Dangerous Dissertations:

Alternative Approaches to Dissertation Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The ever-changing educational environment calls for scholars and practitioners alike to trouble the current ways of seeing and doing dissertations and to invite conversations about doing dissertations differently. Alternative dissertations serve as an avenue for this type of critical work. We begin this article by providing an overview of the different dissertation genres and formats in Appalachian State University's (AppState) EdD program and situating the concept of a *dangerous dissertation* within the alternative dissertation landscape. We frame the dangerous dissertation as an alternative approach to dissertation inquiry and share our experiences creating and supporting dangerous dissertations. Specifically, we discuss the professional anxieties voiced by students using dissertations as vehicles for critiquing their professional contexts and how faculty mentors can support students grappling with shifting professional identities. We conclude with an urgent call for more dangerous dissertations and guidance for faculty advisors supporting this type of critical work.

KEYWORDS

alternative dissertations, conceptual dissertations, critical policy analysis, critique, dissertation mentoring

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger. (Foucault, 1984, p. 343)

Writing alternative dissertations is not a new phenomenon, but bringing to light the inherent dangers of writing alternative dissertations may be new. Some may caution that writing an alternative dissertation is a "bad"[1] thing to do, because defying tradition invites scrutiny. However, the goal in this article is not to determine whether writing alternative dissertations is either "good" or "bad," but to heed Foucault's (1984, p. 343) warning, that one must "determine which is the main danger"—to write or not write a *dangerous dissertation*. To this end, Dr. Star Brown (a dissertation mentor) and Dr. Kristen Proctor (a recent EdD graduate) illuminate the risks and rewards associated with penning dangerous dissertations.

Because this article is a collaborative piece involving reflexivity, the reader will encounter three shifts in narrative voice: Dr. Brown's voice, Dr. Proctor's voice, and the collective voice of both authors.

The article begins with Dr. Brown's account of how difference in the dissertation process represents a way to cement the EdD as a professional practice doctorate. She then maps the range of dissertation genres and formats in the EdD program at Appalachian State University (AppState) to illustrate how the boundaries separating traditional and alternative dissertations are not clearly delineated. She follows by defining the focal point of this article, dangerous dissertations, and by pinpointing the reasons some alternative dissertations become personally and professionally dangerous for the authors. After Dr. Brown shares her experiences as both an EdD student and dissertation mentor, the narrative voice shifts to Dr. Proctor as she details her recent experience writing a dangerous dissertation. Dr. Proctor describes her initial reluctance to engage in dangerous work, the events that led her to do so, and the role her faculty advisor played throughout the process. At the end of the article, the narrative voice shifts a final time as we share our collective guidance for faculty mentors and call for other institutions to advance this type of critical work.

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[1] We use scare quotes throughout this article to indicate terms with contingencies that are not immediately visible (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). We caution readers to approach these terms as provisional and in need of deconstruction.

BRIEF EVOLUTION OF THE EDD DISSERTATION

The doctorate in education (EdD) has been plagued by an "identity crisis" since its inception in 1920, seeking to distinguish itself from the PhD in both function and form (Buss et al., 2014, p. 138). One target for differentiating PhD programs from EdD programs is the dissertation. Decades ago, Thomas et al. (1986) christened the traditional dissertation "archaic" (p. 117) while advocating for "alternative" ways of doing the dissertation. Adding to the conversation, Duke and Beck (1999) called the dissertation a "strange genre" (p. 32) and questioned "why, how, and for whom the dissertation is written" (p. 31). Later, Andrews and Grogan (2005) hastened EdD programs to unleash the dissertation from the "PhD straight jacket" (p. 10) in favor of a culminating experience that develops educational practitioners as "critically reflective professionals" (p. 12). In response, the Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED) created the concept of a dissertation in practice (DiP) emphasizing the importance of research to affect change *in practice*. CPED (2024) frames the DiP as a "scholarly endeavor that impacts a complex problem of practice" (para. 11). The intent of the DiP is to "apply scholarship, inquiry, and research to a broad educational problem that [students] see playing out and face daily in their organization and work" (Perry, 2024, p. 14). The common thread here is a call for a different way to do the EdD dissertation that will produce a different result—a change *in practice*.

Cultivating difference in the dissertation process is a mantra in Appalachian State University's (AppState) doctoral program in educational leadership. In the section that follows, I (Dr. Brown) survey the range of dissertations in AppState's program and reveal how doing dissertations differently can pose danger, especially for students as working professionals. Within the territory of dangerous dissertations, I draw special attention to the conceptual genre, a non-empirical inquiry that uses theory to produce alternative ways of critiquing an educational issue. By showing the multiplicity of dissertation genres and formats generated at our institution, I also interrogate the criteria by which alternative dissertations are defined and open up new and different possibilities for doing the dissertation.

OUR PROGRAM'S DISSERTATION LANDSCAPE

At AppState, we have adopted a programmatic philosophy of doing the dissertation differently (see Miller & Brown, 2024). Dissertations in our program differ in methodological approach, theoretical orientation, and format and oftentimes blur the lines between the traditional and alternative genres. Even within the context of what is considered a "traditional" dissertation, we encourage students to color outside the lines of the five-chapter structure and organization. For example, students producing traditional dissertations may add a foreword, a prologue, an epilogue, or an opening or closing poem to frame their dissertation projects. Or, as an artistic expression of their original works, some students writing traditional dissertations depart from the labeling confines of chapters and instead name the sections of their dissertations as verses, movements, parts, portraits, etc. Still yet, students may morph and expand the traditional dissertation by organizing their research into more than five chapters or sections. The AppState EdD program does not utilize prescriptive templates or methodologies, but we do ask students to take creative liberties with how they approach the research process and, as a result, present

their research. As one student remarked, "so I can explode the outline and make it my own!"

