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Review of *The Role and Nature of the Doctoral Dissertation*, by The Council of Graduate Schools

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The Role and Nature of the Doctoral Dissertation. Council of Graduate Schools. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools. 1991. 41 pages. \$5.00 to individuals at CGS member institutions; \$10.00 to non-member institutions (paper).

This brief, impressively sponsored report overflows with Machiavellian subtexts, bureaucratic rationalizations, and mendacious platitudes. While concluding that the doctoral dissertation "defines the essence of the PhD degree" (p. 31), the overall message is that doctoral dissertations have become all things to all disciplines and that—further—this diversity of options is legitimate and virtually inexorable. The shock to my academic sensibilities on reading this official policy statement of the Council of Graduate Schools is the realization (once again) that some of our colleagues in several of the engineering, natural, and physical sciences have thoroughly subverted the doctoral process, turning it into a grant-fuelled machine that spits out technically proficient clones rather than creative, independent scholars.

The CGS report has all the surface trappings of objectivity and evenhanded debate. Input to the study was solicited nationally by a "task force" of seven graduate deans and was obtained from some 50 universities who "participate[d] in the project" (pp. 2, 40-41). Despite otherwise widespread input and discussion, the final report is atheoretical, impressionistic, and draws much of its structure from issues raised by two authors external to the study: Berelson (1960) and Ziolkowski (1990). The logic of the corporate, unsigned report—which looks ostensibly to the future—is fundamentally *status quo*: that is, it conducts a survey of current practices and makes recommendations on that basis. The science-by-bureaucracy model adopted by our entrepreneurial colleagues in neighboring disciplines is thereby reported without serious critique as *accepted practice*.

All of this would matter little were it not for the prestige of the Council of Graduate Schools, the issuing of this report as an official "policy statement," and the stated intent:

[To] produce a CGS document intended for widespread distribution that provides a rationale, context, and guidelines for institutions to use as they consider their own policies relative to the role and nature of the doctoral dissertation (p. 35).

Readers of *Teaching Sociology* should be aware that this document is already in the hands of administrators at most American and Canadian graduate schools. This document, produced and endorsed by a *committee of deans*, will no doubt be used by *administrators* on many local campuses to promulgate and legitimate "reforms"

that will further accelerate the importation of entrepreneurial norms into academic sociology.

There are, as one might hope, many suggestions in this report that have sympathetic appeal and considerable face validity. For example, the report argues that students should receive good advising and should have a clear understanding of departmental practices and expectations regarding the dissertation project. But most such recommendations are things that first-year graduate students can (and do) tell us. We do not need a "task force" of distinguished deans to tell us these things.

The report could have tackled a serious problem: what to do when the foundational principles of graduate scholarship are subverted toward anti-intellectual ends—but here the report is embarrassingly silent. Despite all the suggestions and good ideas, the central problem is that atheoretical administrative guidance and liberal bureaucratic remedies cannot reform a discipline or a department that is intellectually and/or morally corrupt. I encourage readers to ask a question which strikes below the "I'm OK, you're OK" surface rhetoric of this report: what are the vested interests of a group of structurally powerful administrators in producing, endorsing, and distributing this document?

Indeed, this policy statement brings to mind a host of actions and questions that we in the so-called "soft" disciplines need to start doing and asking. We can, as a first step, help our more bureaucratic colleagues by providing structured workshops and reflexive exercises in values clarification. If the CGS report can be believed, there are myriad biochemists, physicists, and engineers (not to mention graduate deans) who are puzzled by the terms "originality, significance, and independence" when applied to dissertation research. These colleagues need our help! We must do what we can to restore to the so-called "hard" sciences the opportunity for graduate students to learn firsthand the value and excitement of conducting doctoral research that is genuinely original, truly significant, and fundamentally independent.

Copies of the CGS report may be ordered from the Council of Graduate Schools, One Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 430, Washington, DC 20036-1173.

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REFERENCES

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- Ziolkowski, Theodore. 1990. "The PhD Squid." *The American Scholar* 59 (Spring): 175-95.