

“At Least One Peer Reviewed Paper by Graduation”: An Analysis of Pre-Graduation Publication by Post-Baccalaureate Graduate Students

LeEtta Schmidt and Jason Boczar

This study examines the prevailing debates surrounding pre-graduation publishing and investigates the frequency of graduates including previously published material in a thesis or dissertation at one university. The goal of the study was to ascertain where library services outreach could best be targeted to help thesis and dissertation writing graduates with information on author rights and copyright. The results indicate that less than 15% of departments have a degree program that requires scholarly publishing prior to graduation. A quantitative analysis showed that 45% of submitted theses and dissertations included wording that indicated the presence of previously published material.

Introduction

The literature across many disciplines indicates both a prevalence of post-baccalaureate graduate publication prior to degree and a continuing debate on the benefits of this expectation from the perspectives of both faculty and students. The focus on graduate publishing creates new demands for libraries providing support services for graduate research, theses, and dissertations. Library and information sciences (LIS) literature echoes other disciplinary debate and argues that libraries are perfectly positioned to supplement faculty instruction and mentoring for graduate publishing, thesis, and dissertation work. However, it is unclear whether libraries have conducted much analysis of the pre-graduation publications that graduate students might include in their theses and dissertations. Libraries need more information on the differing requirements of various disciplines to focus efforts where they will be the most effective. Additional information on the requirements of publication prior to a degree may also enhance the evaluation of existing copyright, author rights, research, and scholarly communication services for graduate students by providing a more accurate view of the target population.

This paper provides a review of the debate and current state of post-baccalaureate graduate publishing as well as an analysis of published theses and dissertations at one university

* LeEtta Schmidt, Copyright and Intellectual Property Librarian, University of South Florida, lschmidt@usf.edu; Jason Boczar, Digital Scholarship and Publishing Librarian, University of South Florida, jboczar@usf.edu. ©2025 LeEtta Schmidt and Jason Boczar, Attribution-NonCommercial (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) CC BY-NC.

to determine the prevalence of graduate inclusion of previous publication in theses and dissertations. The analysis shows that most graduate student publications included in submitted theses and dissertations came out of only 10 academic departments, and that only 10 degree programs made publication prior to graduation a requirement of the degree. Information about the population of graduates including previous publication in their theses and dissertations was also used to re-evaluate existing copyright service statistics provided to graduates to ascertain how well the population was being served. Knowing this information can also help determine where further copyright and scholarly communication outreach efforts can best help graduate students.

Literature Review

The literature across many disciplines discusses either the ubiquity or emerging expectation of publication prior to graduation with an advanced degree (Ballamingie & Tudin, 2013; Hatch & Skipper, 2016; O'Hara et al., 2019; Clark, 2020). Hatch and Skipper (2016) recount being counselled to have at least five publications by the time they finished their PhD program. For others, encouragement to publish happens as early as undergraduate study (Caprio, 2014; Fraser Riehle & Hensley, 2017). That publication is a metric of success among career researchers, is favored by search committees for tenure track positions, and expected by professional researchers, are often given as reasons supporting the requirement of publication in students prior to graduation (Ballamingie & Tudin, 2013; McClellan et al., 2017; Floyd et al., 2019; Hatch & Skipper, 2016; Reis, 2000). When she addressed graduate students of the study of religion, Clark (2020) said that publishing encouraged search committees to see graduate candidates as potential colleagues and productive scholars. Kaiser and Pratt (2016) pointed to the consistent rise in expectations for graduate students, noting that a couple of peer-reviewed articles would distinguish a graduate in 2006 or earlier, but by 2016 is common among all graduates.