Surely, what AppState recognizes as a traditional dissertation includes forms and stylistic choices that other institutions might consider alternative, which suggests that what is deemed traditional/alternative varies among institutions. At AppState, alternative or *different* dissertations take many forms including multi-article, conceptual, and other varieties that may not fall into an established category. Below I describe the conceptual dissertation, which is one of the prevailing different or alternative types of dissertations that emerge from AppState's EdD program. I end with a discussion of our program's new alternative dissertation conceptualization and approval process.

Conceptual Dissertations

Conceptual dissertations are a variety of alternative dissertations that use theory as a tool to reconceptualize problems of practice. As a non-empirical form of inquiry as practice, conceptual dissertations put current representations of problems of practice into question and critically examine how modern educational issues came to be viewed as problems. In this vein, a radical reorientation of traditional thinking about what constitutes a problem of practice is necessary. That is to say, problems of practice are not always easily identified, improved, or "solved." This genre of alternative inquiry recognizes that conventional interpretive fieldwork or quantitative methods are ill-suited to produce alternative or different ways of critiquing an educational issue. Therefore, by departing from traditional methods and thinking differently, conceptual dissertations generate new ways of doing and improving education.

I contend that the conceptual genre of dissertation is alternative in the sense that these projects differ from the traditional in their methodological designs, critical approaches, and presentation/organization. In light of the exploratory and emergent nature of conceptual projects, students designing non-empirical inquiries prepare a prospectus that articulates how specific theories and concepts frame their analyses. The prospectus acts as an alternative to the traditional dissertation proposal, which best accommodates the fixed methods of empirical inquiry.

These theoretically-oriented projects push the boundaries of tradition by rarely adhering to the templates of a standardized or traditional dissertation. In terms of structure, most conceptual projects depart from (and frequently exceed) the confinement of five chapters and oftentimes refuse the traditional labeling of sections as chapters and instead creatively select section titles that better align with their methodological design and theoretical orientation. According to our program guidance, conceptual dissertations have an introduction, body, and conclusion. In my experience with this genre of dissertations, the body takes many different shapes and forms. For example, my own dissertation (Brown, 2017) was organized as a series of eight different tales inspired by Van Maanen's (2011) *Tales From the Field*. Another example is *The Teaching and Practice of the "Yoga Body": A Poststructural, Queercrip Analysis of Yoga Education in the United States*, where Shears' (2022) dissertation flows through eight chapters as an homage to the eight limbs of yoga. The body of Shears' dissertation consists of five analytical chapters bookended by an introduction, interwoven theoretical framework and methodology, and conclusion.

While non-empirical projects such as critical policy analyses and post-qualitative inquiry may be considered different and

therefore alternative at many institutions, conceptual dissertations have become normalized at our institution. Not unlike other EdD programs, oftentimes, an alternative genre has connections to a faculty member with a specific methodological expertise. Dr. Alecia Jackson, a professor of research at AppState, is credited with the proliferation of this unique genre at our institution, as students embrace her innovative and anti-method approach to "plugging in" theory with encounters, episodes, and experiences related to educational problems of practice (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. viii). As a result, conceptual dissertations have become a signature methodology in AppState's EdD program.

Alternative Dissertation Conceptualization and Approval Process

Opening the door to a broad spectrum of approaches, our program welcomes creativity in both the pursuit and presentation of dissertation inquiry. New varieties of alternative dissertations that blur genre and format lines have been growing in our program. One genre bending instance is a recent collaborative project among two students that consisted of four journal articles bridged with alternating reflections by each author (Burry & Nava Eggett, 2022). These collaborators also charted their unique dissertation journey via podcast as they navigated their academic partnership, pinpointed a research topic and methodological design, and ultimately arrived at final conclusions and recommendations (Burry & Nava Eggett, 2021–2023). Increased interest in alternative ways to approach and present the dissertation led our program to develop a guidance document for faculty mentors and students considering an alternative dissertation project.

While developing this new approval process, our program recognized the impossibility of predicting all of the possible variations of future alternative dissertations. Thus, we did not seek to define what an alternative dissertation "is" or limit what an alternative dissertation might be. Instead, we sought to create a process that would scaffold the conceptualization of the alternative dissertation project. Students, in conjunction with their dissertation committees, draft rationales that build cases for the alternative dissertation products. Students must also articulate how their alternative projects will embody the same competencies of the traditional dissertation at this early proposal stage. To help everyone (student, committee, program, Graduate School[2]) envision the proposed alternative product, students gather exemplars of similar approaches or formats, if available, and detail their original visions for the project. Proposed alternative products include a dissertation plus alternative (e.g. traditional dissertation plus digital magazine), replacing one or more dissertation components (e.g. professional development module as conclusion), or other dissertation alternatives (e.g. dissertation as podcast). Following the unconventional nature of alternative dissertations, at formal defense and beyond, students are likewise encouraged to present and share their research honoring the original innovative aim of producing the alternative dissertation product.

This sketch of our EdD program's dissertations gives a glimpse into how one institution views various dissertation approaches and serves as a canvas for positioning certain dissertations as dangerous. While no dissertation is immune to danger, this article specifically spotlights how the conceptual genre is particularly susceptible to danger due to its potential to disrupt the status quo and the intimate attachment to the author. The best way to illustrate a conceptual dissertation and to explain how its creation can be dangerous is to read the insider accounts of these risky endeavors. To lay the foundation for these stories, I open by distinguishing professionally benign dissertations from dangerous dissertations that present the potential to trouble the institutional waters.

