Thank you to John and the conference planning committee for inviting me to speak with you today, and thanks to you all for welcoming me into this community; I’ve learned a lot over the past two days.

Today I’m going to talk to you about the emerging landscape of PhD education and where the dissertation fits into that. This is a big picture talk, so I’m going to start with a big picture.

The short version: the dissertation is the keystone of innovation in doctoral education. The dissertation and the work you do are at the center of all the exciting shifts happening in graduate education.

Last week I tried to distill my talk into a tweet. It went something like this:

To:
Advance scholarship for the 21st century,
Invite marginalized voices in, &
Send more confident professionals out,

Look to the dissertation.

#YesTheDissCanDoAllThat

A lot of arguments about doctoral education or the dissertation say that nothing much has changed in the roughly 200 years since the German model was transplanted to the New World. But that’s not really true. You all know that intimately, with the transition to pdf.

But if there are still doubters out there, all you have to do is look at the basic requirements of the PhD in 1900 at Johns Hopkins to see the discrepancies.

For one thing, when it first emerged in the US, the dissertation to be an “elaborate thesis” on a “focused subject... written over the greater part of an academic year.”² Sarah Bond shared with us yesterday that the first dissertation deposited in the US was only 6 pages long.

Clearly, the situation is very different now. The pressures on PhD students have increased exponentially.

These are compelling reasons—not that the dissertation should change, but that it has changed. And there pressures at play now that will ensure it continues to do so.

Not only is doctoral education very different, we can do things now that were unimaginable in 1900. Digital technologies have made certain questions possible that then were the realm of science fiction.

So let’s talk about scholarship for this moment in history.

**Advance scholarship for the 21st century:**
I’m here representing the Council of Graduate Schools, which is a member organization of over 480 graduate schools around the US, Canada, and internationally.

Graduate administrators are sometimes surprised to learn that anyone would want to complete a dissertation project that looks anything different than the one they did. Often they do not question the policies that have been in place since before they got there, perhaps requiring a pdf dissertation or having margin or even archival-grade paper requirements.

Nick Sousanis does a great job of articulating this. You saw a bit of his dissertation yesterday in Dr. Bond’s talk.

Nick Sousanis is an assistant professor of Humanities & Liberal Studies at San Francisco State University. His dissertation from Teachers College, Columbia University, *Unflattening*, is a comic book.

From an interview in the *Paris Review*:

> “The book is very much an argument that we make sense of the world in ways beyond text—teaching and learning shouldn’t be restricted to that narrow band. So rather than talking about visual thinking and multimodal stuff... comics just let me do it.”³

Now, I’m not advocating that every single dissertation take a format like this one. What I’m saying is that a project like Sousanis’ demonstrates the exciting possibilities that open up when we think beyond the pdf.

And THAT is what graduate administrators are thinking about—that is what students are thinking about. As Heidi said yesterday, graduate deans aren’t worried about digital repositories or the technological reasons it may be difficult to archive a multimodal thesis. If you want them to be concerned about that,

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you are going to need to advocate to them. I’m here to tell you that it’s very unlikely they will come to this on their own.

This theme of 21\textsuperscript{st}-century scholarship is going to run throughout my presentation, and again, what I mean by this is the different kinds of questions and thinking that become possible when we free ourselves from the confines of the dissertation-as-text.

I say that the dissertation has the potential to invite marginalized voices in. I mean this in a couple of ways: First, in the sense that there are groups that have been systematically excluded from academe. People with certain kinds of bodies or a particular lived experience who have been told implicitly and explicitly that we don’t belong.

Our institutions (I think, I hope) are beginning to come around to the notion that this exclusion has limited our collective enterprise. There has been a push in graduate education towards holistic application review, for example, and moving away from using the GRE.

(The background there is that women of all races and men of racial and ethnic minorities consistently score lower on the GRE, and the test has been shown to be less effective at measuring those students’ ability to succeed. Therefore having a cutoff score or considering the GRE early in the process tends to result in more homogenous cohorts, and generally has very little correlation with graduation rates, time to degree, publication rates, employment, or other long-term outcomes. So the good folks at ETS have been working very hard to help graduate faculty understand how to use the GRE effectively, but some schools have decided to abandon it as a requirement in an effort to diversify their admits.)

But excellence through diversity means more than admitting people with marginalized identities into graduate cohorts. It means remaking structures, creating new space for these important viewpoints and projects.

And by creating these spaces, by remaking graduate education into a place where everyone can thrive, we begin a virtuous cycle that attracts more and more innovation. Equity is good for all of us.

