



112 North Bryan Ave
Bloomington IN 47408
Phone 812.855.7311
www.oah.org

OAH Executive Board Issues Statement on Dissertation Embargoes

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At its fall meeting in Atlanta, Georgia November 16-17, 2013, the executive board of the Organization of American Historians discussed the issue of temporary “embargoes” on newly completed PhD dissertations.

In the academic world, a dissertation embargo usually means withholding public circulation of dissertations in print or digital form for a predetermined period of time, usually no more than five or six years. It provides authors with the prerogative of determining the most advantageous modes of publishing their work without having their dissertations already available, especially in digital form, almost immediately after a PhD is granted. The following statement reflects the board’s unanimous view of this important subject.

The OAH Executive Board strongly supports the right of authors to make their own decisions about the manner in which their doctoral dissertations will be published and circulated. The board urges history departments and graduate school administrations to support that right without qualification, understanding that embargoed dissertations will be available for public consultation upon the expiration of the designated embargo period.

Doctoral research and scholarship typically takes three to five years to complete, a significant investment of time and resources in the lifetime of any individual. In the discipline of history, publication of the scholarship and research embodied in the PhD dissertation is often a prerequisite of employment and professional advancement.

The OAH Executive Board urges history departments and graduate schools to provide doctoral candidates with ample information about embargo options and procedures at their respective institutions. It further encourages advisers and students to consult with each other about the advantages and disadvantages of embargoing a dissertation, leaving the final decision entirely to the individual student.