DEFINING DANGEROUS DISSERTATIONS

Professionally and academically, it often costs us little to do things the way they have always been done. In fact, we frequently benefit from traveling traditional and "safe" routes. Academically, there are fewer risks involved in traveling a well-worn path. Professionally, many benefit from demonstrating their compliance with the status quo. However, when one departs from these safe and protected pathways—which is the case for students producing alternative dissertations—danger can arise.

The idea that certain dissertation projects can be dangerous came to mind after a series of students raised concerns about the ramifications of writing critiques aimed at their professional contexts. Many of these critical analyses employed Foucauldian thought. While considering how, as a mentor, to best support students faced with these professional dilemmas, I recalled one of my favorite Foucauldian (1984) quotes: "everything is dangerous" (p. 343); thus, the idea of dangerous dissertations was born.

So, what makes a dissertation dangerous? Simply stated: difference from the norm. Undoubtedly, whether the dissertation differs from the established norm (i.e., the traditional dissertation) in genre, methodological approach, or format, producing an alternative dissertation can be a dangerous exercise. "The fact that a speaker says something dangerous—*different* [emphasis added] from what the majority believes," writes Foucault (2001, p. 15), is the ever-looming threat of critique. Challenging dominant discourses or ways of doing through critique is a means to speak or write differently about "the way things are" or the status quo. Any time one speaks or writes something that opposes mainstream ideas or the prevailing hegemonic notions, danger ensues. When Foucault (1984) wrote that "everything is dangerous" (p. 343), he was not cautioning everyone into a state of fearful paralysis. Instead, Foucault (1984) alerts us to the greater and often hidden danger of complacency or inaction. Foucault (1983, as cited in McLaren, 2002) further explained his line of thinking by saying, "nothing is very good; everything is dangerous; but everything is not equally dangerous" (p. 43). Here, Foucault indicates that different degrees of danger exist, that nothing is innocuous, and that all actions do not produce the

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[2] Graduate Schools often are more concerned about the formatting and presentation of the final dissertation document versus the content therein. The approval of alternative dissertations at the institution level is a primary concern and thus, the reason that our program has openly included the Graduate School as part of the initial conceptualization process at the proposal stage. Collaboration with the Graduate School during the embryonic stages is vital to avoid questions regarding final approval and unexpected obstacles to student completion.

same effects. For instance, authoring a critique of one's professional context may carry professional dangers, but choosing not to draft a critique (leaving current ways of doing unquestioned) produces different dangers—the perpetuation of the status quo. By daring to put forth a bold (and potentially dangerous) critique, the status quo is disrupted, new conversations are sparked, and different ways forward can be imagined.

For purposes of this project, I define a dangerous dissertation as one in which the student critiques[3] their professional context and, as a result, experiences a heightened level of concern about their current professional standing and future career prospects[4]. Dissertations that offer perspectives that differ from the mainstream and challenge the status quo are particularly precarious and are the focal point of this piece. Illuminating what makes this type of critical work dangerous also highlights the urgency for its continued creation and circulation, but equally important, the need for concentrated support by faculty mentors. To offer deeper insight, a recent program graduate and I share insider perspectives of our encounters with dangerous dissertation work.

TELLING A DIFFERENT TALE: MY UNEXPECTED DISSERTATION JOURNEY (DR. STAR BROWN)

In 2017, I came close to writing a dangerous dissertation. Describing my dissertation as *nearly* dangerous signals my ultimate decision to distance myself from topics with direct professional connections. Rather than face the possible professional repercussions of composing a critique close to my professional home, I aimed my sights at a higher education issue that I could critically examine from the sidelines. Hence, I produced a critique of collegiate athletics in higher education, but I did so at arm's length. My alternative dissertation was organized as eight chapters of differently crafted tales, including a critical tale of the paradoxes of academics and athletics in higher education, conceptual tales of marginality and mattering, and a concluding tale with no end—representing the doing, undoing, and redoing collegiate athletics. I recognized that my dissertation was different from my peers in the program, but I would not have used the word alternative to describe my work at the time. In our doctoral program, conceptual projects may not hold majority sway, but they are a recognized and accepted dissertation genre.

When I embarked on my doctoral journey in 2013, I did not set out to do a different or alternative dissertation. In fact, most would describe my life and career to that point as quite conservative or "traditional." In sum, I was known to play it safe. So how did I wander into dangerous territory as part of my doctoral program experience? Below I briefly chronicle how my thinking transformed as a result of the coursework in the doctoral program and how the exposure to poststructural theory steered my dissertation research into dangerous channels. My story comes full circle as I conclude by showing how my dissertation experience connects to my current mentorship of students attending my alma mater.

The Beginnings of Trouble

The entirety of my writing and research during the doctoral program centered on the effects of accreditation policy on institutions and personnel. Initially, I planned a straightforward quantitative study analyzing the capital expenditures required to maintain accredited status and the disproportionate impact of policy mandates on smaller institutions. When I realized that my deeper interest was in revealing the hidden costs to institutions and personnel (things that are not easily quantified), I shifted to a small pilot study interviewing community college personnel about their experiences with regional accreditation. After concluding my pilot study, I realized that the information gleaned was not new, as the participants' responses simply affirmed my own experiences with the accreditation process. In other words, I discovered that doing empirical work in this case did not produce new knowledge about accreditation and that in order to generate new insights about accreditation, a different way of doing and thinking about research was needed. My exposure to theorists such as Butler (1990/2006, 1993, 2004), Foucault (1975/1995), and Spivak (1993) during doctoral coursework supplied me with a fresh lens to view and scrutinize my identified problem of practice—regional institutional accreditation practices. My new ways of seeing accreditation policies were decidedly unfavorable and departed from the prevailing narrative that accreditation makes institutions "better," which made my work dangerous. At this point, I arrived at a crossroads—to write or to not write a dangerous dissertation.

