

AN ANALYSIS OF PH.D.
DISSERTATIONS ON CENTRAL
AMERICA: 1960-1974

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The role of the dissertation as part of academic preparation is generally accepted and unquestioned. The dissertation is intended to initiate students into serious research in their chosen field. However, what happens to the research, once completed, is another question. Apparently very few have addressed this question, and their findings are not consistent. McPhie, in a study of dissertations completed in social studies education, measured the dissemination of dissertations via library circulation. He concluded that: "These data on library circulation, even when viewed with caution, would seem to indicate a rather meager use of some *potentially* valuable findings."¹ He also found that nearly two-thirds had not published even one article from their dissertations.² In a more recent study of Ph.D. dissertations in sociology, Yoels found a similar picture. He concluded, after analyzing citations to Ph.D. dissertations in the two most frequently cited journals in sociology, that "the likelihood that dissertations will be widely disseminated appears to be slim."³ However, in a recent and more complete study, Hanson found that dissertations are more widely used than is indicated in the above studies. He concludes that: "When one broadens the definition of dissemination to include the media of books, monographs, chapters, presented papers, journal articles (including those not appearing in the two major journals), research bulletins, and miscellaneous forms during the professional life of the Ph.D. sociologist, a picture of more extensive transmission of dissertation results emerge. A conservative estimate would be that findings from a substantial majority of dissertations are disseminated through various media at some point in time."⁴

After annotating some 120 articles⁵ and 140 dissertations⁶ on social change and development in Central America, the authors have the distinct feeling that dissertations are part of the "fugitive literature" and rarely make their way into the hands of other researchers. Although we have not attempted to measure this impression, we have chosen to take an in-depth view of dissertations on Central America for a fifteen-year period. In doing so we hope to draw attention to this potentially important source of information, understand major trends in dissertations being written on Central America, and heighten the awareness of those guiding and doing research in that region.

The dissertations analyzed in this study were chosen because they deal with some phase of social change and/or development in the region. Although a precise definition of what is meant by this is most elusive, we intended to include dissertations that treated topics related to the process of modernization: bureaucratization, migration, urbanization, population growth, etc. Aware of the complexity and interrelatedness of the “social change” topic, we tried to err by being inclusive rather than exclusive. In speaking of Central America, we include Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama.

From 1960 to 1974 there were approximately 140 dissertations written on social change and development in Central America.⁷ This was a period during which the total number of Ph.D.s and the number granted in the social sciences steadily and significantly increased (see table 1). Although one would not expect an exact correlation between the total number of Ph.D.s granted or the total number granted in the social sciences and those granted in a region (in this case Central America), one might expect greater similarity than does exist. Table 2 shows the number of Ph.D.s granted on topics dealing with social change and development in Central America from 1960 to 1974, and quite obviously, there are some dramatic discrepancies. Until 1969, there was general growth in the number of Ph.D.s granted, but then there is a two-year decline, a large single year increase (1972) and an even more dramatic decrease. Factors explaining this decrease are beyond the scope of this study, and whether this change is temporary or not remains to be seen. In light of this leveling off, we would presume that a return to the peak year is unlikely.

TABLE 1 *Doctor's (Ph.D., Ed.D., etc.) in American Universities*

| | 1961-62 | 1964-65 | 1967-68 | 1970-71 | 1973-74 |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Granted in the Social Sciences | 1,365 | 1,991 | 2,821 | 3,659 | 4,126 |
| Total number Granted | 11,622 | 16,467 | 23,091 | 32,107 | 33,826 |

Source: 1961-62—*The 1964 World Almanac* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc., 1965), p. 540; 1964-65—*The 1967 World Almanac* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc., 1968), p. 753; 1967-68—*The 1970 World Almanac* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc., 1971), p. 344; 1970-71—*The 1975 World Almanac* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc., 1976), p. 301; 1973-74—*The Chronicle of Higher Education* 12 (19 July 1976), p. 6.

