



# TRANSLATING A DISSERTATION TO A SCHOLARLY PUBLICATION: WORDS OF ADVICE FROM THE JOURNAL EDITORIAL BOARD

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A quote often attributed to Michelangelo reads, “In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it” (Shaikh and Leonard-Amodeo, 2005, p. 75). There can be a temptation to see the act of chiseling a journal article out of one’s dissertation in similar terms. One cannot help but wonder if Michelangelo’s advisors ever presented him a piece of stone and said, “Yeah, you could get two or three angels out of this one.” However, “chop it down and submit something” is advice doctoral students often receive when thinking about publishing their dissertations. Such advice can lead to the modern-day equivalent of this approach – cutting and pasting a 20,000-40,000 word dissertation into 5,000-7,000 word journal article. This process, of course, often leads to expected results: a disjointed and wordy article that is both difficult to follow and overly complicated.

## A CONTRAST IN PURPOSES

The folly of simply cutting and pasting to publication can be more clearly understood when considering why dissertations and research articles exist. As the academic tent pole in graduate education, the central goal of a doctoral dissertation (and to a lesser extent, a Master’s thesis) is to prepare students for a career of scholarship. The process of constructing a dissertation helps graduate students learn how to consume and produce knowledge with the goal to help scholars in their discipline better understand the chosen subject of inquiry over the course of that student’s academic lifetime. (The word “discipline” is often ascribed to an academic field due to the diligence and specialized rigor with which a scholar must act to consume and create new knowledge within that field.) A dissertation, from this perspective, is simply a comprehensive practice of all the relevant skills necessary for the student to conduct independent research in subsequent decades.

Research articles, in contrast, arose to respond to a different societal need. Before the rise of academic journals, the only communication pipeline for bringing scholarship to a broad population was writing a book. If a scholar wanted to inform an audience about a subject, that scholar needed to write a book and collaborate with a publisher to produce and distribute it. Academic journals began as a way for scholars to efficiently communicate new ideas and findings to fellow scholars. An added bonus was that several articles of various related topics could be combined into a single issue to further increase efficiency and optimize information distribution patterns.

When considering the aim to turn a dissertation into a published article in an academic journal, noting these historical and philosophical differences is crucial. A student completes a dissertation to prove to a small group of faculty who know the student well and has helped them create their research enterprise that they possess the skills necessary to join the community of scholars in their given discipline. A scholar writes an article for an academic journal to efficiently communicate novel ideas that productively build on existing bodies of knowledge to colleagues who share common interests in the scholar's subject area.

## THE CAMPUS ACTIVITIES IMPERATIVE

The differences in purpose described above pose relatively few problems in academic subjects where graduate students commonly advance to careers that involve the production of new knowledge in their subject area. In many disciplines (particularly in the sciences), even if a Ph.D. graduate does not become a faculty member, they find employment in a role that rewards them for continuing innovative lines of research. However, within the study of postsecondary education, and particularly in the sub-field of campus activities work, many doctoral graduates advance into a career of administration that provides few tangible rewards for continuing work as a researcher and scholar.

Within this system, a significant amount of empirical research specifically targeted at improving the work of campus activities professionals and optimizing student development is performed by graduate students. It is, therefore, no surprise that Kane (2019) provocatively stated that the work of campus activities lacks a vibrant and growing body of knowledge for how to do such work effectively. To advance, campus activities professionals who have conducted original research through dissertations and theses should strongly consider efforts to publish their scholarship. With this goal in mind, we will focus on some best practices for recent graduates to follow in publishing their work in *The Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship* and other higher-education focused academic journals.

