**7 Roles and Responsibilities of Dissertation
 Committees**

Be determined. Set your goal. Save the money (at least as much as you can); get a supportive mentor who is knowledgeable with your topic. Go for it.

Finish. Don’t stay ABD.

I was wiser than I thought.

The formal establishment of your committee usually happens simultaneously with the university’s official approval of your proposed dissertation research.

(This document is typically called your “dissertation proposal.”) In the time between completing your courses and having an approved dissertation proposal you will work with faculty who are likely to become the officially designated committee. You may consider them your “unofficial” or your “proposed” committee for the time being. But they are not yet your official committee. There are no temporary titles which are generally used around the university, so we will use the terms “chair” and “reader,” understanding that these are potential roles and titles which may change in the process of developing your dissertation proposal.

During the time when you are drafting your dissertation proposal you may consult with a large number of professors. This process is both a testing ground for your ability to work well as a committee and the beginning of the road to writing your dissertation. Once the chair and readers have agreed that your dissertation proposal is done, they initiate a process within the university, simultaneously accomplishing two important official steps:

• appointing your dissertation committee; and

• accepting your dissertation proposal.

Because the writing of the dissertation proposal includes the development and refinement of the research focus, there are likely to be revisions in your thinking and in the thinking of the faculty who are considering working with you on your dissertation. You are also likely to find that some faculty, who might have the expertise, do not make time to talk with you. Simultaneously you will find others who are both more responsive and have the expertise to contribute to your proposal. The proposal writing time, then, is a time for the student to consult with faculty as potential committee members, and for the faculty to consider the best use of their collective and individual time. When your dissertation proposal is accepted, your committee is officially designated. The proposed faculty committee both supports your proposal for approval and advances the approval of their membership on your dissertation committee.

**University Concerns**

The university is concerned that the faculty who are assigned to a specific committee represent the appropriate areas of expertise needed to conduct the research described in the proposal. In many respects, the university is serving in the role typically taken by funding authorities when deciding whether to support one project over another. Both sponsoring groups have a responsibility to safeguard the scholarly standards of the academic community, approving the intellectual rigor of the committee to supervise the conduct of the research. The committee has a clear charge: to conduct a specific research project, one which utilizes the faculty’s established expertise. The committee and the project are thus carefully crafted to be interdependent. The university is delegating responsibility for the scholarly integrity of the project to specific faculty, those the university recognizes as having the appropriate expertise.

**The University’s Commitment to your Dissertation Work**

When you form your dissertation committee, *you* are tacitly committing to writing your dissertation and to completing your doctoral work. And this is a two-way relationship. The establishment of a dissertation committee under the aegis of the university marks an official contract between the doctoral student and the university, identifying specific faculty who will invest their expertise and time in your apprenticeship. This is a major step in your progress toward your doctoral degree. It does not happen casually. The university is virtually entering into a legal contract, naming you as the doctoral student/researcher, working with specific faculty to complete a specific project. The university agrees to support your academic work on this project by delegating this responsibility to specific faculty. In some cases the university will restrict your discussion of your project to within the university until it is completely approved by the university (after doctoral orals). This control of information is intended to protect the student and the university while your research is in progress.

Committee members may change, but not easily.1 The topic of your dissertation may change, but not easily.2 This contract is taken seriously by the university and the student. It is the committee’s responsibility to maintain the standards of the university when directing your work on your dissertation. It is your responsibility to conduct the proposed research as outlined in the proposal.

 During the time when you are “working on your dissertation” you will be moving through many stages in the process of completing your doctoral program. Some of the activities you will engage in during the time labeled “working on my dissertation” include: creating your committee, writing your dissertation proposal, conducting your dissertation research, and preparing for your dissertation orals. The process involves a gradual transformation from apprentice to experienced, independent researcher.