And I think it’s sometimes difficult to articulate what those new spaces and structures would look like, but it’s very clear in the context of the dissertation. Here is one example. Ellen Hibbard earned a PhD in communication and culture from Ryerson University with a multimedia dissertation in American Sign Language.

From a University Affairs interview:

“As far as I know, I am the first in the world . . . to create a digital document of my dissertation to be hosted using video annotation software that is equipped with deaf culture navigation features. . . . I started from traditional print-centric technologies and I closed with new current modern video technologies to show academic thought and considerations for the future. This model is a bridge between the traditional approach and new approaches for deaf academics.”

Imagine if Ellen Hibbard had been required to submit a pdf dissertation or an English-language dissertation.

But students representing marginalized groups don’t start encountering challenges at the dissertation stage. Structural inequity takes many varied forms, and graduate deans are really starting to pay attention to things such as racial climate surveys and the disproportionate stress burden borne by underrepresented minority students.

At CGS, we’ve been encouraging graduate deans to look throughout the student lifecycle for opportunities to increase student supports, encourage inclusive pedagogies, and also to do the more difficult work of listening and building.

One thing that our research has uncovered is that lack of information about career outcomes may be associated with doctoral attrition, especially for underrepresented students. It makes sense, right? If you don’t see the point of finishing your degree, why invest the massive amounts of time and resources it would take to complete? It’s basic cost/benefit analysis.

Which brings us to my final claim:

The dissertation can help us send more confident professionals out. I care very deeply and personally about graduate student professional development, and I believe the dissertation is an important site for developing broadly applicable skills, and this is important. Helping students understand and articulate the skills they’re building, and making scholarship more accessible to general audiences.

This is an area where CGS has focused heavily in the past ten years, and even more intensely since I joined the team five years ago.

I’m going to turn to another favorite innovative dissertation, another one you heard from yesterday: A.D. Carson. Carson wrote a dissertation that takes the form of a 34-track hip hop album.

Carson offers us another way to think about access, audience, and scholarship. By putting his dissertation up on YouTube, by rapping his ideas, he is able to say things he would not be able to say in the same way in a monograph, and he’s saying those things to different people. What I find especially interesting about Carson’s work is that it is not only publicly available, it’s intentional about its audience and how the form itself stands in defiance of an institution that has largely failed young black men.

He talks about it this way:

Perhaps, following [Hortense] Spiller’s suggestion that “the work of the intellectual is to make her reader/hearer discomfitted, unoriented and, therefore, self-critical,” we
should discomfit and unorient the academy, and make it self-critical [if the academy is the reader/hearer of the message delivered by this project].

The dissertation itself is grounded by an intense theoretical structure of black intellectuals and is unapologetic about its aim to challenge but also contribute to academe. This is an illustration of what I

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mean by 21st-century scholarship. He’s asking different questions, he’s coming to different conclusions, he’s pushing his field and the entire academy forward with his work.

Carson engages these questions and others in an incredibly nuanced and important manner in his dissertation and its supporting materials, and I encourage you to go to look him up and explore his work. There’s no way I can do it justice here, but again, it’s an excellent example of a PhD student using the dissertation as a site for self-exploration, career exploration, and also a deliberate accounting of the skills and processes he uses to complete the project.

Carson has a page on his website where he catalogues his composition process, e.g., including all the software applications that he used. This is exactly what I mean when I say that the dissertation can be both the site of both building skills and understanding and articulating them.

Now, A.D. Carson holds a position right now at the University of Virginia. He is the Inaugural Mellon Digital Humanities Initiative/NEH Africana Studies Hip Hop Scholar In-Residence and Assistant Professor of Hip Hop and the Global South.

But not every PhD student is going to want a career in academe. And even those who want one...It’s no secret the numbers don’t match up.

Here’s just one example: Biology. We have good numbers for Biology because they are part of the Survey of Earned Doctorates (exit) as well as the Survey of Doctorate Recipients (longitudinal post-PhD), both national surveys run by NSF.

In many fields, in many departments, one problem we keep running up against is that we don’t actually know how to help students better prepare for their careers because we don’t know where they go.

I’m excited to tell you that we will very soon!