Close Encounters with Danger

As the accreditation liaison, I was my institution's resident ambassador for the benefits of the accreditation process—the face of accreditation at the college. Presenting views of accreditation that contradicted the prevailing narrative or voiced my doubts about the value of the process would have run counter to my institution's expectation that I sell the accreditation process to my colleagues (i.e. convince my colleagues to "voluntarily" comply with the mandates of accreditation policy). Because accredited status is a prerequisite for continued institutional existence, critiquing and writing against the ways regional accreditors implement and enforce accreditation policy would not have shone favorably on my own institution or myself. Saying I was hesitant to pursue a controversial topic so close to my personal practice as an accreditation liaison and chairperson of the institution's reaffirmation of accreditation process is quite the understatement. As a result, I hid my opposing views of accreditation from the majority of my colleagues and most definitely from senior administration. Those at my institution would have been surprised by my alternative views about accreditation due to my outward allegiance and advocacy of the process. The few colleague confidantes with whom I did share my thoughts cautioned me about publishing a critique of a process that is fundamental to the institution's continued existence. I silently feared that making my critique tangible might harm my institution by endangering their accredited status and result in career stagnation at best or non-renewal of my faculty contract at worst. I never expressed this conundrum with my faculty advisor. Instead, I masked my apprehension about approaching a topic so close to my professional

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[3] We acknowledge that there are a multiplicity of dangers present when pursuing academic work. Critical projects are simply one example of a dangerous dissertation.

[4] Future career prospects include those at their current institution as well as future employment opportunities at other institutions.

practice by abandoning all of my related writing and research to pursue a safer topic—the normalization of athletics in higher education. Because my community college did not have athletic programs, I was able to produce my critique while safely sitting in the stands, far removed from the personal perils of critiquing a topic linked to my professional practice and setting. Although the airing of my dissertation did not pose personal or professional dangers, my probing critique of collegiate athletics did serve as a critical exposé drawing attention to the ways big-time collegiate sports programs manufacture and marginalize individuals, particularly Black athletes, for profit. In this vein, my dissertation tackles the difficult and wicked problems of practice, such as power dynamics, dissertations in practice strive to change.

Becoming a Mentor

Since publishing my alternative dissertation[5] employing post-qualitative inquiry to interrogate the normalization of athletics in higher education (Brown, 2017), my professional journey fatefully landed me in the role of a dissertation chair at my alma mater. This position has afforded me the opportunity to use my dissertation experience to inform and shape the ways I support students as they navigate their own dissertation journeys. Mentoring dangerous dissertations in particular has provided a productive outlet for channeling my past regrets into bolstering the courage of students confronting similar professional predicaments. Being vulnerable with students about how I suppressed my desire to pursue a project situated in my professional context helps me better relate to students confronted with the decision of whether to write or not write a dangerous dissertation.

As a dissertation committee chair, I most frequently work with dissertation projects that use poststructural theory as an analytical tool to animate and problematize educational policies and practices. These projects are inherently political[6] and, as a result, can be both personally and professionally dangerous. At a recent defense of a dissertation employing Foucauldian concepts, I recalled prior conversations I had with the student concerning what might happen if someone from their institution attended their defense and how their colleagues might react to their radically transformed views and insights about key institutional processes and policies. During the defense presentation, Foucault's (1984) caution that "everything is dangerous" (p. 343) reverberated in my mind. The infusion of theory as a tool to view the world differently led to this epiphanic moment, and it became apparent to me that pursuing this critical work carries material effects for our students and places them in the field of danger. Accordingly, I posed the following to the student who was defending:

> Putting forward a bold critique such as yours is what some might call dangerous. What prompted you to do this dangerous work and what advice would you give to other students who are considering the pursuit of a dangerous dissertation?

This question and the subsequent discussion sparked the beginnings of this endeavor to illuminate and advocate for dangerous dissertations. I realized that acknowledging the distinct professional dangers faced by students who produce dangerous dissertations not only benefits future students, but also results in greater propagation of this important, critical work. Thus, this work is inspired by thinking with Foucault and also by the bold, courageous work of students in our EdD program.

Rather than relay the stories second hand, I invited recent graduate Dr. Kristen Proctor to collaborate on this project by recounting her dangerous dissertation experience. I challenged Dr. Proctor to engage in deep self-reflection about her recent dissertation journey and encouraged her to elaborate on why she chose to pursue a critical dissertation and the dangers she encountered along the way. I also asked her to speak to the role of her faculty mentor and advice she would offer to future students. The goal is that our stories may inspire other students to take up their own dangerous dissertation projects and to likewise encourage faculty advisors to promote and support this urgent, critical work. I turn now to Dr. Proctor to guide us along the path of her dissertation journey.

MY DANGEROUS DISSERTATION STORY (DR. KRISTEN PROCTOR)

In the spring of 2024, I defended my "alternative" dissertation. The dissertation I produced can be described as alternative for many reasons. Structurally, my dissertation is alternative because it departs from the traditional five-chapter format and instead unfolds across seven parts that are bookended by a prologue and epilogue on reflexivity. My dissertation also differs from the positivistic norms of my field (institutional effectiveness), which further earns my work the moniker of alternative. My dissertation even moves beyond CPED's conceptualization of an alternative dissertation by challenging the claim that educational "problems" of practice objectively exist awaiting a solution. These differences alone are enough to place my work outside the realm of tradition and therefore normality, which can be a professionally and personally dangerous place to be. However, it is the long-held assumptions and silenced discourses that I uncovered and challenged through my work that make my dissertation unquestionably alternative and, consequently, profoundly dangerous.

