

Statement on Online Dissertation Embargoes

The Medieval Academy of America strongly encourages graduate programs and university libraries to adopt policies that allow doctoral candidates the option of withholding their Ph.D. dissertations from university mandated open access digital publication for up to six years. The Academy also encourages the disclosure of options available to students so they can make an informed choice.

Many universities require doctoral candidates to submit their dissertations digitally. Instead of conveying hard copies to the university library or archive, they must post the digital dissertations on line where they are freely accessible.

The decision as to whether to allow immediate, free, digital access to research or to withhold such access for a limited period, should remain with the doctoral candidate. This decision is best made in close consultation with the student's dissertation advisor and other mentors who can provide field-specific advice regarding career and publishing paths.

Background and Rationale

In the past, printed and bound dissertations could be consulted in a university's archives and circulated either through inter-library loan or in the form of a microfilm or hardcopy for fee. Under these circumstances, they were not considered "published" and access to them was effectively limited.

Still, even when access was effectively limited, some universities – notably Harvard – allowed graduate students the option of limiting consultation or circulation of their dissertations for a set number of years. These restrictions aimed to impede outright theft – the publication of dissertations, in whole or part, by other scholars under their own names – that ruined career prospects.

The publication of a book or a series of articles have long been standard requirements for tenure at colleges and universities. Typically, a young scholar revises and expands the dissertation research into a monograph or articles for tenure during the challenging early years of full time teaching. While standards for tenure vary across fields and institutions, publication of original research remains a key requirement and the dissertation research still forms the core of material young scholars draw upon for publication. Heavy full time teaching loads and little or no leave time make it very difficult for such scholars to bring entirely new post-dissertation research to published fruition by the tenure decision.

Digital technologies are rapidly transforming how dissertations are filed and made accessible. Many universities now require digital submission of dissertations and are moving to make them freely available through library websites soon after they are filed. This radically expanded access poses exciting opportunities but also some perils.

The perennial problem of outright theft of intellectual work remains and indeed is greatly exacerbated in this new digital environment. Once another scholar downloads a dissertation and publishes it or material from it under his or her own name, the dissertation's author no longer has their original research to produce the publications required to secure a job and achieve tenure.

A new peril has also emerged as digital technologies have transformed the concept of "publication." As on-line journals, reviews, and blogs are becoming accepted as outlets for academic publishing, dissertations made freely available on the web also may be considered "published." This raises difficulties for early career medievalists. Some journals and university presses will not consider for publication research that is, in some form, already available freely on line. A 2011 survey of journal editors and university press directors published in *College & Research Libraries* found, for example, that only 53.7% of the university press directors would "welcome" or "consider on a case by case basis" manuscripts derived from openly accessible on-line dissertations. Close to half (46.3%), then, would not consider them or wanted evidence of "very substantial" changes. Variations in the data by field also indicate that medievalists have some cause for concern: 100% of university press directors would not consider a manuscript in romance literatures that is a revision derived from an openly available dissertation.

Conclusion

While publishing conventions are rapidly changing and standards for tenure are being discussed and modified, there is evidence that making dissertations immediately openly accessible on-line can make it more difficult for early career scholars to publish revised versions of their research as articles or books. The long-term effects of these changes are not yet clear and preliminary data suggest variation across fields and publishers.

For these reasons the Medieval Academy of America urges policies that preserve graduate student choice: the decision about whether to make a dissertation immediately available on line is best made by the student researcher in consultation with his or her faculty mentors. It therefore encourages graduate programs and university libraries to adopt policies that allow doctoral candidates the option of withholding their Ph.D. dissertations from being made available digitally for up to six years.