Building Value Addedness into the Academic Dissertation:
A Systems Analysis Approach

By Dr. John V. Richardson Jr., Professor of Information Studies
and Ms. Janine Liebert, DIS graduate student jrichard@ucla.edu

Department of Information Studies 300 Charles E. Young Drive, N Los Angeles, CA 90095-1520 (310) 206-9369

Abstract

Background: Since late 19th century, American universities have awarded its highest degrees based, in part, on an "approved dissertation that demonstrates the student's ability to perform original, independent research and constitutes a distinct contribution to knowledge in the principal field of study."[1]

Potentially, the transition from print to electronic submission of theses could provide "added value" to the process, yet there are two TQM approaches to adding such value: (1) building it into the process (kaizen, the Japanese approach) or (2) adding it at the end (sometimes called the Mercedes' approach). To understand which approach makes sense, a study of the academic process from a systems analysis perspective is necessary.

Theoretical Framework: The problem can be understood to exist within three dimensions: the known, the theoretical bridge, and the unknown. The known: UCLA accepts about 700 dissertations annually. The Graduate Division regularly offers a Graduate Summer Research Mentor-ship program, and the Young Research Library offers information literacy programs. As a theoretical bridge between the known and unknown, we will adopt the five keys to total quality management (TQM) which include: 1) continuous Improvement philosophy; 2) consistency in everything you do; 3) teamwork as part of the culture; 4. routine measurement and analysis; and 5) training for all (see http://www.businessknowhow.com/manage/buildqual.htm). At the moment, the unknown is represented as how process can be improved.

Objectives: For our purposes at ETD 2007 in Uppsala, we wish: 1) to understand the process and to improve it; 2) to identify the advantages of using the systems analysis perspective; and 3) to create a dataflow diagram that will graphically represent the problem space.

Questions: In order to accomplish these three objectives, three questions logically flow: 1) What's the process?; 2) How can the process be improved? 3) Should "added value" be built in or added at end just before filing of the dissertation?

Case Study Method: Examine the process at UCLA which awards 700 dissertations per year. Interview faculty members, graduate students, and Graduate Division as well as Library staff about the system's requirements and fit criteria. Create data flow diagram. Draw explicit conclusions and recommendations for added value.

---

1 UCLA Graduate Division, "Program Requirements," (2006) at http://www.gdnet.ucla.edu/gasaa/library/pgmrqintro.htm.