A noticeable amount of literature indicates problems or issues with publication prior to graduation. Pasco (2009) suggests that attempting publication as a scholar could compete with the responsibilities of being a student, causing students to sacrifice work on their own degree or teaching responsibilities. Wilke (2017) further expounds that the schedules of journals and publishers are so dissimilar from the schedule of a graduate degree, where peer review can last months or longer, that publication prior to graduation should not be required. The literature shows that many disciplines are making publication part of a student's thesis or dissertation work to address the conflicting requirements of degree and publication that Pasco highlighted. Ball (2010) recounted experiences of graduates being encouraged to publish articles for later inclusion in their dissertation as a way for the dissertation committee to outsource review of the graduate's research. Perhaps in response to this type of experience, Fulton (2018) asserts that engaging journal staff, editors and peer reviewers for student work is inappropriate even though teaching and counseling students on how to craft and submit a manuscript for publication should be part of their degree experience. In their study of rhetoric and composition scholars, Wells and Söderlund (2018) reported that several interviewees found that format and function of peer reviewed articles did not work well as dissertation chapters. Other scholars voice concern over the escalating effect that publication prior to graduation has on tenure and promotion review (Flaherty, 2017; Velleman, 2017).

Regardless of any continuing debate, many studies show links between publication prior to graduation and future career successes (Kaiser & Pratt, 2016; Pickering et al., 2015;

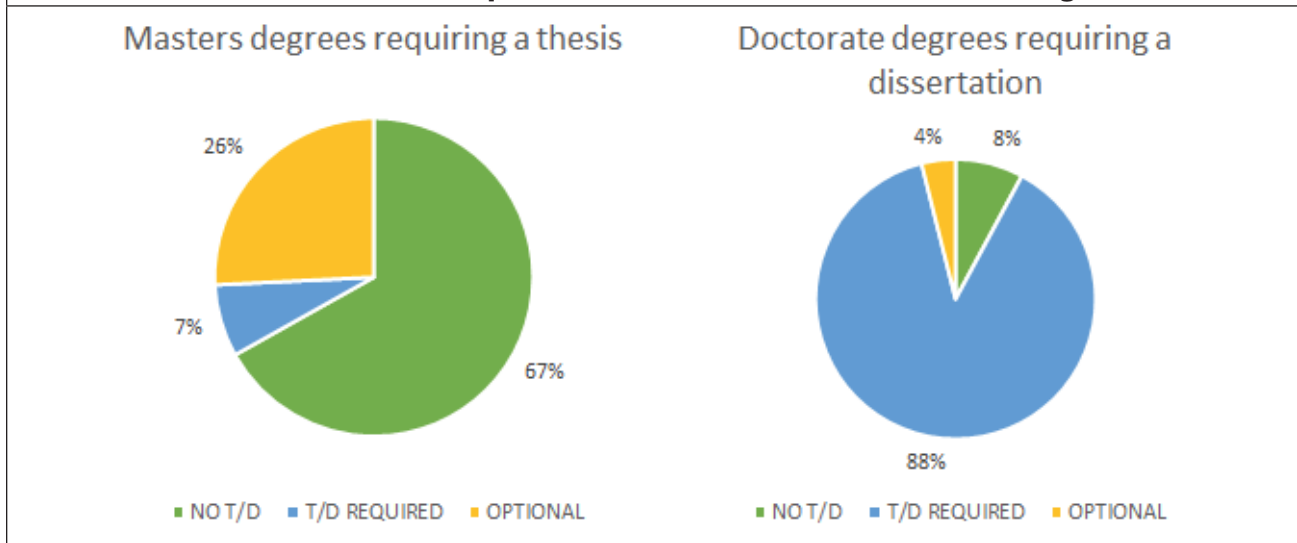
Ballamingie & Tudin, 2013; Garbati & Samuels, 2013). Pickering et al. (2015) confirmed that graduate publication rates were increasing over time, and that publication prior to a PhD indicated a greater likelihood of publication post PhD. This finding is echoed by Kaiser and Pratt (2016), whose examination of scholar curriculum vitae found that “doctoral students who publish in elite journals increased their potential career publication productivity,” and that “lead and solo authorship continue to have a significant and positive effect on lead/solo publications during a faculty members’ career.” The tendency for pre-graduation publication to affect post-hire productivity has created what Headworth and Freese (2016) term “‘tournament mobility,’ in which early successes can end up being quasi-necessary conditions of high later attainments” (p. 1259).

