

Rethinking Dissertation Rigor in Small-Business Public Policy

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1. Introduction

Across academic circles, it is commonly assumed that dissertations from non-prestige or online universities are inherently less rigorous than those produced at mid- or upper-tier institutions. This belief is repeated confidently, often without anyone examining the underlying evidence. In the small-business public policy domain, where applied insight matters more than theoretical novelty, this assumption carries real consequences: valuable practitioner-driven research may be overlooked simply because it did not originate from a prestige institution.

This white paper challenges that assumption by presenting findings from a review of dissertations specifically within small-business public policy. The goal is not to compare institutions broadly, nor to make claims about other academic domains. Instead, the focus is narrow, evidence-based, and grounded in the applied needs of small-business leaders, policymakers, and community organizations.

2. What the review examined

The review focused on dissertations from non-prestige and online universities that addressed:

- small-business policy
- local economic development
- regulatory impacts
- community-level business dynamics
- applied frameworks for small-business decision-making

The intent was to evaluate clarity, methodological discipline, and applied usefulness—not to rank institutions or critique prestige programs.

3. What I found

Contrary to the prevailing assumption, the dissertations reviewed were clear, disciplined, and directly relevant to real small-business and community-level decision-makers. Practitioner-scholars tended to:

- define variables cleanly
- frame applied problems with precision
- use methods appropriate to the policy questions at hand
- generate insights that leaders can actually use

This aligns with existing research showing that practitioner-driven inquiry often produces more actionable insights than theory-driven academic work (Van de Ven, 2007; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). As someone with decades of experience in small-business public policy environments, I can assert confidently that these applied insights are often more useful to practitioners than the theoretical constructs that dominate prestige-tier dissertations.

This is not a claim about other domains. It is not a claim about superiority. It is simply an observation grounded in the evidence reviewed within this specific field.

4. The most surprising finding: no comparative research exists

The most unexpected discovery was not in the dissertations themselves—it was in the academic literature.

Despite decades of doctoral-education scholarship, no comparative study exists evaluating dissertation rigor across institutional tiers in small-business public policy. Searches across doctoral-education research, higher-education journals, and meta-analyses reveal no published work comparing dissertation quality by institutional ranking (Golde & Walker, 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

To conduct such a study, researchers would need to:

- sample dissertations across prestige and non-prestige institutions
- evaluate methodological rigor
- assess committee standards
- publish comparative findings

Prestige institutions have little incentive to invite such scrutiny, and non-prestige institutions often lack the funding or political capital to initiate it. As a result, the prestige narrative persists without empirical support.

5. Prestige bias is cultural, not empirical

Prestige bias is well-documented in academic sociology and organizational theory. The “Matthew Effect” (Merton, 1968) describes how prestige amplifies perceived quality independent of actual merit. Research on academic gatekeeping shows that institutional affiliation strongly influences perceptions of rigor, even when reviewers evaluate identical work (Peters & Ceci, 1982).

Prestige-tier faculty themselves quietly acknowledge that:

- rigor varies widely across all institutions
- dissertation committees everywhere approve work that would not withstand external peer review
- theoretical novelty often overshadows applied usefulness
- committee variability is universal

These observations align with studies showing inconsistent dissertation committee standards and wide variation in methodological expectations across programs (Lovitts, 2007; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

The irony is clear: the very people who dismiss non-prestige dissertations have never examined the underlying claim. The belief is cultural, not evidence-based.

6. Why this matters for small-business public policy

Small-business leaders, policymakers, and community organizations rely on applied research—not theoretical constructs. When practitioner-driven dissertations contain clear, disciplined, and relevant insights, those insights should not be dismissed simply because they originate outside the prestige tier.

Yet that is exactly what happens.

Valuable work disappears into institutional archives because it lacks the prestige label. The result is a loss of practical knowledge that could meaningfully support small-business ecosystems.

This dynamic mirrors broader findings that applied policy research is often undervalued in academic settings despite its real-world impact (Bozeman & Sarewitz, 2011; Head, 2016).

7. The role of Undeterred Press

Undeterred Press exists to surface, refine, and elevate practitioner-driven scholarship in domains where applied insight matters—including small-business public policy. The goal is not to challenge academia, but to fill a gap it has left unaddressed:

- rigor that is clear
- methods that are disciplined
- insights that are useful
- research that is applied
- voices that are overlooked

By bringing this work into the public conversation, Undeterred Press ensures that valuable practitioner insight reaches the people who need it most.

8. Conclusion

The assumption that non-prestige dissertations lack rigor in small-business public policy is unsupported by evidence. The reviewed work demonstrates clarity, discipline, and applied usefulness. And the absence of comparative research reveals that the prestige narrative has never been tested.

Institutional ranking is not a reliable indicator of dissertation rigor in this domain. What matters is whether the work helps real small-businesses, communities, and policymakers make better decisions.

Undeterred Press is committed to elevating that work.

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