 Thinking of your work on your dissertation as similar to an independent study project rather than any other academic activity will be useful. When enrolled in an independent study course, for example, the student is usually responsible for initiating the process, obtaining feedback on work completed, and seeking additional direction in continuing the project. When you are enrolled in an independent study course, you create your own schedule and work space. Although you may feel isolated, you are neither totally alone nor independent. There is a faculty member who is guiding your work. Additionally, you are constantly held to explicit or tacit university standards. It is perhaps useful to consider independent study experiences as transitions or bridges to the doctoral committee structure. Whether working on an independent course or on your dissertation, you are required to initiate the project and to respond to professors’ guidance and directives.

 The traditional stages in your doctoral program from admission to graduation, with a note of the typical length of time dedicated to each stage, are noted in Table 7.1. Typically, the stages numbered 5–8 are considered times when you are “working on your dissertation.” All the time you are working on your dissertation you are working with your committee.

 When working on your dissertation, your community changes from collaborating with student-colleagues on the same project in a course to working individually with a faculty committee on a unique project. Although you and the faculty are “working together” on your dissertation, the work that each person does is specialized. The roles of the faculty in this project are to support, facilitate, direct, and evaluate your learning, whereas the student’s role is to learn, research, speculate, and write. And there is a major transition during the process wherein the student takes on increasing responsibility for decision-making as the professor(s) relinquish control, enabling the student to become an independent researcher.

 The faculty’s role changes from being knowledgeable about all aspects of your research to being most knowledgeable about university practice, while the doctoral student changes from a neophyte to an experienced researcher, becoming an expert in one research project. This gradual transition is represented in Figure 7.1. The transformation typically results in the creation of a collaborative team with each member sharing different expertise—the setting for the conversation at the oral defense. Clearly this transition takes time, a period during which you will converse extensively with your committee.

Table 7.1 *The academic stages in the doctoral process*



**Starting to Work with Your Committee**

 *The relationship between you and your dissertation committee is perhaps the most significant factor in your completion of the doctoral degree.* It is in your best interest to find ways to make this relationship harmonious and productive.

 The committee organization requires you to utilize a different set of inter

action skills than you used when taking courses. The faculty probably have a history of collaborating in different ways. Although you may have worked with each professor productively, you probably worked with each individually, or only as a member of a whole class. Now that you are an official group, your relationship with each of the professors changes, as do their relationships with you.

Figure 7.1 *From dissertation proposal to dissertation: transition in responsibility and expertise*

**

 Early on it is important to understand the rules for working collaboratively and dialogically. Although it would be idealistic to create an equal relationship, reality reveals that this is not the case. The student usually conforms to the styles of the professors. While there may be some negotiation of procedures for progressing, the professors usually set the rules. And each professor has idiosyncrasies which doctoral students eventually learn to accommodate, or they elect to work with other faculty.

***Working with Your Chair***

 You start with the professor whom you’ve identified as most likely to be able to help you to complete this project. This professor may prefer you to focus your research questions and write some rationale for your study before asking other faculty to consider serving as readers on your committee. You will write drafts of what might become Chapter 1 of your proposal, considering such issues as how your study will add to current knowledge in your discipline or how it will enlighten some conflicts in the field. The writing that you are being asked to do requires you to focus on a highly targeted issue.

 You now need to engage in an in-depth study to determine what is already known, so that your research is not “reinventing the wheel.” Your research must build on what has preceded you. The only way you are in a position to advance that issue authoritatively is by knowing the “literature” of your field.

 Thus, the request for some written text will require extensive reading along with documentation of your understanding. Your writing will accomplish four essential processes:

• You will acquire a depth and breadth of knowledge in your chosen field.

• You will note similarities and contradictions among the theories you learned in separate courses, as you develop your persuasive argument for conducting your planned research.

• You will become aware of the issues which are clear to you and those which are still hazy as you seek to write cohesive drafts of text for your chair.

• You will receive evaluation and feedback on the comprehensiveness of your thinking and the clarity of your writing from the drafts you present. There are likely to be multiple drafts of this document, with each draft reflecting a refined and intensified understanding of important issues.