Overview of PhD Career Pathways:
CGS project supported by the National Science Foundation (#1661272) and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. (Builds on 2014 CGS feasibility study and a planning phase funded by Mellon, NSF, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.)
1. Purposes: design a set of instruments that would allow graduate institutions to collect career pathways data for PhDs, use that information for program improvement.
2. Instrument design would address three particular information gaps established in a prior CGS feasibility study:8
   1. data on career skills and responsibilities that would help graduate institutions improve individual STEM PhD programs and career support services,
   2. information on the range of STEM careers available to prospective and current graduate students,
   3. national data to give the broader public a better understanding of the scope of contributions of doctorate holders.

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The idea is that, once programs have information about what their alumni are doing, they will be able to better prepare their current students for the full range of careers available to them.

My role as co-PI in the project is to direct an implementation study to answer the question: will having these data make any difference? Will programs improve? If so, how? If not, why not?

Our first data briefs will be released this fall.

Here I’m going to pause for a personal confession: I have a PhD in English and I never wanted to be a professor.

“Why the heck did you go for a PhD, then?” you may well ask. I confidently strode into graduate education with the attitude that the more education you have, the more options you will have. So when I got to my doctoral program and the very first course I was required to take was called “The Profession of English,” I was confused. Guess which profession was “The Profession”? It took me far too long that nearly everyone around me was operating under a very different theory of education than I was.

The longer I work on these issues, the more I believe that much of the tension around reforms in doctoral education come down to these two competing theories of education. This graphic neatly lays out the distinction.⁹

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You can see there are two ends of the spectrum when it comes to thinking about doctoral education:

- PhD as research certification to prepare students as academics and
- PhD as broad professional preparation for a variety of careers.

This comes from the Re-envisioning PhD project, which was a late 90s project of the University of Washington that remains relevant. You should check it out if you’re interested.

There is a growing acceptance and awareness of this approach to doctoral education, which I think is a good thing. To me, this problem, of PhDs who have pursued careers beyond the academy feeling ignored or disowned by their alma maters is one of the most pressing in graduate education.

The dissertation lies at the heart of doctoral education, and thus appropriately, lies at the center of thinking about its reform. If we think about the PhD as a degree that broadly prepares professionals for a variety of contexts, then the dissertation should be the site of a large part of that preparation.

CGS has taken up the attempt to identify implicit and specialized cultural knowledge necessary for success in a doctoral program. At this point, this attempt has taken the form of introducing the concept of learning outcomes for doctoral education.\(^\text{10}\)

I’ll be honest with you, when we started the research for this report, I did not think it was going to go well. I didn’t think any graduate schools were thinking about learning outcomes, and I didn’t think they wanted to be.

But as I learned more, and as I delved deeper into the processes that some institutions have gone into for crafting these learning outcomes, I became convinced of their potential for leveling the playing field for students who might not know what to expect when they matriculate in a doctoral program. And in the theme of innovation, and of equity being good for everyone, the process of developing learning outcomes forces faculties to look at what those degree requirements are that I put up at the beginning of my talk, to look at those and say, “what is it we’re really trying to teach here? What is it we want students to learn? What do we want them to know and be able to do?” And that can lead you directly to: “Is there a better way?”

A key recommendation of the report on learning outcomes in doctoral education was to take a close look at the dissertation in particular. So I made a short list, not meant to be comprehensive, of some of the skills and abilities that writing a dissertation can develop.

Of course, not every dissertation currently develops all of these abilities—but it could! And that’s a matter of policy. What we’ve been doing at CGS is talking with the graduate deans to make them aware of these larger issues at work, and how their institutional policies may not be leaving room for the kinds of innovation they say they want.

I’d say from an institutional perspective, the first level of opening up the dissertation is removing roadblocks.

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The next level is articulating possibilities, so that students understand what is possible. Because some students will come in with an idea of the digital work they want to do, and some will have no idea that that is even an option. So making explicit what is possible.

Some small policy changes that could make a big difference to your work, such as making it part of the form for admission to candidacy that the student indicate whether they are considering a nontraditional dissertation format.

And I’d say a third level is pushing all students, even those who choose to pursue traditional dissertation projects, out of their scholarly comfort zone to make their ideas accessible to a more general audience.

Some institutions have already made moves to change policies, including the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a consortium of universities in Canada, led by McGill. In both cases they were motivated by a desire to advance scholarship as well as a recognition that the dissertation is a key aspect of PhD student professional development.

How do you make sure that your graduate dean or graduate council really understand the work you do and why it’s important for you to be at the table?

I’ve already come up with a short list of some of the takeaways of this meeting for CGS and for the graduate dean community.

But my question for you is: What do you think I should take back to CGS? What do you wish your graduate dean knew about the work you do?

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