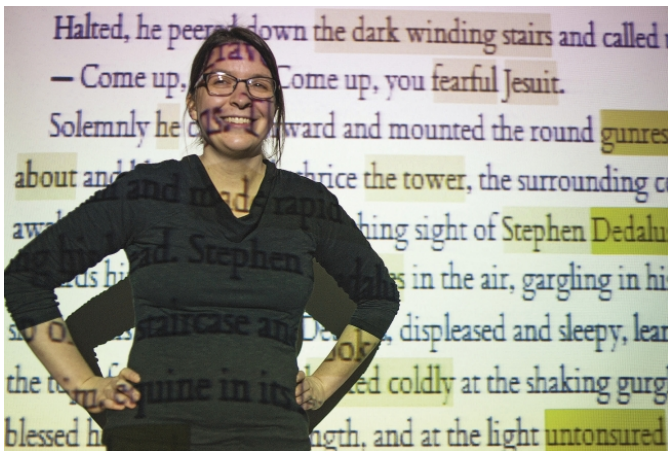


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Ph.D.s Embrace Alternative Dissertations. The Job Market May Not.



Ty Wright for The Chronicle

As a doctoral student, Amanda Visconti created an interactive digital dissertation that lets users annotate James Joyce's "Ulysses." She landed a job at Purdue U. as an assistant professor and digital-humanities specialist.

By *Vimal Patel* | FEBRUARY 28, 2016

Nick Sousanis has scored some wins lately.

After taking an academic risk to use an alternative form for his dissertation — a comic book about visual thinking — he successfully defended it in 2014 and earned his doctorate in interdisciplinary studies from Columbia University.

The dissertation was published by Harvard University Press. Several professors now assign the book. And perhaps most satisfying to Mr. Sousanis, last month he received a national award, from the Association of American Publishers, typically reserved for more-traditional academic tomes.

"It's one thing to convince a dissertation committee" of the value of an unusual approach, says Mr. Sousanis, who is now a postdoctoral researcher in comics studies at the University of Calgary. "And maybe you can convince an editor

because they could see the novelty and want to sell some books. But to convince an independent body feels like people are buying into this."

Mr. Sousanis's optimism, however, is tempered. By one measure, academe hasn't quite yet bought in to nontraditional dissertations. Despite the accolades and speaking invitations — he spoke with *The Chronicle* last month while on the road between talks about his dissertation at the College for Creative Studies, in Detroit, and Duke University — he hasn't landed a tenure-track job.

For a variety of reasons, humanities programs at many colleges have started to allow dissertation formats to veer from the traditional book-length monograph. These projects have taken the form of a suite of three or more papers, a documentary, an interactive analysis of a text, or even a comic book.

But as more graduate schools support different approaches, hiring-and-promotion practices at most universities lag behind. Ph.D. advisers and doctoral students need to be thinking sooner about how such alternate dissertations will affect career prospects down the line, say graduate-school administrators.

As one scholar put it, students who pursue nontraditional formats may be "guinea pigs," participating in an experiment that could hobble them on an already tough academic job market.

Charles Caramello, dean of the University of Maryland's Graduate School, which supports efforts to rethink the form that dissertations can take, says the status quo is changing, but slowly.

"Dissertations still look traditional for the most part," Mr. Caramello says, "because hiring committees still look at them favorably for the most part, because tenure-and-promotion committees use them as the gold standard."

New Career Paths

The traditional humanities dissertation, published as a book, has long been a de facto requirement for landing a tenure-track position. But that needs to change, many scholars and administrators say.

The financial problems facing university presses have meant that fewer dissertations are being published as books. What's more, calls to reform doctoral education are growing, in part in an effort to reduce the time it takes to produce a traditional dissertation, which often takes three years or longer.

The depressed academic job market, sending more Ph.D. students to seek jobs outside academe, has forced programs to question the purpose of a dissertation, Mr. Caramello says. "If you're looking for a career that's not in the academy, it may be less important for you to have written a dissertation that's going to become a book in two or three years. We can't keep training students as if they're going to all be professors if 50 percent of them are not going to be professors."

For Amanda Visconti, who created an interactive digital dissertation that allows users to annotate James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the alternative approach paid off. But her experience shows the planning — and luck — that is needed to create a new career path.

Ms. Visconti, who earned her Ph.D. at Maryland and is now an assistant professor in Purdue University Libraries, had some advantages. Maryland's flagship campus, at College Park, has a center that helps scholars develop computer skills. And her research adviser was Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, whose dissertation in the 1990s about electronic literature was one of the first that was all digital.

Doctoral students need to consider their career goals before determining a dissertation format, Ms. Visconti says. She wanted a job outside the professoriate and did not expect to have an academic career. By chance, though, the Purdue

job opened up and allowed her to keep a focus on digital humanities while going on the tenure track.

"I had the privilege of knowing that I would be happy in a variety of jobs," Ms. Visconti says. "If you know you want a traditional tenure-track job, you need to think about how you're going to deal with questions about your digital dissertation on the job market."

Mr. Kirschenbaum says academe is more open to nontraditional dissertations now than when he was a doctoral student. But research advisers still need to have frank conversations with their students, he says. He talked with Ms. Visconti about how she would have to chart her own path.

"If your dissertation is on Victorian poetry and you want to be a Victorian in an English department," Mr. Kirschenbaum says, "the odds are stacked against you, but the path forward is clear. We talked about the difference between that and what she was doing."

Indeed, for those who want to land nonacademic jobs, rethinking the dissertation can be appealing.

Jesse Merandy, a Ph.D. candidate in English at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, says a traditional dissertation wouldn't have served his career goals. His dissertation will be a game for mobile devices that tells users about the life and work of Walt Whitman as they walk Brooklyn Heights, where the poet lived.

"A monograph may have even been a disservice for me," Mr. Merandy says. "When I started, I thought my degree was going to lead to a teaching position. But it became obvious to me that doors were opening constantly as a result of my tech skills."

Last July, more than a year before he expects to complete his Ph.D., Mr. Merandy landed a job at the Bard Graduate Center, assisting faculty members and students with digital-media projects. "This is the perfect place for me," he says.

Those Risky Humanities

Most professors who spoke with *The Chronicle*, including Paul Yachnin, an English professor at McGill University, say their advice for a student who wants a tenure-track job in a traditional humanities department is to stick with the typical book-length monograph.

Still, Mr. Yachnin says, he wouldn't object if a student is set on doing a nontraditional dissertation. "There are more jobs outside the academy than in the academy," he says, "and the academy is in a mood to change."

He also says he's not convinced by the argument that advisers are putting their students at risk by allowing exotic dissertations. The very act of accepting a student into a humanities Ph.D. these days is a major risk, he notes.

He has a point. Mr. Sousanis, the comic-book author, hasn't landed a tenure-track job yet. But neither have countless doctoral recipients with traditional dissertations.

Mr. Sousanis says his challenge isn't so much his comic-book thesis, but trying to find a place where his academic interests fit. At the Harvard bookstore, his book, *Unflattening*, sits in the philosophy section, next to Spinoza. At another bookstore, it's on the shelf with other graphic novels, next to Art Spiegelman.

"You scroll through job postings and they want someone who does contemporary literature or prose poetry or creative nonfiction, and what they're looking for isn't necessarily going to be me," Mr. Sousanis says.

Despite the job uncertainty, he says, he wouldn't change a thing about his dissertation. "I did the work I thought I needed to do, and it exceeded the impact that I expected. I've been beyond lucky."

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