Expectations or requirements for publication are not always accompanied by instruction and preparation, as noted by Wells and Söderlund (2018) in their survey of researchers. O’Hara et al. (2019) reported similar findings and noted that, though students and institutions can benefit from “more robust research mentoring practices,” the benefit to faculty is less or non-existent and could inhibit faculty from participating. Both Ball (2010) and Fulton (2018) describe how writing for publication should be embedded into instruction and the mentoring relationship between faculty and graduate. The cross-disciplinary literature helped to develop a picture of the possible needs in departments that may regularly interact with library services devoted to supporting research, publishing, and the archiving of theses and dissertations. A notable article from within the LIS literature, McClellan et al. (2017) pinpointed the ‘instruction gap’ relating to pre-publication training as an opportunity that could also be filled or supplemented by libraries.

Institutional Background

The University of South Florida (USF) is a preeminent high-impact global research university with three campuses in the Tampa Bay area. In 2022, USF enrolled over 9,000 graduate students in 178 graduate programs. All graduate programs with a thesis or dissertation option or requirement submit their final manuscripts with ProQuest. The submission process includes an agreement with the university that the electronic thesis or dissertation (ETD) will be hosted and made accessible through the institutional repository. The Tampa campus library serves as

FIGURE 1
Thesis/Dissertation Requirements in Masters and Doctorate Programs



the library for the largest USF campus and provides support for the institutional repository ingest services for all ETDs.

Of the 178 degree programs available to students in 2022, 163 were master's degrees, 51 were doctorate degrees, and nine were professional degrees. Figure 1 illustrates that of the professional degrees only one required a dissertation while one made it an option; 12 master's degree programs required a thesis while 42 made it an option; and 45 doctorate programs required a dissertation while two made it optional. Language from the posted degree requirements and accompanying graduate handbooks reflected the observation in the literature of the growing requirement of publication connected with graduation (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Thesis, Dissertation, and Publication Requirements Among Degree Programs

College/School	MA Thesis	Thesis Optional	PhD Dissertation	Dissertation Optional	Publication Requirement
College of Arts and Sciences: School of Humanities	10	9	5		
College of Arts and Sciences: School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics	12	8	12	1	6
College of Arts and Sciences: School of Social Sciences	7	6	4		
College of Behavioral and Community Sciences	5	4	6		1
College of Education	1	1	5		
College of Engineering	10	9	8		3
College of Graduate Studies					
College of Marine Science	1		1		
College of Nursing			1		
College of Public Health	1		1		
College of The Arts	2	2	1		
Morsani College of Medicine			1		
Muma College of Business	4	3	3	1	
Patel College of Global Sustainability					
Taneja College of Pharmacy	1				

Graduate students in the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, College of Behavioral and Community Sciences, and College of Engineering were given the instruction to have at least one paper accepted to a peer review journal or conference by the time of graduation. A few programs required the paper to be sole or first authored and explicitly stated that the paper be related to the student's dissertation research. None of the posted degree requirements or handbook instructions examined explicitly stated that the paper should be included as part of the thesis or dissertation. Additionally, the USF Office of Graduate Studies instructs graduate students that only sole or first authors may include previously published papers as chapters in their theses/dissertations (2022).

Methodology

The USF Libraries receives new ETDs for inclusion in the institutional repository from ProQuest. Students are required to upload the PDF of their ETD and appropriate metadata to ProQuest prior to graduation. The student also signs an agreement giving permission to USF to post the ETD on the institutional repository. The USF Libraries retrieves PDF and XML documents via a scripted FTP process from ProQuest and deposits the PDFs in the institutional repository. To analyze the content of ETDs from 2014–2021, the researchers retrieved PDFs from ProQuest to create a data set for text analysis. The early date of 2014 was chosen since it was the earliest year that XML and PDF files were available from ProQuest.

Over 4,000 ETDs were retrieved to compose the data set that would be searched systematically for certain phrases. The search process would also contextualize the phrase within the document to support a manual quality control check on the results and eliminate false positives. To start the process the PDFs were converted to plain text using the `pdftotext` command-line utility.* Once the plain text files were created, the files were searched using `ripgrep`,[†] a fast command-line search utility. Four key terms were searched to find ETDs that had previously published content: “Reprinted,” “Used with permissions,” “Previously published,” and “Note to reader.” These terms were selected based on the researchers’ familiarity with the ETD submission process and the requirements of the Office of Graduate Studies. The search output resulted in .txt match files that included the lines that the search terms appeared. An additional search was made that provided context for the search term by providing four lines before and four lines after the search term appears.[‡] These txt files were added to spreadsheets where they could be tagged and deduped. The researchers initially checked a small batch of results against the ETD PDFs to look for false positives and ensure that the ETD did have previously published material. The results of this initial review confirmed that the search terms were catching ETDs that included previously published material.