## SPECIFIC ISSUES TO CONSIDER

### **The Extended Timing of Dissertation Writing**

Let us consider how dissertations are built. Typically, students discuss their preferred topic with an advisor, gain permission to get started, and then construct their chapters in sequential fashion. Chapter One provides an introduction to the study and is often written first. Chapter Two provides an overview of relevant literature and is most often approached second. Only after both chapters are complete does one typically begin to write the third chapter, which describes the methods utilized within the student's original research study: how the study will be approached, data will be analyzed, and conclusions will be drawn. In most programs, these three chapters constitute the dissertation proposal that separates a doctoral student from becoming a doctoral candidate – and not insignificantly, where the methods are described in future tense (i.e. what the student will do). Once the proposal has been properly defended to the student's supervising faculty, the candidate often begins navigating institutional review boards and logistical necessities – and only at the completion of such processes begins the active research phase of their work. It is not unusual for the research phase of a dissertation to take several months or more to conduct. For these reasons, doctoral candidates only rarely revisit the first two chapters of their work through the several months and occasionally even years of completing their dissertation. Due to the significant time invested in producing a dissertation, its first half (chapters one and two) can inadvertently become disconnected from its second half (chapters three, four, and five). As a result, the literature review in a dissertation may not predict or reveal the concepts that ultimately became important in the study, or appropriately succinctly lay the foundation for introducing its research questions, methodology, findings, or implications.

### **The Goals of Literature Reviews**

The point of a dissertation literature review is to explicitly display to supervising faculty that the student has mastered the comprehensive body of knowledge relevant within their research subject. Such display requires the student to include numerous citations and deeply describe past researchers' methods, strengths, and weaknesses.

Supervising faculty may point out arcane references to add to help show readers of the dissertation that the student possesses deep and broad knowledge. Such goals stand in stark contrast to the expectations of a literature review within a journal article, where succinctness is valued, and authors share only what is relevant to show the significance of the research presented and how the author's work is poised to significantly advance a body of knowledge.

Journal articles and dissertations may look very similar (similar structures, language, tone, citation management, etc.) but their purposes are very different. As mentioned above, the purpose of a journal article is to efficiently inform the reader regarding innovative and timely advances in knowledge, and rigorously show how the author achieved such advancement. In this regard, it must be readable, interesting, and brief. Authors (who are anonymous to article reviewers) are assumed to already belong to the body of scholars within their field. Journal authors who write to prove to their readers that they belong within that community find themselves often including far too much detail. By contrast, such inclusion is often rewarded in dissertations. The best literature reviews in articles are relatively brief, include the most important citations, and focus on "the why" – why the research is important to scholars and practitioners; why it builds on what we already know, or believe, is true within the field; and, why its findings might significantly inform future research or future practice.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSLATION

At this point, some may wonder if it is hopeless to translate one's dissertation research into a scholarly journal article. If it were, certainly we wouldn't exert the effort to produce this article. As campus activities professionals (and in general, graduating doctoral students) approach publishing their work, it would be wise to consider the advice presented in the paragraphs that follow. While the information pertains specifically to *The Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship*, we also feel it could be productively applied across most scholarly fields of inquiry.

### **Create an Outline**

Perhaps most significantly, we suggest "starting over" in writing for publication. We recognize such reconstruction is probably not what most prospective authors who have spent years working on their dissertations want to hear – yet it is the most likely path to success. For all of the reasons cited in the previous section, it will be difficult to chisel (i.e. cut and paste) a way out of turning a dissertation into a journal article. Certainly one does not have to scrap everything; there will be many useful quotations and citations – but the bulk of the writing that supports those existing elements should be written just for the article. The development of your outline should focus on how the research you have conducted contributes to the larger body of knowledge in campus activities. An introduction should be used to articulate how this is a current issue for professionals. A brief review of the research conducted should follow with a summary of the results. Describe your methodology and philosophical framework. Focus the body of the article on the implications to practice. Think about the following two questions: Why should professionals in campus activities care? What can they actually do with the information that you are sharing? Conclude with a discussion on further research opportunities and implications.

### **Identify salient citations**

Consider the extreme difficulty of editing and proofreading a piece you have likely read dozens of times and have discussed in detail with your advisors for several months. Prospective article authors must put on the lens of a first-time reader to critique the clarity of their writing. In a concrete sense, the author's work might include editing five paragraphs of 20 sentences that include 15 citations into one or two paragraphs that include a comparable amount of significant information. Such translation cannot be accomplished through simply cutting sentences. Simply writing the one or two paragraphs from scratch will result in something much more readable and clear. Beginning to identify the citations that are salient to the focus of the journal article will help you identify how you want to frame your approach.

### **Continue to research**

Given the amount of time that passes between the development of a dissertation and a defense, authors will

need to stay current on the literature surrounding their topic. A journal article should recognize the most recent discussions about a given topic in the field.

