Position Statement on Open Access to Theses and Dissertations

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On July 22, the American Historical Association (AHA) released a "Statement on Policies Regarding the Embargoing of Completed History PhD Dissertations" recommending a lengthy embargo option in policies designed to make dissertations freely available through online repositories. The Harvard Office for Scholarly Communication (OSC) believes that the AHA recommendation will do more harm than good for scholars, including doctoral students.

The AHA provides no evidence to support its chief recommendation:

“The American Historical Association strongly encourages graduate programs and university libraries to adopt a policy that allows the embargoing of completed history PhD dissertations in digital form for as many as six years. Because many universities no longer keep hard copies of dissertations deposited in their libraries, more and more institutions are requiring that all successfully defended dissertations be posted online, so that they are free and accessible to anyone who wants to read them. At the same time, however, an increasing number of university presses are reluctant to offer a publishing contract to newly minted PhDs whose dissertations have been freely available via online sources.”

This recommendation contradicts evidence gathered in a recently published article in College & Research Libraries (C&RL), which explores the impact of making social sciences and humanities dissertations openly accessible. The AHA’s call for a six-year embargo is an extreme measure given the results of a 2011 survey of publishers that was conducted by the authors of the C&RL article. According to the authors’ survey, “[t]he majority of responses (72%) from university press directors and journal editors indicated that manuscripts that are revisions of openly accessible ETDs are always welcome for submission (45%) or considered on a case-by-case basis (27%). Only 4.5 percent of all respondents indicated that they would never consider an ETD for publication” (p. 372).

The AHA statement argues that “the AHA seeks to balance two central though at times competing ideals in our profession – on the one hand, the full and timely dissemination of new historical knowledge; and, on the other, the unfettered ability of young historians to revise their dissertations and obtain a publishing contract from a press.” The AHA recommendation does not strike that balance. Instead, it restricts access to important research from new scholars without significantly improving the likelihood of publication in book form.

The OSC’s goal is to remove access barriers to Harvard research, help Harvard authors build audience and impact, and help readers find and retrieve the Harvard research they might need for their own work. We support open access for theses and dissertations, flexibility for students in different circumstances, and the shortest embargoes that will serve student needs.

A recent Harvard University Press (HUP) blog post speaks to “the possibility of a dissertation’s availability actually working in favor of a young scholar seeking a contract.” One of the Press’s editors, Brian Distelberg states, “I’m always looking out for exciting new scholarship that might make for a good book...And so, to whatever extent open access to a dissertation increases the odds of its ideas being read and discussed more widely, I tend to think it increases the odds of my hearing about them.” The HUP post notes that the process of “scouting for new voices, new ideas, and new inquiries” often happens online, and concludes with the simple assertion that, “If you can’t find it, you can’t sign it.”

Open distribution is also in keeping with the Form of the Dissertation guidelines from Harvard’s Graduate School of
Arts and Sciences, which emphasizes the long-standing academic tradition of sharing dissertations in an effort to disseminate research and knowledge: “The assumption that underlies the regulations concerning the deposit of PhD dissertations is that they must be ‘published’ in the old sense...This assumption echoes a traditional European idea that the candidate for a doctorate must make a contribution to knowledge and cannot have a degree for making a discovery that is kept secret.” Harvard Professors Gary King and Stuart Shieber address this tradition in a recent OSC-produced video and speak to the importance of making one’s research openly available.

In another video created by the OSC, Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences alumnus Ben Finio explains why he chose to deposit his dissertation in DASH, Harvard’s online repository of scholarly work, and how that decision has affected his academic career for the better.

To date Harvard has over 600 open-access dissertations in its Faculty of Arts and Sciences Theses and Dissertations Collection. These dissertations have been downloaded over 29,000 times since they were added to the repository in 2011. OSC Director Peter Suber has called theses and dissertations “the most invisible form of useful literature and the most useful form of invisible literature.” Opening this scholarship brings the benefit of that usefulness to other scholars working on the same topics, and gives the authors an audience beyond their original committee.

For additional commentary, we suggest Duke University's Scholarly Communications Officer Kevin Smith's recent in-depth exploration of the AHA's new policy here.