The data set was also searched for publication year, college, department, and whether it was a thesis or dissertation. All this information was routinely available on the cover page of every ETD. The first page of the PDF was extracted and converted into plain text using the command-line utility `pdftk`.[§] Using `ripgrep`, the information was pulled from the ETDs with manual data cleanup for items not matching certain patterns. The positive key term results were then analyzed against the results for department and year to identify patterns.

Limitations

This study looked specifically at the inclusion of previously published articles in theses and dissertations included in the Institutional Repository hosted by the libraries, so it does not reflect the full range of graduate student publishing activities. The only version of ETDs available for analysis are PDF documents. The process used for analysis involved creating plain text documents from the already Optical Character Recognized PDFs. Broken formatting such as strange line breaks caused issues and may have resulted in ETDs that had previously published content but were not identified.

* For FILE in *.pdf; do `pdftotext $FILE ${FILE%.*}.txt`; done

† To get the filenames only, we ran: `rg -i 'previously published' *.txt > ../previously_published.txt && rg -i 'Note to reader' *.txt > ../Note_to_reader.txt && rg -i 'Reprinted' *.txt > ../Reprinted.txt && rg -i 'used with permission' *.txt > ../used_with_permission.txt`

‡ To get context for each result we ran: `rg -i --heading -A 4 'previously published' *.txt --sort path > ../previously.txt`

§ For FILE in *.pdf; do `pdftk $FILE cat 2-end output full/${FILE%.*}-01.pdf`; done

The greatest limitation to the study was the lack of standardized language used by graduate students to signify that a chapter of their thesis or dissertation was previously published. Students are not required to include a particular phrase in their ETD to indicate that a portion was previously published. However, a partnership between the Office of Graduate Studies and the USF Libraries in 2015 resulted in recommended phrasing that many graduates adopted. The implication of this limitation is that there are more ETDs that have previously published content; however, there are not fewer than we counted. Further standardizing terminology in the future would minimize this limitation and allow more accurate text parsing.

The study also did not include any direct feedback or participation by graduate students, which may have helped to expand the population examined to include publishing graduates who did not include those publications in their thesis or dissertation. Without direct input from graduates, this study also did not collect information on how much instruction graduates received on publication, or from where they may have received it. Future studies of the ETDs could better capture any terms that a student may have used in their ETD.

Results

The researchers analyzed 598 ETDs between the years 2014 and 2021. Out of these, 546 were dissertations and 52 were theses. Of the ETDs, 270, or 45%, returned positive results for key terms which indicated they included previously published material. Most ETDs with previously published material were from the College of Arts and Science and the College of Engineering. The five departments with previously published material are the Department of Chemistry, Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Department of Electrical Engineering, Department of Cell Biology, Microbiology, and Molecular Biology, and the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering (see Table 2).