Table 3 shows the number of Ph.D. dissertations by discipline. The chart indicates a rather high degree of concentration, with three disciplines (economics, geography, and political science) accounting for 64 percent of the total. It is interesting to note that none of the Ph.D.s was granted in interdisciplinary or area programs. This tends to support Needler and Walker's statement that there seems to exist “an attitude that a doctorate should be earned primarily in a discipline rather than in an interdisciplinary program.”⁸

Table 4 shows the distribution of dissertation topics by discipline according to the countries studied. Guatemala was most studied (41, or 27 percent of those dealing with only one country), followed closely by Costa Rica with 32 studies. These two countries account for 60 percent of the dissertations that deal with a single country. Anthropology concentrated most of its studies in Guatemala (9 of a total of 14). Economics and political science studies were disproportionately completed on Costa Rica, Guatemala, and 5- to 6-country studies. The other disciplines were less dramatically grouped, however 9 of the 11 sociology single-country studies were in Guatemala and Honduras. Nicaragua, one of the least-studied countries (8), had half of its studies completed in economics.

Dissertation topics as classified in table 5 show a heavy concentration in Economic Conditions and Behavior (24), Political Behavior (21), and Rural Development (19). Together they constitute 46 percent of all studies. Although Common Market studies (Mercado Común Centroamericano) could logically be included in Economic Conditions and Behavior, we chose to separate them since they tend to be regional studies rather than single-country studies. Most of the Common Market studies appear in table 4 under 5- to 6-country studies.

The method of study is presented for each discipline in table 6. Most of these categories are understandable, but a few words of explanation will help to clarify some of them. By "archival" we refer to the utilization of historical records for such information as birth, taxes, and land use. By "secondary analysis" we mean data collected recently for other purposes but used as a source of information for the dissertation. Such information is generally collected by national and international agencies and often includes demographic, trade, and agricultural data. "Author generated" refers to the collection of data during the process of doing fieldwork. Examples of this are transportation networks, commodities produced in an area, and land-use patterns.

As the table indicates, interviewing is used most by anthropology, political science, and sociology; participant observation is dominated by anthropology; there is very little concentration in the utilization of questionnaires; archival research is primarily used by political scientists and to a lesser degree by historians; secondary analysis is overwhelmingly dominated by economics, but is also heavily used by political science; and author-generated research is largely a product of geographer's work, with some contribution by economists.

Table 7 presents the names of universities that have awarded three or more Ph.D.s in social change and development in Central America between 1960 and 1974. No one university dominates this field. In fact, a total of 62 American universities granted the 140 Ph.D.s included in our list. It is interesting to note that according to the list by Needler and Walker of universities that offer Ph.D.s in Latin American Studies, most are represented in our study, but all of them granted the Ph.D. in specific disciplines.

In summary, Central America has received a great deal of attention by American Ph.D. candidates, but this attention has been sporadic and is apparently in decline; it has been diverse, but has left many potentially fruitful areas of study virtually untouched. Consciousness of these trends should heighten

our awareness of not only what we have investigated, but also what we have failed to investigate.

NOTES

1. Walter E. McPhie, "Factors Affecting the Value of Dissertations," *Social Education* (December 1960):377.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 385.
3. William C. Yoels, "The Fate of the Ph.D. Dissertation in Sociology: An Empirical Examination," *The American Sociologist* 8 (May 1973):89.
4. David J. Hanson, "The Dissemination of Ph.D. Results: Further Findings," *The American Sociologist* 10 (November 1975):238.
5. D. Neil Snarr and E. Leonard Brown, "Social and Economic Change in Central America and Panama: An Annotated Bibliography," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 2 (March 1972):102–15.
6. E. Leonard Brown and D. Neil Snarr, "Dissertations Concerning Social Change and Development in Central America and Panama (1960–1974): An Annotated Bibliography," *Rural Sociology* 40 (Fall 1975):284–318.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Martin C. Needler and Thomas W. Walker, "The Current Status of Latin American Studies Programs," *LARR* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1971):120.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 135–39.

