**6 Forming Your Dissertation**

**Committee**

I realized that getting along with people was even more important than being

academically talented.

I really enjoyed being a student. If I had this attitude during my undergraduate

years, it would have been a better experience. Perhaps maturity does have its

advantages.

*The process of identifying your dissertation committee is probably the most*

*significant decision you will make in your program.* Before suggesting criteria

for selecting your committee, we need to understand the roles and

responsibilities of the committee.

**The Dissertation Committee Structure**

The university establishes the doctoral committee structure as a vehicle to

guide the student from course work to doctoral orals. The purpose of the

dissertation committee is twofold: from the university’s perspective the

faculty are expected to assure the maintenance of the tacit “standards” of the

university. From the student’s perspective, the faculty are the teachers guiding

the student in developing a dissertation. This is a true apprenticeship model.

The dissertation committee becomes the group of faculty responsible for

your progress from the identification of your research question through your

dissertation oral examination. The development of your dissertation proposal,

your data collection and analysis, and documentation of your study in the

form of a dissertation are activities which evolve over time, consuming at

least two years, and frequently considerably longer. Thus, it is essential that

your committee work well together and with you.

Typically there are two or three faculty members who comprise a

dissertation committee. These faculty have different responsibilities within

the group. One person has the title of chair, mentor, director, or head (for a

listing of these common titles, see Figure 3.1). The others are called

“readers.” The hierarchical organization established with this naming

connotes differential status and responsibility among the faculty. The chair

has the major task of guiding the student from vague idea to dissertation

orals. The chair is assisted by other faculty, all contributing to the

development of an acceptable dissertation. The chair collaborates with the

readers in determining when the dissertation is ready for orals, but the readers

expect the chair to be the major advisor in the research process.

Since most doctoral students are hazy in their understanding of most of

these stages, they usually depend on their committee to provide the needed

information or to refer them to appropriate resources. Ideally, the doctoral

committee is comprised of faculty with different areas of expertise, who will

contribute to the completion of your dissertation. For example, one member

might be expert in research design, another in the current theories prevailing

in a discipline, and a third in analytical processes. You will tap these

resources many times in the process of working on your dissertation.

Each committee is virtually an independent entity. It functions in isolation

from others in the university deciding when the dissertation proposal is ready

for public evaluation, and, ultimately, when the dissertation is ready for

public scrutiny. “Going public” involves reviews by external readers, editors,

the department chair, and others who are either responsible for or interested

in evaluating specific aspects of the dissertation. Thus, the committee guides

the doctoral student in this whole process.

You may call your committee your “doctoral committee,” your

“committee,” or your “dissertation committee.” You only have one

committee, but these terms are used interchangeably (see Figure 3.1). Over

the years, the faculty in your academic program and your university

developed an implicit understanding of what is expected in the process of

completing a dissertation. These faculty are the ones who will, in the main,

become members of your dissertation committee.

In most instances, faculty have the choice to accept or decline the

invitation to serve on a doctoral committee. (In some institutions, the chair is

appointed without consulting the student. If this is the practice in your

institution, you may proceed to the next chapter where we consider effective

procedures for working with your committee.) It is not unusual to see the

same names on multiple dissertation committees. Faculty with similar

expertise and expectations are happy to sponsor students who are working

with their colleagues. Others, impressed with the student’s work in different

courses, seek to work with the student on the dissertation. Some of the

reasons faculty choose to work on dissertation committees include:

• to influence the future directions of their discipline;

• to help students get done with their doctoral programs;

• to be surrounded by the “youth” of the academic world;

• to obtain status by working with the most advanced students in the

department; and/or

• to fulfill university responsibilities.

You select your committee from among those in your department and related

departments, those whose courses you’ve taken, and those whose work bears

on the focus of your dissertation. Some of these faculty may be members of

other programs or other schools within your university. In rare cases, experts

from beyond the university are chosen. Successful committees have

predictable characteristics which you may want to consider. For example,

their members are:

• cooperative and respectful of each other;

• knowledgeable in the discipline;

• familiar with the procedures of the university;

• effective at reflecting on student work and promoting student learning;

• stable, responsible professionals, reasonably responsive to student needs; and

• supportive of student progress, returning work in a timely manner.

You probably have several choices of faculty from your program who may

be appropriate. But some are likely to be easier for you to talk to. Some are

eager to work with you. You will need to work through these choices,

focusing on which people are going to help *you* to get done!

At times, students have difficulty finding any faculty who are willing to

work with them. This might be a reflection of tension in the academy. It may

indicate different priorities than your own. It may suggest that the faculty

think you will be difficult to work with or will require inordinate attention

and assistance or the program may be in the process of being phased out.

You have a few choices to consider at this juncture:

• Request assistance from your department chair.

• Request assistance from the Dean of Students or the Director of Graduate

Studies.

• Revise your research focus.

• Leave the program.

Each person has a unique experience. These variations in experience are

sometimes considered part of the “dance” which is choreographed as you

work your way through to your dissertation and beyond. Some say this is

just like life in general. There are multiple paths we may each travel, different

dances we may each prefer.