In the following narrative, I offer a glimpse into my dissertation journey and the dangers I encountered along the way. I begin by providing an overview of my dissertation, which is titled *Problematizing Institutional Effectiveness Policy: A Foucauldian Poststructural Policy Analysis* (2024). The overview I offer is intended to present my journey without delving into the intricacies of

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[5] My dissertation is alternative for two reasons: methodological difference (post-qualitative inquiry) and organizational structure (a series of eight tales). However, I do not classify my dissertation as *dangerous* due to the separation from my institutional setting and context.

[6] References to *politics-political* in this article are used in the Foucauldian sense and encompass any power struggle (Allen, 2014). To borrow an explanation from Proctor (2024), "like how all squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are squares, 'politics' in the traditional sense is politics in the Foucauldian sense, but politics in the Foucauldian sense is not necessarily 'politics' in the traditional sense" (p. 118).

Foucauldian language and poststructural thought. After the overview, I unpack my initial reluctance to pursue an alternative dissertation, particularly one that involved Foucauldian poststructuralism. I then recount how I found the courage to move forward with poststructuralism despite the dangers it posed, and the role my committee chair played in my decision. I conclude by describing how my alternative dissertation journey resulted in unparalleled professional and personal change, and how I now view alternative work as a necessary and urgent endeavor, despite the inherent dangers.

An Overview of My Dissertation

In my dissertation, I used Foucauldian poststructural theory and Carol Bacchi's (2009) "What is the Problem Represented to Be?" approach to poststructural policy analysis to uncover how subjects (i.e., institutions, institutional personnel) are made and shaped by the practices and processes of institutional effectiveness (IE). That is, the subjectification effects of IE policy. The concept of subjectification is grounded in the poststructural understanding that discourses, which are expressed through various mediums including policy, make available and normalize certain subject positions or ways of being and doing (Bacchi, 2009). How we make sense of the world and our position or role in it, and how we subsequently modify our behavior to match the norms communicated through discourse, are effects of subjectification (Bacchi, 2009). Accordingly, in my dissertation, I exposed how the policies that constitute IE (namely accreditation policy) make available and "acceptable" certain ways of being and doing in higher education, consequently altering and limiting the behaviors of institutions and institutional personnel.

To this end, I employed the poststructural technique of deconstruction, Foucault's (1980a; 1980b) practice of genealogical tracing, and Foucault's (1975/1995) positing on disciplining technologies. Across three analyses, I uncovered many hidden histories and unquestioned assumptions, all of which contribute to the production of modern higher education and higher education policy. For example, by tracing how accreditation came to be, I exposed a complex history that includes raced, gendered, and colonizing discourses and practices designed to keep "others" (those who cannot or will not normalize) out of higher education. I also uncovered how accreditation policy institutionalizes the resultant power arrangements and narratives about what constitutes a "quality" and "effective" institution, and produces institutions that comply with these unexamined narratives. I further argued that IE is the tool that accreditation policy employs to ensure institutions comply with the norms communicated through accreditation policy, thereby producing IE as a disciplining apparatus and positioning IE staff as the institutional "police" assigned to locally enforce accreditation policy. I concluded my dissertation by synthesizing the deleterious subjectification effects produced by accreditation policy's constitution of IE and by discussing my work's implications for higher education and higher education governance.

The Catalyst for My Alternative Dissertation

Despite the patent alternativeness of my dissertation, I never set out to write an alternative dissertation. In fact, when I began my doctoral studies, I intended to find a benign topic like retention that would lend itself to the path of least academic and professional resistance (i.e., a five-chapter dissertation using a quantitative method or a "mainstream" qualitative method like interviewing). However, none of the topics that felt academically or professionally "safe" sparked the level of curiosity I needed to carry me through the dissertation process. Moreover, I felt that the dissertation should be challenging and an exposition of skill and produce something new—something that moves past the convenient topics and methods that saturate educational research.

As my perfunctory search for a dissertation topic shifted to a quest for passion and intellectual stimulation, I found myself drawn to policy analysis. My interest in policy was not new. I had written about my desire to craft public policy in my doctoral admissions essay. However, my doctoral coursework exposed me to Foucauldian thought and the work of poststructural policy problematizers like Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), which alerted me to new ways of thinking about and engaging with policy. As a result, rather than viewing policies as I had in the past (as solutions to objective "problems"[7]), I was instead curious about how policies confine our understanding of issues by articulating narrowly defined "problems" and how the solutions policies offer shape the behavior of people and institutions. In effect, my interest in policy had shifted from *crafting* policy to *critiquing* policy.

Concurrently, at work, I was guiding my institution through the policy-laden reaffirmation of accreditation process and continuously encountering narratives about what is "appropriate" or "acceptable" for institutions and institutional personnel to be and do. In response, I routinely wondered: How did accreditation policy come to be? How did the norms articulated through accreditation policy come to be? Who is served by these norms? Who is harmed by these norms? How are the "problems" accreditation policy seeks to solve (i.e., "quality" and "effectiveness") defined and are there other ways of thinking about these "problems"? I was also reading Foucault's (1975/1995) *Discipline and Punish* and identifying parallels between the disciplining technologies described by Foucault and the practices of accreditation policy, which I recognized as being locally enacted and enforced by IE and IE staff. Despite the apparent connections I was uncovering, I was reluctant to write a dissertation that employed a professionally alternative approach like poststructuralism. I unpack some of the sources of my reluctance in the following section.