TABLE 2 *Ph.D. Dissertations on Social Change and Development in Central America: 1960-1974*

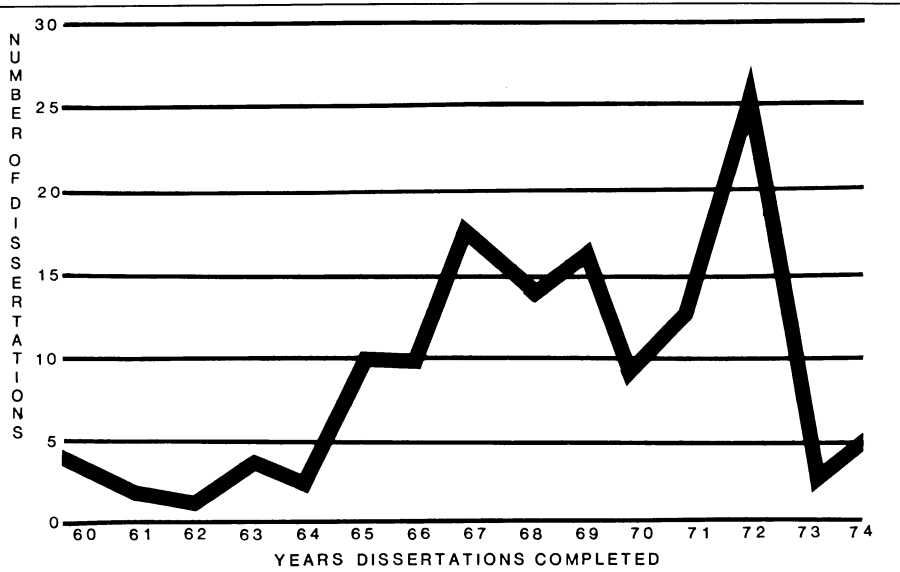
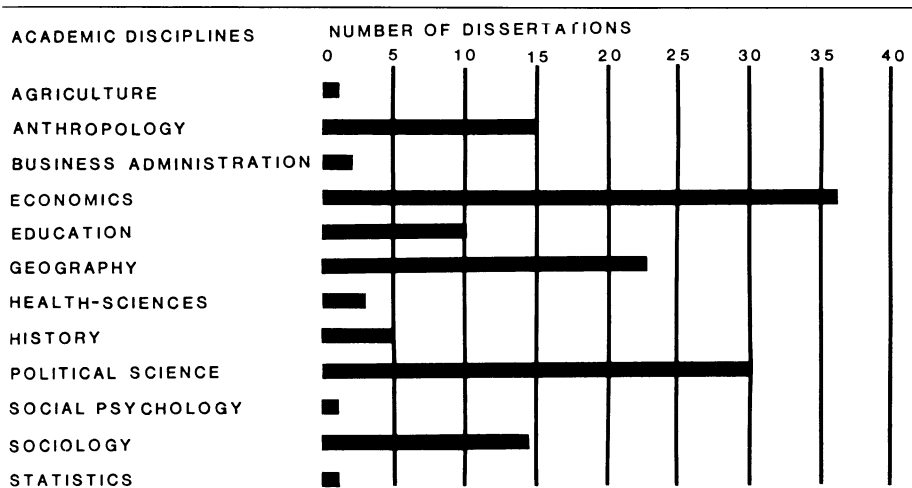


TABLE 3 *Ph.D. Dissertations on Social Change and Development in Central America by Discipline*



T A B L E 4 Ph.D. Dissertations on Social Change and Development in Central America by Discipline and Country

| Academic Disciplines | 1 Country Study | | | | | 2 Country Study | | | 3-4 Country Study | | | 5-6 Country Study | | | Total | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------|--|-------|----|
| | Costa Rica | El Salvador | Guatemala | Honduras | Nicaragua | Panama | Country Study | Country Study | Country Study | Country Study | Country Study | Country Study | Country Study | | | |
| Agriculture | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Anthropology | 1 | 1 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | 14 |
| Business Administration | | | 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 |
| Economics | 8 | 2 | 7 | 3 | 4 | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | 37 |
| Education | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | 11 |
| Geography | 6 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 2 | | | | | | | | | | 22 |
| Health Sciences | | | 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | 3 |
| History | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | 5 |
| Political Science | 11 | | 6 | | 1 | 3 | | | | | | | | | | 30 |
| Social Psychology | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Sociology | 1 | 1 | 5 | 4 | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | 13 |
| Statistics | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Total | 32 | 10 | 41 | 13 | 8 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 22 | 140 | | | | |