 While you are writing these drafts, you are also learning the genre of dissertation writing as it is acceptable at your university or as it conforms to the style of writing acceptable in professional publications in your discipline. Frequently students find they need to learn a new writing style. As you read widely in your field, you are becoming immersed in the writing style(s) as well as the concepts. Your writing and conversations with student-colleagues and faculty about your readings will promote your developing proficiency in writing academic discourse.

 Thus, although the request that you “write up your research question” may sound simple, it is really quite demanding. Working with your chair, you will learn how to move through this process. With a clear focus, expansive knowledge, and time devoted to your project, you are likely to move through this process very rapidly.

 Your chair will probably want you to defer talking with other potential committee members until you have a text that is highly focused, reflects a significant understanding of complex issues, and accommodates the institution’s format requirements. You will eventually create a fairly polished text which your chair will accept. This process becomes an initiation into what will be expected of you.

 Many students find it simplifies matters to work through the specific research focus with just one professor, and then add perspectives to the discussion once the topic is identified. With a clearly written document in hand, you are prepared to visit with potential committee members. Faculty make judgments about student work from these drafts. Your written drafts and your personal presentation will offer clues about your enthusiasm for the project and your proficiency, for example in writing, following directions, articulating issues and conceptualizing. These characteristics will contribute to faculty members’ decisions to serve on your committee. Expect that your readers will offer suggestions which are likely to enhance your study, necessitating additional revisions of your proposal. *Look on all of your work as a work in progress, thereby reducing your anxiety level of seeking a perfect document as a first draft.*

 Early on you may initiate conversations with your chair about who might be good readers, when you should talk with them, and what you might bring with you. Once your chair gives the “go ahead,” you will need to make an appointment with the professor(s), indicating the intent of your visit. You may be definitive: “I’m hoping you will agree to be on my committee and I have some text I’d like you to read.” On the other hand, you may be more circumspect, waiting to see what a professor’s reaction is to your ideas, or the way in which you are treated before making any formal request. It is difficult, but not impossible to rescind an invitation to be on your committee.

Ask advice from your chair and from student-colleagues who may have experiences to share with you.

***Working with your Readers***

 The readers on your committee support and supplement the directions and guidance offered by the chair of your committee. They are likely to have different viewpoints and perspectives from your chair. When there are conflicting opinions among the members of the committee, it is useful to have three-way or four-way conversations. Traditionally, the chair negotiates differences among the faculty, with the student participating in this process, offering theories and practice which guide the decisions. Make note of the questions and issues addressed in these meetings, as they are likely to recur in other settings, such as at your oral defense. Seek advice from your chair concerning when to talk with the readers. Some chairs like to limit your interaction with the readers while others prefer that you work as much as possible with the readers. Some readers will only read text that has been approved by the chair and will only meet with you once your chair has approved a significant part of your proposal or your dissertation.

In the process of working with all these faculty members you have access to a rich treasure trove of academic expertise. Try to learn as much as possible from these professors during this time. Ask them about conferences you might attend and publications which might be of value to you. From an academic perspective, this is a utopian experience since you have the assistance of a group of academics pooling their accumulated expertise to promote the success of *your* project. Enjoy it!

By working continuously on your research and responding to the recommendations of your committee, you will find enthusiastic support and encouragement. The committee’s patience with your progress may be short-lived if you absent yourself for extended time periods and/or repeatedly offer excuses for not progressing. Students with significant personal crises reported that by attending to their dissertations, they were able to see progress in at least this aspect of their lives. Try to get done with your dissertation as rapidly as possible.

Your meetings with your committee are academic conversations, talking about ideas and processes. Be ready to explain your thinking based on your interpretation of published materials and expect to listen to other perspectives. Ultimately, it is important that you provide expansive explanations of the decisions you made in each aspect of your study, while listening to and considering alternative viewpoints. Your opinion should derive from a comprehensive understanding of the literature and the historical evolution of your academic discipline. Refer to specific sources in your explanations. Your progress from a doctoral student to a student “ready for orals” will be marked by your growing proficiencies in these types of interaction.