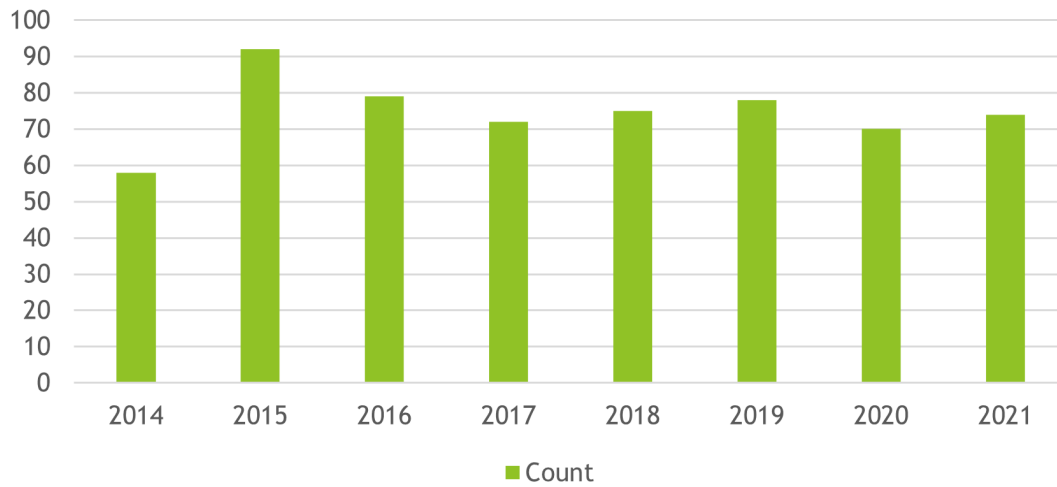
TABLE 2 Departments With the Most Previously Published Content in Submitted ETDs	
Department	Count of ETDs
Department of Chemistry	66
Department of Computer Science and Engineering	65
Department of Electrical Engineering	51
Department of Cell Biology, Microbiology, and Molecular Biology	50
Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering	38

As of 2023 USF has 77 departments. Of these, the study showed there are 54 departments from the University that, between 2014 and 2021, had at least one student who previously published a portion of their ETD. Throughout the years looked at by the study, the number of ETDs including previously published content remained relatively steady between 70 and 80 per year. The years 2014 and 2015 represent minor outliers in that only 58 ETDs were submitted in 2014, followed by 92 in 2015 (see Figure 2).

Discussion

The study shows that since 2014, a steady number of students have including previously published materials as a part of their thesis or dissertation. For the most part, the number has re-

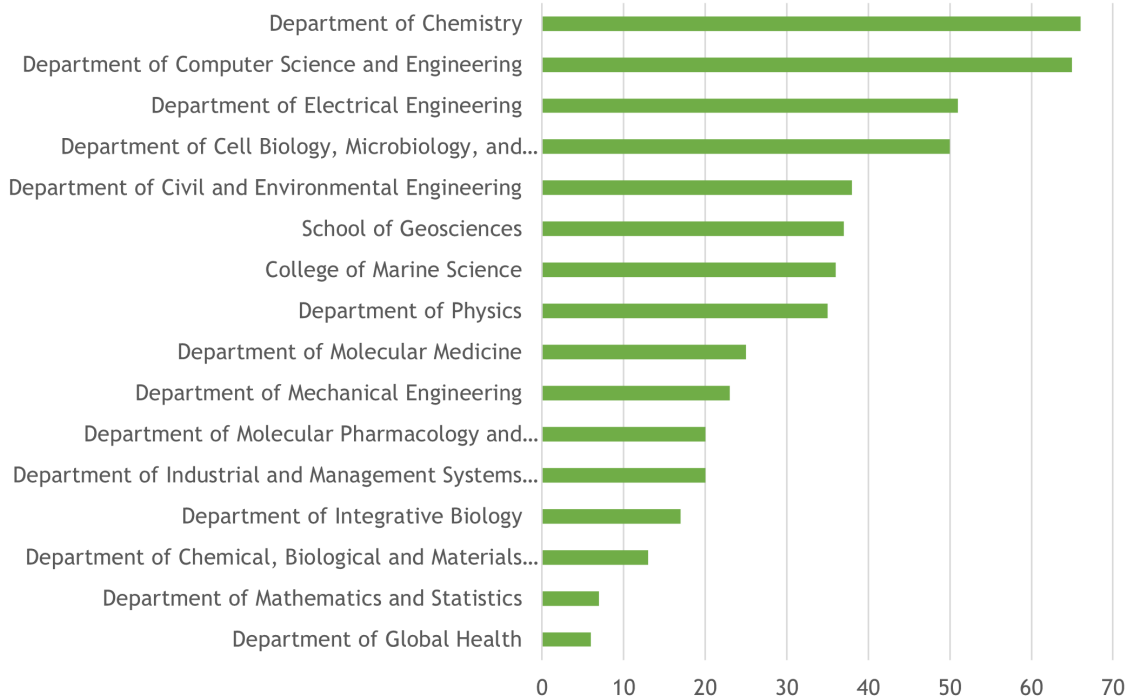
FIGURE 2
Count of ETDs with Previously Published Material Per Year



mained consistent throughout the years. The results indicate that a few concentrated departments require, or allow, a format of dissertation that relies on the inclusion of previously published articles or papers. Out of 77 departments, 38 had five or fewer students including previously published material. This study did not include a count of graduates from each department, so it cannot be determined at this time if the five or fewer students from each of the 38 departments mentioned represented all or a majority of the departmental graduates for those years.