TABLE 5 *Number of Dissertations on Social Change and Development in Central America by Topic*

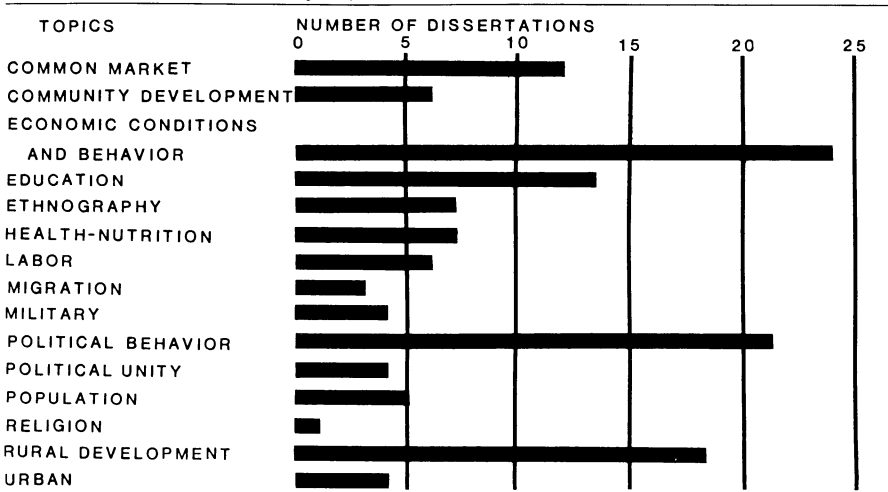


TABLE 6 *Ph.D. Dissertations on Social Change and Development in Central America by Method of Study and Disciplines*

| Academic Disciplines | Methods of Study Used | | | | | | | Number of Methods Used | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------|----------|--------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----|---|
| | Interviewing | Participant Observation | Questionnaire | Archives | Secondary Analysis | Author Generated | Experimental Design | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Agriculture | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Anthropology | 6 | 13 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 5 | 3 |
| Business Administration | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Economics | 4 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 29 | 5 | 1 | 31 | 6 | 0 |
| Education | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 3 | 0 |
| Geography | 2 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 12 | 0 | 12 | 10 | 0 |
| Health Sciences | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| History | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Political Science | 8 | 2 | 4 | 11 | 16 | 1 | 0 | 21 | 6 | 3 |
| Social Psychology | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Sociology | 9 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 8 | 5 | 0 |
| Statistics | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

CENTRAL AMERICAN DISSERTATIONS

TABLE 7 *Number of Dissertations on Social Change and Development in Central America by University and Year Completed*

| | 1960 | 1961 | 1962 | 1963 | 1964 | 1965 | 1966 | 1967 | 1968 | 1969 | 1970 | 1971 | 1972 | 1973 | 1974 | Total |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| University of Wisconsin | 1 | | | | | 2 | | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | | | 12 |
| University of Florida | 1 | | | 1 | 2 | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 1 | | | 11 |
| University of Texas | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 | | 1 | 1 | | | | 10 |
| Cornell University | | | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | | | 9 |
| Michigan State University | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | | | | | 2 | | 1 | 9 |
| University of Oregon | | | | | | | | | 2 | | 2 | | 4 | | | 8 |
| University of California | | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | 1 | | 1 | 2 | | 1 | 7 |
| University of Kansas | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | | 2 | | | 6 |
| American University | | 1 | | | | | | | 1 | | | | 1 | | | 3 |
| Columbia University | | | | 1 | | | | 1 | | | | | | 1 | | 3 |
| University of Illinois | | | | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | 1 | | | | 3 |
| Indiana University | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | 1 | | | | | 3 |
| University of Pittsburgh | | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | | | 3 |
| Stanford University | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | 2 | | | 3 |
| University of Pennsylvania | 1 | | | | | 1 | | | 1 | | | | | | | 3 |
| Total | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 8 | 10 | 11 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 19 | 1 | 2 | 93 |

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