**Characteristics to Consider in Selecting your Committee Chair**

David Brown, in an interview about his experiences writing an undergraduate

thesis, noted:

A good thesis advisor should be knowledgeable about your subject and

should be familiar with what your particular department expects. …

However, it is even more important that your advisor is willing to spend

hours helping you improve your thesis and is someone with whom you can establish a good rapport. …Enduring the criticism of an advisor with

whom you do not get along well is likely to breed resentment.

(Brown, 1997, p. 2)

Rosemary Bolig offers additional advice:

Each student will need the kind of committee that can demand of her the

quality of work she is capable of producing. Each student will also need

a committee that can be firm and supportive and give her the kind of

encouragement often needed in this final stage of the doctoral experience.

(Bolig, 1982, p. 24)

Professors are human beings, representing the same range of good and bad

players as is evident in all other settings, including politics, medicine, law, and

commerce. Some seek to work with students with limited confidence, keeping

them dependent. Others seek to empower their students, sharing experiences

and nurturing their growing understanding of the academic world along with

their independence as researchers and academics. Some of these personal traits

may be attributed to the professor’s tenure status at the university.

Untenured faculty tend to be less sure of their own longevity at the

institution, and may prefer to restrict the number of graduates who may

eventually compete with them for posts. This stance might be evidenced in

their delaying student progress and discouraging student creativity. Others,

looking to retirement soon, may be reluctant to take on new students,

concerned that they will retire prior to the students’ completion of their

dissertations. Others may prefer to dedicate their time to their own research,

choosing to work only with students who either are willing to work on the

professor’s research, or need no assistance. And so the dance of selecting a

chair and a dissertation committee is far from easy for the doctoral student.

The more information you have about the individual faculty, the easier it will

be for you to make a decision about which individuals may both potentially

agree to work with you and help you to achieve your goals.

Some additional criteria to consider in selecting your chair:

• Interaction style which is compatible with your own. Some may prefer to

provide feedback on written drafts, with little dialog. Others may choose to

read and evaluate text collaboratively. Some feedback may be vague (e.g.

“Redo this section”), while others may provide detailed comments (e.g.

“You need to identify the three main issues and then critique them in light

of the other theories you have discussed”). Some may ask questions without

offering any assistance. Others may give explicit assignments with

guidelines for completion, while others may say, “Get started and let me

know how you’re doing.” Some may wish to see you weekly while others

may be happy only when responding to polished text.

• Knowledge of the discipline of your dissertation. If your chair shares your

strong interest in your topic, she or he will be in a position to apprise you of unpublished work in progress, as well as important published resources.

You will need to respect the knowledge of your chair, who is likely to

criticize your work, requiring you to revise texts, for example. You will

need to value and feel comfortable with the way in which feedback and

criticism are provided.

• Time to work with you as you progress. Since faculty are fairly independent

in scheduling appointments, you will need to identify faculty who will make

time in their schedules to work with you. A related element is the university

status of the faculty. Whereas untenured faculty contracts may not be renewed,

tenured faculty are likely to be more stable. Faculty who leave one institution

frequently elect to continue working with their doctoral students, but these

arrangements get to be more complex. Sabbatical leaves also potentially

interrupt progress. You will need to consider the relative stability and

accessibility of faculty along with your own time constraints and projections.

• Success at bringing students to graduation. Since you are concerned with

completing your degree, you will want to work with someone who has a

fairly consistent record of success with students finishing their

dissertations. Some students seek to be connected with the “stars” in the

department, with people who are well-known internationally. Star-status,

however, may contribute to students’ difficulty in meeting “standards,” or

in finding time to meet with them when they are on the conference circuit.

On the other hand, their national status might facilitate inclusion at

prestigious professional conferences.

• Nurturing students in the academic tradition. The professor must be

comfortable in initially leading, but eventually freeing, students to become

independent researchers. At first, the student is dependent on the chair and

the committee, but eventually the student should be perceived as an expert

and a colleague. If the professor is a confidence-booster for the student,

the student may find it easier to progress.

• Personal preference. Some students prefer to work with female faculty,

while others prefer to work with male faculty. Some prefer older people,

while others younger.

It is unlikely that you will find all the characteristics of the perfect mentor in

one person. You will need to identify the one or two characteristics that you

consider to be essential for the person who will guide your apprenticeship. It

is likely that other members of your committee will be able to offer different

strengths which “round out” your committee. You certainly want your

committee to be supportive of your progress.

**Selecting the Chair of Your Dissertation Committee**

Each student selects the dissertation chair. You will discover a subtle process

in which faculty implicitly or explicitly make known an interest in working

with you. As a way of indicating interest in serving as the chair of your committee, a faculty member may inquire who your dissertation chair is. If

you respond that you do not have one yet, they may volunteer to fill that

void. If you indicate that you are not sure what your topic is yet, they may

seek to engage you in conversation to guide that selection.