***Learning What to Expect from your Chair and Readers***

There are several ways to find out your committee’s expectations. For example:

• Ask each committee member.

• Ask students who are currently working with one or more of the professors

on your committee.

• Review dissertations completed during the past five years with one or more of the professors on your committee.

You are encouraged to obtain multiple responses. By accessing several perspectives you increase the quantity of ideas to consider while potentially corroborating the information, insights, and perspectives from these different sources.

**Initial, general questions for the committee**

*•* How do you usually work with your doctoral students?

*•* What do you think are my responsibilities?

*•* In what ways can I expect that you will help me?

*•* Will you give me assignments each week?

*•* Are there other students who are working with you on a similar topic, whom I might work with?

*•* Do you have a research group that meets periodically to talk about projects?

*•* Do you have preferences for one research methodology, one theory, or one topic over others? Why do you prefer these?

*•* Is there a way in which I might work on one of your research projects for my dissertation?

*•* Will we be able to meet during the summer and during semester breaks?

*•* Will you meet with me if I have nothing written?

*•* How will I get feedback?

*•* What progress do I need to make each semester?

*•* What happens if I don’t finish in two years?

*•* How do I know if I am making good progress?

*•* Can you provide me with guidelines for how long this will take based on your experiences with other doctoral students?

*•* Can we establish a schedule to organize my work?

*•* Who has to evaluate my work?

*•* What are the characteristics of an acceptable dissertation proposal?

*•* What problems can I expect to encounter?

 There are questions which you might prepare to pose to your potential dissertation chair and readers. These are organized into two groups: initial, general questions, and those with a more specific focus, addressing issues which evolve once you’ve started working together.

Specific questions for your committee

*•* What do you think I should do next?

*•* Do I need to summarize in writing all that I have done during the time between our meetings?

*•* When do I actually start writing my dissertation?

*•* Where might I find dissertation proposals to read?

*•* Where might I find dissertations to read?

*•* Which dissertations do you think would be useful for me to read?

What should I particularly look for in these dissertations?

*•* Is there a predetermined, specific format that I need to use when I write my proposal or my dissertation? Where do I find out what that is? How will you help me to learn and follow this format?

*•* How “polished” must the text be that I give you to read?

*•* May I leave materials for you to read in your office mail box?

*•* Should I e-mail you whenever I have a question?

*•* What are acceptable times to phone you? (Get all available phone numbers and beepers, if offered.)

*•* How frequently can I expect to get feedback?

The more information you have at the outset, the more you can prepare for your responsibilities, and the less likely it is that you will encounter conflicts between your expectations and reality. Once you’ve started working, there are additional questions you may want to pose.

 Keep your committee informed of your activities. Let them know if your life is changing in ways which may impact on your dissertation writing; for example, perhaps you need to take on another job for financial reasons, you are looking for a new position, or you are getting married. Professors like to know that you are a serious student, cognizant of your commitment to doing your dissertation. If you absent yourself from the academic community without explaining your new pressures, they may take you and your work less seriously, and neglect to mention texts or conferences which may be useful to you, or to encourage you to finish.

 While you are informing your committee of changes in your priorities, they, too, might be experiencing major events in their lives. You may find that changes need to be made in your committee due to death or illness, for example. These always complicate and lengthen the process. At times the student needs to start all over again, with a totally new focus. The more rapidly you progress, the less likely these changes will occur.

