

How to Choose Your Dissertation Topic and Advisor – March 7, 2001

Panel members:

Greg DuBrow, full-time HED PhD student on dissertation status

Jerel Wohl, GSE Assoc Dir Finance, HED EdD student on dissertation status

Myrna Cohen, Assoc Dir Learning Resources and Academic Support, GSE Adj Faculty,
1992 LED PhD graduate, dissertation committee member for LED students

Steve Feld, HED faculty and Academic Coord, HED PhD student on dissertation status

Introduction Lois MacNamara, GSE Assistant Dean for Student Affairs

This panel is to help you get from coursework to graduation – the research, the writing, the decisions, the roadblocks.

- What are you going to study?
- Who are you going to work with?
- How do you choose those people?
- How do you get them to work with you?
- What order do you do this in?

Be sure you know the GSE requirements – candidacy, prelims, proposal hearing, defense – all this is available in the student handbook and online.

Comments from the panel:

Get in a dissertation support group even before you form your committee or start your proposal – it will help you set goals, stay motivated, keep in the loop. Get together often and keep each other on task. Puts it into a social context because the dissertation process is a lonely one.

Choosing your topic: You should you pick the broad topic as early as possible so that you are thinking about this in your research classes (prosem, readings)? The goal is to be familiar with the relevant literature on your broad topic. If you are working even part time in Higher Education, you should pull something out of your job that you are interested in. If you don't have something in your job that is interesting, pick something that does fascinate you. Narrowing the actual research question will be done with your chair and perhaps your committee because they will know what data you can access.

Picking your chair: Greg looked for temperament and structured the committee with those he felt he could work with. Also important to find people who share your dissertation interests to some degree. They may not have to meet physically other than the proposal hearing but personality matters. Start by identifying who you would like to be your chair. Once you have that person on board, talk to him/her about who else to get for your committee – who can they work with, who can bring something different to your committee. You need committee members who are not going to contradict your chair at every step. This can really hold you back. You need readers who will get along with you as well as the other committee members. You may also need to consider their schedules and if they are compatible with the way you work. How will they care

about you as a person? This can help as you are trying to finish. E-mail communication may be enough, but it depends on how you work.

Three approaches to selecting your committee members:

1. Academic/ Intellectual
2. Pragmatic
3. Philosophical

A good dissertation is a done dissertation. The goal is to get a quality product done not to stretch the limits of knowledge of the universe.

HED Faculty will not force you to do their work. The faculty is different in their approach to intellect. Their curiosity is at varying levels. Michael is very curious. You need to be too in order to work with him.

Your end goal is also important. Do you care about the Dissertation award, or do you just want the credential (you can always go for the book award in a few years). Pick a topic that fits in with your career goals.

One of the pragmatic concerns relates to having committee members who can help you gain the access that you need – to people, data, documentation, etc. You may want to consider committee members according to how they can help you in a very practical way (like access to people and information). Talk to Alyse or Steve to find out if the person you are interested in working with has been on another person's committee. You can use an intermediary such as Bob to contact someone.

The chair has to be a standing GSE faculty member. At least two of your minimum three members have to be standing faculty at Penn. All three primary members must have earned doctorates. Additional members must have a terminal degree such as an MBA or a JD.

Make friends with Billie Meeks, the GSE Registrar because she can explain things, speed things along. Billie is a nice person who is willing to help.

Logistics about paperwork and who can be on the committee are in the handbook or on the web (GSE student handbook or the Penn graduate student handbook). There are differing guidelines for PhD and EdD. You must pay attention to the type of paper you use, the margins, fonts, footnoting style, etc – these are all very important. Not following the required protocol on any of these items can hold you up for a long time! Be careful. Be meticulous in your references. Have a record of where all your information is coming from: card system or computer system. Come up with a system to organize your data and text. You don't want to have to backtrack. Write references on your notes...you won't remember. Take time to write out your thoughts about the quote you are copying.

