 1978 report, Hulet noted that there were 212 theses in preparation and 131 completed. 1977 included 226 in preparation and 186 completed, and the numbers in 1976 were 307 and 256, respectively (304).

Compilers Carmen Chavez McClendon and Nadine Olson began classifying dissertations by region and genre with the 1984 list. This practice lengthened the lists considerably, and in time, the compilers included many dissertation titles under several classifications. Multigeneric or multiregional dissertations sometimes were listed four or five times in a single year, and the pages expanded accordingly as graduate students opened their dissertations beyond conventional boundaries. Howard M. Fraser began indexing the principal authors studied in each dissertation in 1991, which also included multiple entries for the same title. The increasing complexity of scholarship led the present compiler to streamline the process by creating broader categories, specifically “Transatlantic,” “Multiregional,” and “Multigeneric,” beginning with the 2008 list, which has significantly reduced the length each year.

The 2015 Dissertations list, set to appear on the Hispania web sometime in September 2016, will mark the eightieth anniversary of this endeavor. Even today, the compiler faces the same concerns that previous colleagues have mentioned. Are we reaching all of the departments that grant doctoral degrees? Are all of these departments responding? Is the information reported and transcribed accurately? Additional questions certainly are possible. Furthermore, we also are facing the matter of how well current reporting of dissertations reflects the realities of our profession. The format of the list, for example, is remarkably consistent over eight decades, and it may be that the generic and regional classification of literary subjects no longer represents contemporary or future scholarship. But what else would the list report? Might there be a better way of organizing these data?

Finally, the numbers of dissertations reported suggest that further reflection over the state of our profession is warranted. The Fall 2013 Modern Language Association report on enrollments states that the total of graduate students in Spanish had fallen by 20.5% from 2009 to 2013 and that the number of PhDs granted in 2012 was 11.6% lower than the lowest point at which it had been in the previous decade (6). The 2014 Hispania dissertation list records only 35 dissertations
completed in all fields of literature and linguistics, and 53 in-progress dissertations were reported for the same year. In comparison, 55 were completed and 93 in progress in 2013, and the 2012 numbers were 92 and 93 respectively. We can conclude with some certainty that these data reflect effects of the global financial crisis of 2008, which continues to disrupt higher education even as recovery has spread through the general economy. It is likely that potential graduate students see a difficult path to professional success in the current university environment and then choose not to pursue an advanced degree with limited prospects in the future.

This review and reflection on the Hispania dissertation lists might best serve as a call for input that will shape the future. Presuming that we can agree that the list’s publication in this venue serves a useful purpose, the move to digital publication is a point at which we can consider alternative formats for reporting and organizing. These practical issues also will be relevant in broader discussions on the disciplinary and financial future of our profession. We hope that interested individuals will engage in upcoming conversations.

NOTES

1 In comparison, the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database lists 145 dissertations completed in just “Spanish” in 2014. However, we have not yet crosschecked this database to determine if it includes dissertations for degrees other than the PhD, from fields not traditionally included in Hispania (such as history), or from universities reporting to ProQuest that are not represented in the Hispania lists.

WORKS CITED