 Expect at least one crisis. For each student the crisis will be different, and for each it will be generated from a different source. But expect that there will be at least one curve ball at some time. The unexpected event might come in the decision of one of your readers to relocate. It might be that there is a fire in your office where you keep all of your dissertation materials. It might be that the dissertation proposal which your committee accepts gets questioned by some other approving group. It might be that the people who agreed to serve as your “subjects” or participants have a change of heart. It might be that your spouse decides to end your marriage. It is unlikely that all of these things will happen to any one person, but all of these have happened to people and most have continued to complete their degrees. They persevered tenaciously. It will not be easy. You can only be assured that it will be memorable! And almost to a person, doctoral recipients are happy that they endured the process.

**Working with Your Committee**

 As you work with your committee, you will become increasingly responsible for making decisions. Initially the faculty will guide you, offering advice about the form and content of each part of the dissertation proposal and dissertation.

 They will expect you to follow this advice, as well as take on responsibility for exploring resources beyond what they suggest. You need to keep them posted on your journey, explaining how your thinking about your topic is evolving, what sources are contributing to this development, and what new questions are emerging. The entire research process results in an increasing number of questions, a new sense of complexities and new insights.

 The balance of responsibility and of knowledge gradually changes during the time when you are working on your dissertation as presented graphically in Figure 7.1. Although the faculty will provide general guidelines, you will craft a unique proposal which responds to the specific research question you have chosen and which draws on your unique strengths and experiences.

 When you meet with faculty, they are likely to engage in conversations about your work, helping you to think more deeply about your topic, offering you a forum for trying out some of the new language which you are learning, while you are informing them of your progress. In your conversations they will help you to identify gaps and inconsistencies in your thinking, an essential element in promoting your work. These conversations are probably valued as much by the faculty as by the student since faculty typically seek opportunities for scholarly talk. You can expect that your committee is likely to pose numerous questions. Typical questions are listed in the box below. You might find it useful to consider your answers to these questions as you are writing and revising your proposal.

 Use this time to practice expansive explanations of your thinking while evaluating your consistency and your depth of understanding. When noting weaknesses, you will want to enrich your knowledge in advance of your committee’s identification of a gap in your knowledge. While it is impossible for anyone to know “everything,” there are key issues which you should be able to explain. You also should be able to say that you do not know and that you will research the issue. Any area of ignorance relevant to your study should be addressed in the process of doing your dissertation.

Expect these conversations with your professors to be opportunities for you to learn from them while you demonstrate your expanding understanding of Questions faculty are likely to ask you the discipline and of your specific research focus. These interactions are a prelude to the formal conversation which will occur at your oral examination or oral defense.

**Questions faculty are likely to ask you**

*•* Why do you want to do this research?

*•* How did you pick this topic?

*•* How are you doing with your literature search?

*•* What are your hunches about what your findings may reveal?

*•* What are your reasons for choosing this strategy?

*•* How is your study likely to contribute to our knowledge?

*•* What other procedures might you consider?

*•* What are the competing theories which are being addressed in your study?

*•* What is the basic “argument” which you are addressing in your study? How well are you addressing this issue?

*•* What are you going to do next and why?

*•* What problems are you finding? How are you handling them?

*•* What criteria will you use in selecting your sample?

*•* What theories (implicitly or explicitly) are contributing to the design of your study?

*•* Can you document the historical evolution of this theory?

*•* What confidence do you have that your analysis is comprehensive?

*•* How will the findings of your study influence our knowledge and/ or practice?

**The Complexities of the Committee’s Power**

The faculty are the ones who typically initiate the necessary approvals for your proposal and eventually for your dissertation. This imbalance of power prevails throughout the process. And inequalities in power are played out in different ways with each person having a unique experience. Relationships between students and faculty are complicated. There are numerous reasons for this:

• The university establishes a hierarchical structure with the faculty having the
 authority (read that as power) to recommend students for graduation, for
 example. Thus, students are dependent on faculty in this relationship.

• Ultimately, the students in a doctoral program become colleagues of the
 faculty, frequently teaching on the staff of the university or other local
 institutions. Some faculty resist this transition. They believe that “once a
 student, always a student.” For others, this is an important phase which they
 consciously and overtly support, seeking to participate in the apprenticeship
 of their future colleagues.

