



school are going to make your curriculum vitae stand out.

**Eos:** *One section of the book stands out as both rebellious and obvious. Can you explain your method for “ditching the dissertation”?*

**Christopher:** I do not recommend that students write a formal dissertation, and I have many reasons why. A typical dissertation is written like this: The student sits down and writes 100, 200, 300, however many hundreds of pages. Then draft 1 goes to his advisor, then draft 2, draft 3. He works on it for several months, and then the student sends it to his committee. Then there are more revisions. Finally, the student stands up and defends his dissertation. At the end of it all, after he’s received his degree, he sits down and thinks, “Ah, now I have to write a paper.” This leads to the task of slicing and dicing that many-hundred-page dissertation into 10- to 20-page papers that meet a journal’s requirements. You’ll need to change the tone of your writing, the figures, and some of the contents, so you’ve actually doubled your work. You’ve done a formal dissertation—which nobody ever reads, by the way—but you have so much more work to do.

So instead of this formal dissertation process, I recommend my students take a different approach. I suggest that they write two or three peer-reviewed papers. After they write these papers, the process is, basically, to write a very short introduction that says, “My dissertation is organized into two major sections.” Then, they slide the entire peer-reviewed paper in as part 1 and the next paper as part 2. They write a very short future work or conclusions section and, if they have another paper, add it as an appendix and call it quits. This works on many fronts, because think about this: On the day of his defense, the student stands up to give his presentation. On the first slide is the title of his research. On the

second slide is the list of papers that he’s already published. At that point, if the committee members knew what was going on, they would say, “Where do I sign the dotted line?” And why is that? Because the peer-review process typically puts papers in the hands of reviewers who are experts in that particular topical area. The thesis work has already been vetted by the international committee, which should make it easy for the thesis committee to also approve the work.

Seaming a dissertation together after you’ve written your papers means you have to do the work only once. It lets the larger research community know about your work, and, finally, peer-reviewed papers are what typically count in the geosciences. So it works well for everyone involved to reduce the time and the frustration.

**Eos:** *Recurring themes in the book are those of taking ownership and of becoming a resource center. What do you mean by this?*

**Christopher:** There is a definite link between lack of ownership and lack of productivity. When a student first joins a research group, there is a short period of time in which the advisor and the student are working together and the student sees the project that they are working on as “his advisor’s project.” With time and proper mentoring, the advisor should be able to hand over the project to the student. So what do I mean by that? The student should always think about going the extra mile in terms of doing research analysis, producing plots or figures, writing papers, and being part of the team. It doesn’t happen overnight, but eventually there needs to be a transition during which the student starts to think of the project not as his advisor’s project but as his own dissertation and his own research project.

As part of smoothing and enabling this transition, I think that becoming a resource

center is really critical, especially considering the fast pace of research. In my graduate school days I had to set up weekly meetings with my advisor, or maybe send the occasional e-mail with figures or plots or analysis. I tell my students not to do this. I tell them, “Well, you can design a blog or a Web site that says, “These are the papers that I have read, and here are some figures and plots.” As a student, you become a resource for your advisor for that particular topical area. This lets your advisor keep up with what you are working on without needing that weekly check-in, but above that, becoming a resource center also builds avenues for collaboration with the wider scientific community.

**Eos:** *Since you started teaching career counseling, have the infrastructure and support being offered to graduate students and recent graduates improved?*

**Christopher:** I think that there has been an increase in awareness of these issues. I’m not saying my book brought about that change, but at least in the places to which I have traveled there has been an increased awareness of how this could help students and eventually help the faculty, the department, and the university as a whole. I think we want our students to succeed and not to get disillusioned by the myriad things that can get in their way. I don’t have numbers for how resources in this area have changed, but I can say that I have personally been given freedom to expand my course to all of the graduate students at my university, rather than just offering it to the Department of Atmospheric Sciences. So I think it is catching on.

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—COLIN SCHULTZ, Writer