My Reluctance to Do Differently

A multiplicity of things contributed to my reluctance to commit to a dissertation experience that involved poststructural thought, including (to be candid) my awareness of the amount of complex theory one must wrestle with before engaging in poststructural work. I certainly felt more academically conditioned and professionally prepared to write a literature review, run a statistical test, code an interview, or create a fishbone diagram. Conversely, the

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[7]Anytime *governing* occurs, there is a "problem" governing power seeks to solve. Whereas traditional approaches to policy analysis seek to solve "problems" that are assumed to objectively exist awaiting a solution, poststructural policy analysis understands problems to be created through *problematizations* or problem representations that narrowly and contingently frame how issues are understood (Bacchi, 2009).

poststructural tendency to allow analyses to *unfold*, was not something I felt comfortable doing. Relatedly, I was reluctant to commit to poststructuralism because committing to poststructuralism meant embarking on an alternative dissertation journey and therefore a journey with fewer signposts indicating whether I was traveling the "right" path. As someone who finds comfort in processes, linearity, and predictability, the prospect of doing a dissertation differently was nerve-racking.

Of course, concerns over the reception and potential ramifications of my work loomed in my mind, too. During that period of irresolution, my mind was a slurry of anxious thoughts: Will using a non-traditional theory or method make my work seem less "rigorous" or "scholarly"? How will my interrogation of IE and accreditation policy or what I uncover be received by the higher education and IE communities? What might my employer think about my work? Will what I uncover negatively affect my institution's relationship with our accreditor? How might what I uncover challenge my professional identity or change the way I understand my institutional role? As a result, I brainstormed ways to analyze the subjectification effects of IE and accreditation policy sans poststructuralism. That is, I was searching for a way to explore the effects of policy in a professionally and academically "safe" manner, desiring to dig into those effects just enough to uncover something new without saying something unpopular and consequently professionally dangerous. I kept returning to academically and professionally convenient ideas like administering a survey, conducting interviews, and designing a public relations campaign to improve the image of IE. However, none of those approaches spoke to the ways policy acts upon and through us, thereby shaping what is possible for us to be and do. More importantly, none of those ideas or approaches spoke to the many silenced discourses, governmentalities, and policy contradictions that Foucauldian thought illuminated and consequently compelled me to expose.

It was not until I completed my dissertation and penned my epilogue that I fully understood the anxiety I experienced during those days. Upon reflection, I added the following to my epilogue:

> When I wrote the prologue to this dissertation, I lacked the vocabulary to fully name what made me reticent to approach this inquiry using poststructuralism. However, I now know that what I felt was a reluctance to engage in disruptive conduct because to "do" poststructuralism is to trouble current ways of being and doing, including my own. (2024, p. 211)

The type of action that poststructuralism calls for, i.e., troubling, disruption, and counter conduct, can be described as many things (uncomfortable, unpopular, and unsung), but it always poses some degree of danger to those answering the call.

Doing Dangerous Work

To do poststructuralism is to disrupt, to trouble, to question, and to challenge the status quo—none of which were things I was known for or felt comfortable doing at that time. By all accounts, I was more of a traditionalist (with privileged identities that benefit from tradition) than a disrupter or change agent. However, poststructuralism calls you to do and become different by questioning and pushing limits. Not in order to "prove" an existing way of being or doing "wrong" or to propose an alternative, but to open up discourse and create opportunities for doing differently. Because poststructuralism challenges the status quo and questions what is accepted as "common sense," poststructuralism can be dangerous work.

Moreover, poststructuralism is inherently political work because of its focus on power, i.e., how power is conveyed through knowledges and discourses that firm up and privilege certain ways of being and doing. This focus on power and *politics* (used here in the Foucauldian sense) makes doing poststructural work dangerous, particularly in our increasingly polarized society. With every word I typed, I anticipated that what I uncovered (the raced discourses, the neoliberal rationalities, the framing of the "problem" of educational "quality") might cause discomfort among members of the higher education community, particularly as they become aware of the hidden politics and the exclusionary past that underpins some of the "commonsense" policies of higher education, and are then faced with examining their relationship with those policies. Certainly, coming to terms with the role I play in sustaining the deleterious arrangements of power produced by accreditation policy altered how I understand my relationship with policy.

As if these dangers alone were not enough, I also was reluctant to engage with poststructuralism because poststructural analyses are intimate endeavors. There is no hiding behind things you claim to have "objectively" observed or "discovered" when you do poststructural work. There is no dissociating the significance of the work from you (e.g., this is what the *data says*, this is what the *people I interviewed* think). Instead, it is all you. It is your thoughts, your ideas, your critiques, and your experiences laid bare. That level of exposure and potential risk is enough to make many students shy away from this type of work. Undoubtedly, the potential risks made me continuously reconsider the path I was traveling. Even so, change demands more critiques from persons in intimate proximity to the complex issues we face. Accordingly, when students find the courage to do this type of dangerous work, they need a dissertation chair who understands the inherent risks and will support them through the uncharted and perilous waters that lay ahead.