Of the remaining 16 departments with ETDs including previously published materials, the top five accounted for 45% while the top 10 accounted for over 70%. As a whole, ETDs

FIGURE 3
Count of ETDs in 16 Departments with the Most Previously Published Content

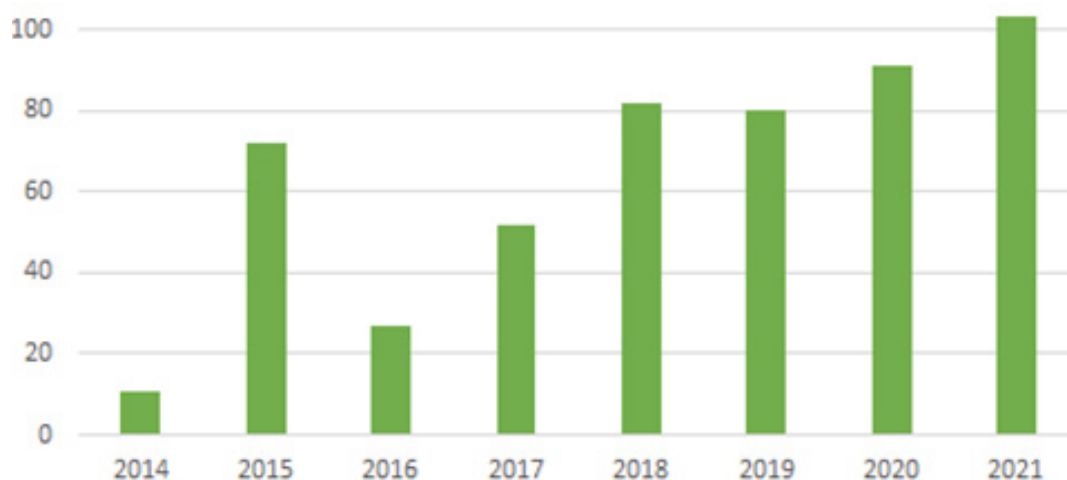


including previously published content accounted for about 15% of the total ETDs submitted between 2014 and 2021. The 10 departments that accounted for over 70% of the ETDs including previously published content provided a focus to both evaluate point of need library services and explore the development of additional services and instruction.

The researchers approached this study with the idea that copyright, author rights, and scholarly communication outreach regarding the use of previously published content in ETDs could be improved by ascertaining the tendency of different departments to both require and submit ETDs with previous publications. Several interactions with thesis and dissertation writing graduates during copyright, author rights, and scholarly communication outreach activities had indicated a lack of understanding concerning author rights and the publication process. The interactions seemed to indicate that graduates were not instructed on how to choose or evaluate a journal to ensure they could use their published research in their future projects. This observation echoed findings by McClellan et al. (2017) of an 'instruction gap' for publishing graduates. While library instruction on copyright, author rights, and scholarly communication was already customized to address these issues at point of need, it was unclear how thoroughly the population of publishing graduates was being served and if additional library instructional programming might assist in addressing the need. Review of the results prompted additional questions as to how the number of submitted ETDs with previously published content aligned with the number of copyright service interactions relating to using previously published content in a thesis or dissertation.

A review of copyright service interactions was performed to 1. check that the point of need instruction was, at the least, reaching those ETD authors who were including previously published content; and 2. inform discussions on additional library instructional programming that could support the larger population of graduates interested in or participating in publishing. Copyright services at the USF Libraries had been tracking service activity during most of the years included in the study. Service tracking data had already been coded to indicate if the questions received and consults conducted related to ETDs as well as several other key topics. Questions related to the use of copyrighted material in ETDs account for nearly 50% of all questions received by the USF Libraries' copyright services. Some of these interactions are

FIGURE 4
Unique Patrons with ETD Copyright Questions Per Year



referrals from the Office of Graduate Studies, either from their ETD preparation workshops or from facilitators of the ETD submission process. The question coding for ETDs, however, did not distinguish between using previously published articles as chapters or using figures or materials authored by others.