You get an advisor during coursework, but that person is not necessarily your chair. You may have to convince faculty members to work with you so you will need a compelling argument.

Make sure you have already considered the broad topic of your dissertation before trying to convince a faculty member to work with you.

The Readings “Critical Essay”:

The expectation in the second semester of Readings is that you will produce a critical essay on books that are relevant to your topic. Ideally, this should be your dissertation topic. This doesn't always happen. This paper can form the basis for the lit review section of your proposal and dissertation. It also fulfills the literature section of the written preliminary exam.

First semester: historical research, critical theory. What kind of data was used? How good was the data? Are there inconsistencies?

Second semester: apply what you learned in the first semester to the books you have selected that are related to your topic. You should not be doing a book report on these books – the paper should relate to your topic so be thinking about the topic while you are going through the first semester. This differs from Phd to EdD. For the Ed.D., survey the lit and find out the relevance. For the PhD, it is more theory based. Encompass the lit and then do something new that adds to the body of knowledge. There will be overlap in the actual works you look at. If you are able to start conversations with potential committee members and/or the committee chair you might be able to get some guidance on the books you select. Most people aren't able to do this, but if you can, you will be way ahead.

GET THIS PAPER DONE DURING THE SEMESTER – i.e. no incomplete.

There will be occasional conflict/tension with your committee/chair. Don't take it personally. There is something adversarial in the process. The committee is responsible to push and raise the bar. Sometimes you should push back, but remember that they are trying to help you produce the best work you can. You have to be able to defend your ideas. It is called a defense. Your committee members are your colleagues. You have less experience and they will treat you as such, but if you are prepared and take charge, they will respect you for it. Be prepared and confident! Be ready to defend your ideas. There will be some negotiations, but their goal is the same as yours – to finish.

As you are working on your proposal, set aside your intro and lit review for a moment and try to imagine yourself in the field doing the work. What specific questions are you pursuing and whom are you pursuing them with? This helps to put into perspective what is relevant and doable. This will shorten the process if you can be realistic from the beginning.

Procrastination:

- 1) Reading- maybe you are reading too much so you can avoid writing. Are you reading for a purpose or are you reading so that you don't have to move on? You can get lost in the reading by gathering too much.
- 2) Setting the bar too high- this can lead to procrastination
- 3) Watching too many movies, cleaning, making babies.

You can set incremental project goals with your chair that leads to output of some sort in a specified time period. This gives you a deadline as if you are in the classroom.

DISSERTATION is a huge word but if you break it down into pieces it is much more manageable. It is large and unstructured so do what you can to structure it -- advisor, calendar, support group. Pay attention to your dissertation every day – even if that simply means re-reading a portion of it. One more time – pay attention to your dissertation every day. If you let yourself walk away from it, you then have to regroup and regrouping can take even more time. Evaluate at the end of the day. What did I do today?

Consider taking the risk of leaving your job and working on the dissertation full-time. While this is not possible for most of us, if you can do it you will finish sooner.

If you have kids – let them see you working on your dissertation. It is important for them to see that you are putting a lot of work in to get results.

Research- you may have to take yourself out of your family situation in order to get things done.

Every piece of this is going to take longer than you think it will. You have control over your part but you may not be able to control other people's schedules

IRB – Institutional Review Board:

This now covers all research done on humans. Non-invasive research projects in social sciences can be expedited. It is supposed to take 2 weeks. Nichole Shumanis' took 4 months because she wanted to tape phone conversations. There is no way to know how long it is going to take to get approval. It can be a bit difficult to get in touch with them. They are in transition. Go through Lois if you are having a hard time.

You can't file with the IRB until your proposal has been approved. There is a document you file along with pieces of your proposal. You can not proceed with any human contact until after you get approval. You may also have to go through the IRB process at any institution at which you are examining. This is not just for dissertation research...this would be for faculty research or staff projects.

Dissertation quote of the day:

“A doctoral dissertation is eight weeks of work crammed into eight years.” Dr. Doug Toma.