My Chair: A Mentor, Advocate, and Cheerleader

In all, I spent months decisively waffling between two options: committing to a poststructural analysis despite the dangers it posed or committing to a more "acceptable" approach and therefore more "traditional" dissertation. It was during that period of indecision that I met Dr. Star Brown. During my first meeting with Dr. Brown, I shared my observations about the ways accreditation policy disciplines institutions and how the resultant power arrangements produce deleterious effects, including the production of IE as a disciplining apparatus and IE staff as institutional "police" tasked with surveilling compliance. While my observations were clearly Foucault-inspired, I danced around the topic of theory and instead pitched my ideas for turning my observations into an actionable "problem" of practice. After listening to my ramblings, Dr. Brown delivered an inconvenient truth: what I described was poststructural work. Dr. Brown then told me about her own dissertation journey, and that the phenomenon I described was something she also experienced in her work with accreditation policy. Hearing that I was not alone in my experience and perceptions of accreditation policy provided me the "validity" I had unknowingly been longing for. Yet, I was still reluctant. Sensing my reluctance (and likely recalling the reluctance she felt during her dissertation journey), Dr. Brown recommended I spend the semester exploring poststructural theory and the possibilities made available by opening myself to poststructuralism and an alternative dissertation journey.

Accordingly, I spent that semester reading and writing and drafting two versions of the introduction to my dissertation. In one

version, I presented a "solvable" "problem" of practice. In the other, I set the stage to use poststructural theory and the positing of Foucault (1975/1995) to expose the carceral underpinnings of IE and to uncover how IE is constituted by the "problems" articulated in accreditation policy. The act of putting pen to paper made clear what I already knew: poststructuralism was the only theory that provided the language and concepts that fully account for and articulate the phenomenon that sparked my inquiry. Additionally, it was the only theory that could incite the type of change I desired because my overarching aim was not to challenge or amend a singular policy, but to expose how we engage with and are governed by policy. After arriving at this realization, I requested a meeting with Dr. Brown to discuss her interest in and willingness to chair my dissertation committee.

The relationship Dr. Brown and I forged in the months that followed was critical to the success of my dissertation. Certainly, committee chairs play an important role in the dissertation process regardless of the theoretical or methodological approach. However, the role of the chair as a mentor and advocate are more pronounced when producing an alternative dissertation. The freedom afforded by doing something theoretically, methodologically, or stylistically different is liberating, but the resultant experience can be confusing and isolating as the time-honored guides for writing a dissertation are not useful and few of your classmates are traveling the same path. Consequently, I relied on Dr. Brown to help me chart a path to completion. We spent countless evenings and weekends working together to find ways to move past the limits of traditional dissertations while designing a final product that was theoretically and methodologically sound, clearly communicated, and professionally impactful. At times, this required that we develop ways to communicate my alternative journey in more traditional ways. In those instances, Dr. Brown acted as an advocate on my behalf, helping me navigate the bureaucracy of academia and communicate my alternative work in traditionally digestible ways. Additionally, because alternative dissertations often employ lesser-known theories and methods, they necessitate a pedagogical approach to communicating your work. This was particularly true for me because Foucauldian poststructuralism employs its own lexicon and retools existing words in new ways. Thus, the guidance and experience of Dr. Brown and the other members of my committee were integral in helping me craft my ideas in ways that were accessible to all readers.

The most important role Dr. Brown served, however, was that of the cheerleader. While I knew the degree of theoretical and methodological prowess my alternative dissertation required, I worried about the reception it would receive from academia and the highly positivistic IE community because of its departure from tradition. Accordingly, I routinely looked to Dr. Brown for encouragement, validation, and regular pep talks about why the work I was doing was important and necessary. Additionally, because I was worried about the reception my dissertation would receive, I worked hard to make it theoretically, methodologically, and technically unassailable. Dr. Brown played a pivotal role to that end by challenging me, asking probing questions, identifying my presuppositions and argumentative gaps, helping me organize complex ideas, and always pushing for more. The hundreds of hours Dr. Brown spent providing feedback and suggestions will never be lost on me.

Reflecting on My Dangerous Alternative Journey

In hindsight, I recognize that some of the anxiety and reluctance I felt to commit to an alternative dissertation journey was because of the prevailing representation of what a dissertation "is," (e.g., a dissertation is a five-chapter document, a dissertation generates solutions, a "good" dissertation employs a traditional theoretical or methodological approach, a dissertation includes empirical research, etc.). Since my dissertation is definitively not those things, I spent months worrying that it might be relegated to the "inferior" side of the normal/abnormal, acceptable/unacceptable, appropriate/inappropriate binaries by those with more structuralist and solution-focused orientations, which are common in IE. That is, it is not traditional, therefore, it is *different* and a threat or *danger to tradition*. Additionally, in the discourse of higher education and academia, dissertations are often represented as career-defining work and as expressions of identity and "expertise." That type of finality can feel suffocating, particularly for scholars-in-practice whose dissertation may be the only piece they ever publish. However, an unexpected byproduct of my time with Foucauldian poststructuralism is the liberating idea that we all exist in a state of continuous *becoming*. Reflecting on my alternative journey, I now think much of the reluctance and anxiety I felt during the dissertation process could have been avoided by reframing the dissertation as a piece of my academic, personal, and professional becoming as opposed to the defining feature. Foucault shared a similar sentiment in a 1988 interview, stating "The main interest of life and work is to *become* [emphasis added] someone else that you were not in the beginning" (Martin, 1988, para. 4). The present continuous tense of becoming reflects the poststructural idea that things, including subjects like me, exist in a continuous state of becoming as opposed to a static state of being and are continuously produced through discourse and repetition. However, becoming something new requires unmaking the subjects that dominant discourse shapes us into—an endeavor that is wildly uncomfortable and feels personally dangerous. According to Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), this process of unmaking subjects is the central task of poststructural policy analysis. Certainly, the poststructural work I undertook left me unmade and unequivocally different.