The tracking of copyright services changed in 2014 and 2016 resulting in only partial data for the 2014 calendar year before a drastic jump in the number of questions received during the 2015 calendar year. However, this jump in questions from ETD students during the 2015 year does correspond with a similar jump in ETDs with previously published content seen in Figure 2. Most patrons requesting assistance with using copyrighted material in either a thesis or dissertation did not return for more assistance later, however the results for figure 4 were deduped to show only unique patrons.

TABLE 3
Top 10 Departments Represented by Unique ETD Patrons to Copyright Services

College/Department	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Electrical Engineering	0	11	10	4	12	13	50
Engineering	3	3	0	18	5	17	46
Civil and Environmental Engineering	2	4	9	7	3	6	31
Computer Science and Engineering	4	0	7	4	8	4	27
Education	1	0	3	2	10	8	24
Humanities	0	1	3	7	6	5	22
Mechanical Engineering	0	0	3	5	7	7	22
Geosciences	2	5	3	6	4	0	20
Communication	1	0	1	3	6	6	17
Chemical and Biomedical Engineering	1	2	2	3	3	3	14

School and departmental identification of patrons changed over the years examined from free text entry to patron selection from a curated list and was not recorded at all during the 2014 and 2015 calendar years. This inconsistent patron self-reporting of college/department over the development of copyright services led to a large group of patrons being identified simply as “Engineering” alongside other similarly large groups of specific engineering departments. The departments of Chemistry and of Cell Biology, Microbiology, and Molecular Biology fell just outside of the top ten.

None of the posted degree requirements or handbook instructions examined explicitly stated that a published paper should be included as part of the thesis or dissertation, so publication prior to graduation could be happening alongside and in addition to the completion of a thesis or dissertation. However, discussions with students seeking assistance, and with ETD graduate support across campus indicate that previous publications are often incorporated into ETDs. Knowing which departments require previously published material that may be included as a part of their ETD provides new ways to adapt copyright services for the libraries. Being able to target specific assistance to those departments and students will increase the effectiveness of outreach and support provided by the USF Libraries. Instead of marketing ETD support services to all 77 departments at the

same level, the library can focus specific outreach and instruction on certain department graduates and their advisors.

This study did not look at where a student previously published. Further research into this area will help determine if graduate students are publishing in open access journals and what the implications of that may be in relation to copyright education from the library. Additional information about faculty research patterns may also be presented from further research into where graduate students are publishing since they often publish together.

Conclusion

This study looked at the prevailing debates surrounding pre-graduation publishing and investigated the frequency of graduates including previously published material in a thesis or dissertation. Though the population of graduates including previously published content in a thesis or dissertation may not incorporate the whole population of graduates publishing prior to obtaining their degree, this smaller population offered some insight into possible information and instruction needs of graduate student authors. The researchers began the study with the belief, supported by the literature, that library services were perfectly positioned to augment faculty instruction and mentoring regarding the publication process especially where it intersected with the completion of theses and dissertations. The results showed that theses and dissertations incorporating previously published articles was favored more strongly by certain departments at the University of South Florida. The Department of Chemistry and the Department of Computer Science and Engineering both led the count with 66 and 65 items, respectively. Over the entire University, 15% of ETDs contained pre-graduation publishing.

Using information learned from the study, existing copyright service statistics were re-evaluated to ascertain success at serving the graduate population at the point of need and to identify room for improvement or expansion of library instruction and outreach. Understanding the amount of previously published material in ETDs and the departments that are predominately emphasizing pre-graduation publishing can help libraries target instructional services specific to these practices. Future collaboration between copyright, scholarly communication, and subject liaison services within the library can also utilize the information learned from the study to target author rights instruction, outreach, and potential partnerships with faculty advisors in different disciplines. These targeted activities can inform future research into service uptake and graduate publishing behavior and to document the impact of library instruction on author rights.

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