Making the Most of Your Thesis or Dissertation

Publication Strategies for Graduate Students and Recent Graduates in Evaluation and the Social Sciences

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Agenda

• Brief presentation
• Discussion and question session
• NOTE: For those interested in more about this topic there is a multi-paper session at this year’s AEA conference including presentations by myself (converting a dissertation to a book) as well as the editors of New Directions for Evaluation, American Journal of Evaluation, and Evaluation and Program Planning on November 10th.
Aims and Objectives

• The purpose of this Café is to provide useful information and strategies to graduate students and recent graduates on publishing their work, including
  – How to plan in advance for converting a dissertation or thesis into a publishable journal or book manuscript
  – Getting it published
  – And most importantly, getting it and you noticed

• It is NOT a step-by-step guide…merely some practical advice to get you started
Some Important Facts

- Nearly 90% of papers published in academic journals are never cited.
- Approximately 50% are never even read by anyone other than their authors, their referees, and the journal editors.
- Historically, nearly 50% of Nobel laureates prize winning works were originally rejected.
• So, why is this important?
  – If you intend to pursue a career in academia, publications are one of your greatest assets…so start now!
  – If your work is important you need to communicate it…dissemination!
  – Publishing is a good mechanism for starting a career in evaluation and/or the social sciences
  – In some cases, your job depends on it
  – CREDIBILITY
• First things first…
  1. A thesis and/or dissertation is a COLLABORATIVE effort—one between the student and her/his advisor(s)
  2. MUST interest you (and your advisor)…this is a long-term commitment!
  3. SHOULD be of interest to others…does the work:
     • Respond to or provide a potential solution to a longstanding or emerging problem or issue?
     • Contribute to or advance current knowledge, theory, or practice?
Identifying a Topic

• Common stages
  – HAVING and THINKING about an idea
  – DISCUSSING the idea with others (preferably experts or persons knowledgeable about the subject area)
  – CHECKING the existing scientific literature to see if it makes sense (e.g., relevant?, doable?, has been done?)
  – DECIDING exactly what goals and objectives are to be achieved
  – DEFINING questions more precisely to formulate hypotheses—if appropriate
Next Steps

• Your thesis or dissertation prospectus has been approved and you are hard at work, now what?
  – DO get to know (personally if possible) the leaders/key figures in the topic area/field of study (don’t rely only on your advisor)
    • Potentially one of your greatest assets
    • Do they believe the work is important?
    • Often, they can draw more attention to your work than you alone
Next, Next Steps

• DO begin considering where your work is most relevant (i.e., what publication outlet?)…BEFORE the thesis or dissertation is complete

• DO get to know the editors of journals or acquisitions editors of publishers you are considering (e.g., introduce yourself and your work via e-mail, in person at conferences, through work samples)…
  – They should know WHO YOU ARE and WHAT YOU ARE DOING
Next, Next Steps

• DO review books and/or referee papers for your targeted journal (can be a good strategy to “get you in”)
• DON’T wait to begin preparing your manuscript…start DURING the writing of your thesis of dissertation!
• DON’T underestimate your committee…they are (or should be) known by others in the field
• Typical elements of submission
  – Cover letter
    • Take this seriously as it can have an immediate influence on a journal editor’s reaction to your manuscript
  – The manuscript
    • Check, double-check, triple-check, and if possible have someone else check (e.g., errors, grammar & syntax, voice, tone, style)
    • Follow the journal’s guidelines carefully (e.g., formatting, reference & citation style, blinding, paper or electronic submission)
• **Interim correspondence**
  – Don’t pressure editors if the review process seems overly long (for some journals can be up to 6 months or longer)

• **Decision**
  – Usually a letter from the editor summarizing reviewers’ decisions/comments + reviewers’ evaluations
    • Accept (ideal scenario)
    • Revise and resubmit (most frequent decision)
    • Reject (don’t panic)
• Reorganizing after “rejection”
  – Study editor and reviewers’ evaluation carefully
  – Learn from it and use it (often reviewers' comments can help improve the quality of your manuscript)
  – Start over?
  – Did you target the right journal?
  – Remember, peer review is the “quality control system” of science (the tyranny of small numbers [e.g., typically 2 – 3 reviewers]…were their judgments accurate?)…AND reviewers are selected by editors (i.e., non-random)
• Unless a publisher directly solicits you to write a book manuscript this can require dramatically reorganizing (or completely rewriting) a thesis or dissertation
  – Usually, a thesis or dissertation is too narrow in scope to be EASILY reorganized into a book
  – A single study is not adequate for a book in MOST publisher’s minds
  – Publishers are in the business to make MONEY…but if they don’t know you or your work it is likely that they will not even look at a prospectus…NETWORK!
Book Publication

• The typical elements of a book prospectus
  – Author qualifications and authority on the subject matter
  – Substantive focus
  – Intended audiences
  – Unique characteristics
  – Comparison to existing related texts
  – Proposed outline (i.e., chapters)
  – Sample chapter