Of course, becoming is an ongoing process that does not stop when the dissertation is submitted. Accordingly, who I am continuously becoming is a product of the skills and confidence I gained as a result of my alternative dissertation journey. Foucault (1984/1997) writes that, when we encounter an intolerable power arrangement, we must "acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ēthos* [emphasis in original], the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible" (p. 298). As a result of my decision to engage in poststructural analysis and to interrogate the intolerable arrangements of accreditation policy, I have gained all the things Foucault (1984/1997) enumerated and consequently feel more prepared to play the games of power that permeate higher education differently and more skillfully. I have acquired the rules of law articulated through accreditation policy to such a degree that I feel a command over accreditation policy, and I am adept at uncovering the covert techniques policies employ to manage populations. More importantly, I now feel positioned and equipped to question and push back on these techniques and "commonsense" policies when they produce intolerable effects. I have also developed a heightened sense of morality and ēthos, the practice of self, and confidence to challenge things that are unjust or intolerable (even

when the status quo benefits me), which I attribute to doing dangerous work and surviving to tell the tale.

Undoubtedly, my alternative dissertation journey left me with a skill set with broad applicative value. I now see things (even the seemingly innocuous) differently and with an air of healthy skepticism. Not only do I see and think about things differently, but I am also more willing to question the unquestioned and to propose and accept alternative ways of thinking and doing, because poststructuralism is about creating opportunities for difference, even if they do not emerge from poststructural thought.

Every new policy—of which there is a limitless supply in education—is underpinned by unexamined and "commonsense" presuppositions that produce new effects and subject positions. Consequently, EdD programs are well positioned to liberate scholarly practitioners from the confines of "traditional" dissertative work that may allow current assumptions and interpretations of issues to go unexamined. By encouraging students to pursue dangerous work, opportunities to challenge the multiplicity of ways that education, educators, and policy produce and replicate deleterious power arrangements and discourses become possible.

Having experienced firsthand the potential that dangerous dissertations have to change people (and consequently institutions and policies) by opening up new ways of thinking, I beckon others to answer the urgent call for dangerous dissertations. Accordingly, in the section that follows, Dr. Brown and I synthesize the salient points gleaned from our combined experiences and present them as recommendations for faculty advisors.

NAVIGATING DANGEROUS DISSERTATIONS AS AN ADVISOR

Having exposed the dangers and anxieties posed by doing dissertations differently, we now offer ways that faculty and advisors can support students who embark on alternative dissertation journeys. Since our experiences are specific to critical inquiries, we approach these recommendations with dissertations that critique professional contexts in mind. However, these suggestions can be applied to all varieties of alternative dissertations, since any departure from the norm poses some degree of risk.

Firstly, we reiterate the importance of the mentor-mentee relationship and highlight the need for increased student support. As Dr. Proctor mentioned, students embarking on an alternative dissertation journey lack the support traditionally provided by the cohort model since they are traveling a path that is uniquely different from their fellow cohort members. To combat this isolation, we recommend an alternative support network that connects students with multiple generations of alumni who have completed dangerous dissertations. One way to implement this strategy is to ask program graduates to serve as committee members for future dissertation projects, which would allow alumni to mentor the next generation of dangerous dissertators through the trials and tribulations of doing dissertations differently. As Dr. Brown has witnessed in her work as a mentor, this method of "paying it forward" can be extremely beneficial for current students who are hesitant to move forward. Students who have utilized similar critical methodologies or share professional contexts can empathize with mentees, validate their experience, offer words of encouragement, and ease students' anxiety by showing them that there is life and success after dangerous dissertations. We encourage other mentors to nurture

academic bravery and professional confidence so that students may permanently plant themselves in their institutional contexts as change agents in the field.

Ongoing Dangers for Students

Dr. Brown approached several alumni about participating in this project. Some could not participate due to time constraints or other priorities, while others explicitly cited concerns about the dangers their critical dissertation still poses for their professional future. Many alumni reiterated the same piercing questions expressed during the dissertation process such as: "Am I ruining my career by writing this dissertation? What are my chances of becoming a college president if I write this? Will I ever become a superintendent if someone in the school district reads my dissertation? Do you think I will lose my job if my supervisor learns about my dissertation topic?" In these most vulnerable moments, students expressed the felt dangers of writing a public critique about the systems they actively inhabit. While these students were brave enough to publish and defend their dissertations, many still view their work as an ongoing threat to their professional journey and shy away from future work (like this article) that might invite further risk. For these students who continue to work within the systems they critiqued, time has not decreased the sense of danger posed by their work. Years past graduation, many still fear the possibility of a colleague or supervisor uncovering their dangerous dissertation or any future critical work. Accordingly, it is incumbent upon faculty mentors to find ways to better support students who are challenging the status quo in their writing, but are distressed over how to translate their scholarly transformation into a new, "acceptable" professional identity and voice.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we offered an aerial view of how one EdD program does dissertations differently, demonstrating that what is signified as "alternative" depends on the norms of academia and institutional culture. The program overview served as backdrop for introducing the dangerous dissertation. By bringing to light the professional anxieties associated with critique, we alert mentors to the internal struggles faced by students and also offer strategies to support students engaging in dangerous dissertative work.

Before concluding this article, we offer an incredibly important note about positionality. We both sit at the intersection of multiple privileged identities as we are both White, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class, non-disabled women. Even so, our dissertations posed considerable risks and, despite our keen awareness of the necessity of our work, we experienced reluctance to go against the grain. We cannot fathom how dangerous critical work must be and feel for individuals from marginalized backgrounds or identities and for those tackling more sensitive or controversial issues. As educational leaders, it is imperative that we make ways for all individuals to engage in critical work without fear of repercussion, because to do otherwise would silence the vital alternative viewpoints needed to affect educational change *in practice*.

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