### **Take the Appropriate Amount of Time**

Motivation to write is an important consideration. How will you motivate yourself to work on this project? Many individuals who complete dissertations find themselves feeling like someone who has just completed a marathon; the suggestion that they immediately run a 5K race the next day would probably not be well received. The problems with taking an extended break, however, is that every subsequent day that passes without translating a dissertation to an article is another day that the skills the author built as a writer will atrophy just a bit more. Similar to any skill not consistently honed, dissertation authors who lose the practice of writing struggle to regain it. A typical journal article can take over 30 hours of work to establish an initial draft to submit for review. A mistake dissertation authors have made in the past is reserving an open weekend soon after completing their dissertation writing to cut its length into an article to submit to a journal. Budget several sessions for outlining the article, summarizing dissertation sections, inserting more timely references, etc. Our advice is to write a little every day – no matter how little – to keep the work on your mind; you may be surprised with how quickly you make progress given such consistency.

### **Possible Trap of “Familiarity”**

Many authors have fallen into the following trap: lulled by familiarity of our writing and certain of what we intended to say, we tend to glaze over the actual written words, inserting absent words as if they were there, ignoring grammatical and syntactical errors as we skim, and presuming that other readers will be able to make exactly the intuitive leaps we have made. A good litmus test for your writing is to force yourself to read your work word for word (aloud, if possible); if you cannot bring yourself to read what you have written, it is unlikely that others will want to, either.

### **Structure your time**

For example, after re-reading Chapter One, commit to writing 150 words that could be used as the introductory paragraph or two in a scholarly journal article that summarizes the chapter. Maybe the goal of another day’s writing is to summarize the sample of one’s research participants from three paragraphs to one. Compartmentalizing tasks and accomplishing them in bite-sized pieces can sustain momentum while still allowing full-time working professionals to get their weekends back.

### **Stay motivated**

The process to get a journal article from an outline to press takes time. This process will be a marathon and not a sprint. To motivate yourself, think about what made you excited to study your topic in the first place. You should also think about all of the efforts that went into becoming an expert. It was likely founded in a desire to understand the topic. Remember that there are others like you who would like to understand the topic better, where you can serve as a catalyst for their learning.

### **Seek feedback**

Lastly, find individuals who are willing to read and critique your work. Find individuals who will challenge your thinking, not the colleagues who will tell you that you did a great job. They can offer a fresh perspective, especially if they have never seen it before. It can be useful to ask individuals without any experience with your topic to offer their feedback. (This can also serve as a dry run for when you submit your article to be reviewed by anonymous scholars.) Good research often strikes a balance between describing complex constructs and processes in ways as simple and clear as possible. Such counter-balancing is the “ying” and “yang” of the educational process. The process of effective teaching involves, in part, taking something simple and making it complex. In this way, it should be possible to give your article to a friend from outside of academia and have it make sense to them. Their feedback could provide very useful feedback in preparation for the blind review soon to come.

Another source of good critique can come from members of your dissertation committee. In the “publish or perish” world of higher education, they may even be interested in being a co-author with you – which will likely

also result in your having help in the writing and editing of the article. Should this occur, it would be a good idea to discuss the order in which authors are listed. For those who are pursuing careers as practitioners, there is little to no downside to being listed as a second author – especially if the first author is well-respected in the field. On the other hand, if you have done the lion’s share of the work that led to the article, being listed as the first author is justified. Regardless, possessing the help of a seasoned professional guiding you in the process offers clear advantages in making the transition from dissertation to academic journal.

## THE JCAPS COMMITMENT

The editorial board of JCAPS is committed to helping scholars develop in the field of student activities. We believe that the ability to demonstrate the impact of campus activities on students’ development in postsecondary education and the effectiveness of our institutions is integral to the success of our profession. As such, we are willing to commit our time to individuals who submit to this journal. Academic journals are ranked based on how often the articles they contain are cited in subsequent research. Our central goal is to help campus activities scholars and professionals produce writing that is accessible and significant to the work of campus activities. To that end, we are more than willing to play an active role in supporting authors prior to and during the publication process.

## REFERENCES

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