The fact that a faculty member has engaged you in this discussion suggests

a respect for the quality of your academic work. If no one has approached

you, however, that is not a reason to be depressed. Perhaps they are unaware

of how far you have progressed in your program, or perhaps they think you

have already selected your chair. You may need to initiate the conversation

and the process. (If a faculty member approaches you, you need not think

that person is your only opportunity. Try to be in charge of this process

without conveying a sense of arrogance. You may talk with many faculty,

letting each know you are *exploring* topics, gathering information before

deciding on your committee at this moment.)

Students sometimes approach a faculty member. They may ask the

professor if she or he has time to take on another doctoral student. It is useful

to have a draft of an idea, or to request time to talk about possible areas of

research. It is important to let the professor know where you are in the

process of working on your dissertation.

You probably do not want to ask a professor blithely to accept such a

crucial role in your doctoral program without knowing more about how

successfully the two of you can work together. So you might be wise to

indicate that you are in the process of thinking about a topic and want

additional insights. Along with sharing perspectives on your proposed

research problem, you will get a sense of how you may work with this

individual on a long-term basis. Along with your personal interactions with

different professors, use as much “insider information” as you can: ask other

doctoral students about their experiences and knowledge of different people;

and read dissertations they have sponsored. Remember to access multiple data

sources, not limiting yourself to one perspective. It is reassuring to have

confirming information on the inferences you are drawing from your

inquiries. (Never under-estimate the power of the university gossip mill. Get

information you can trust.)

Faculty may make themselves hard to find to avoid giving an explicit “turn

down.” Given the voluntary nature of chairing a dissertation committee, faculty

typically elect to work with the candidates they perceive to be the strongest

academically and the easiest to work with. Students who demonstrate these

characteristics in their coursework are frequently sought after by faculty.

In the process of considering your options from among your program

faculty, you will want to identify as clearly as you can what your hopes are

in working with a faculty member as the chair of your dissertation committee.

Some issues you might consider include:

• Do you have confidence that Professor X can help/guide you?

• Are you ready to accept direction and criticism from Professor X?

• Are you willing to adapt to Professor X’s interaction style?

You need to identify the best match between your learning style and the faculty

who are available to work with you. Be open-minded in your exploration.

Sometimes faculty are different in one-to-one relationships than they are in

lectures or seminar classes. In your exploration you may find a professor working

on a project that interests you. This might be a combination made in heaven.

Consider it carefully. For each student the response is probably different. (Some

like to be told exactly what to do, while others want to learn how to think on

their own.) Selecting your committee is not easy but it is essential for you to

progress. Do not expect perfection. There probably is no such thing as a perfect

committee—or a perfect doctoral student for that matter!

In this process of selecting the members of your committee you want to be

cautious of offending others in the department, those who will be your professional

colleagues once you graduate and/or those who may ultimately participate in the

process of evaluating your dissertation. You never know which committee members

will need to be replaced, which colleagues will participate in your oral defense as

“outside readers,” or which will be in positions to derail your progress.

You want to keep everyone’s friendship and respect. This requires very

careful planning. Keep your eye on your goal and avoid participation in any

intrigues or gossip which may place you in one political camp or another.

(Although you may have been oblivious to the political nature of the

academic world as you work with them in a group, you are likely to become

increasingly cognizant of the internal frictions and even wars which prevail

in most departments. Several fascinating books on this topic are included in

Appendix C.) As a doctoral student you are well advised to remove yourself

from internal political discussions. Make it very clear to yourself and the

faculty in your department that you do not want to become involved. You

want to get *done*! You have an agenda that keeps you very busy, and there’s

no time in your calendar for gossiping or for politics.

While it will be inevitable that some faculty might feel rejected because

you have not asked them to chair your committee, you may still maintain a

professional relationship, inquiring about their work and acknowledging how

their courses helped in your dissertation work. At all times convey a sense of

respect for all, while progressing on your own work. Expect to have tense

times, but also expect to find ways to work through these. Most people have.

**Selecting the Readers on Your Doctoral Committee**

The readers on your committee work with your chair to promote your

progress. They may work with you at other times than your chair, drawing

on different areas of strength. Some may only read drafts which have been

approved by your chair. They may offer recommendations which need to be

considered in collaboration with your chair. Your chair is the leader in this

process, so make sure you follow your chair’s advice on how to proceed at

all times. Ultimately, your readers and your chair must approve your

dissertation proposal, and eventually your dissertation.

readers. You will want faculty who can work well together, and your chair

will be in the best position to determine these collegial relationships. You may

offer some suggestions, but you should allow your chair to guide you in this

decision. The committee will stay with you, guiding your apprenticeship. In

some institutions this committee evolves during the writing of the proposal

as the needed expertise becomes evident. In other institutions, the committee

may grow from the time of the proposal to the completed dissertation. Find

out what the process is at your university.

You will talk with the members of your committee as you develop your

dissertation proposal, as you conduct your research, and as you write your

dissertation. We will address these relationships in the next chapter.