• Some professors establish a “tough love” stance wherein they believe their
 responsibility is to help the student, but the student must both ask for help
 and show that she or he has independently worked at trying to resolve the
 issue.

• Some professors prefer to have as little as possible to do with the daily
 development of the dissertation, seeing it only when the student is convinced
 she or he has finished with it. Others want to hear frequent updates on progress
 and to participate, for example, in the data analysis process.

The committee’s intent and concerns at times are perceived as abusive. There are numerous contexts in which their influence is felt. Harvard University was catapulted into the limelight recently when one of their doctoral students committed suicide. In a letter left for his advisor, Jason Altom referred to his advisor’s comment that his project had “no intellectual contribution” (Schneider, 1998, p. A12). Schneider, a reporter, noted:

More than most students…Mr. Altom feared and revered his adviser. … “People have a perception that Corey [the advisor] can make or break your career.” That fear is not unfounded. …Good jobs, prestigious grants, even tenure depend on strong letters of recommendation. …As an aftermath to this student’s suicide, the department has established a new plan intended to avoid the problem of isolation and of control over a student’s future. (Schneider, 1998, pp. A12–14)

The faculty’s power is clearly a concern in the academic world. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Leatherman (1997) notes the University of Pennsylvania “has a strict rule of thumb: ‘you do not ask your students to work for you on activities that serve you personally but are not affiliated with academic work’” (p. A11). There is an additional admonition from Elizabeth Fox-Genovese who notes that the employment of graduate students by professors is “an extremely complicated relationship, and there are good reasons to avoid it” (p. A11).

 A related matter involves publishing student work. Some professors will only mentor on the condition that the student writes an article on the dissertation with the professor’s name listed as first author. Some students look on this as advantageous, jump-starting their publishing record, acknowledging the fact that their professor’s name on the article is likely to bring more acclaim than their own. Some faculty consider this “the least” that the student can do to reciprocate for all the time they will devote to the project. Other faculty are appalled at this tradition.

 In some rare cases, students have a sense that faculty have actually appropriated their work without giving credit to the student for doing the work. According to the *New York Times* of September 24, 1997, “they seldom take legal action because they fear jeopardizing their degree or their references” (p. A25). While these occurrences are rare, they do happen. You need to prepare to deal with these situations if you are confronted with such dilemmas. Institutions create bureaucratic procedures for addressing issues such as harassment. You should become aware of the policies that prevail at your university. They are likely to be published in handbooks and in *Bulletins* as well as being posted conspicuously on university bulletin boards. In case there are no such precautions available bureaucratically within the university, you may find support in your affiliations with students and other faculty. The informal networks you create may guard you against these potential dilemmas while providing essential support and guidance when needed.

**Notes**

**1** Changes in committees may occur when faculty take sabbatical leave, leave the university, retire from the university, move to another geographic area, become incapacitated, or die. Frequently committee members remain in place, regardless of their changed status with the university, but sometimes this is not possible. Whenever there are changes in a committee, there is a chance that there will be a change in the expectations of the members, or a change in the enthusiasm and support for your project. These changes have been known to cause students to have to start all over again, getting a new topic and a new committee. This is particularly true if there is a change in the chair.

Since you cannot predict these eventualities, you need to do all in your power to try to avoid these events. Working rapidly is one strategy. Try to have “all your ducks in order” so that once you start working on your dissertation you will be able to devote significant energy to completing it in a brief time period. Also, try to monitor what is happening in your committee’s lives so that you are not surprised by the changes. An additional strategy is to keep up your positive relationships with all the faculty in your program so that if you need to substitute one faculty for another, you will not be “iced out.”

**2** The dissertation proposal is a contract between you and the university to accomplish one project. Depending on the specificity required in your dissertation, you may have some “wiggle room,” but usually the dissertation proposal identifies a very specific focus which must be consistent with your dissertation. An alternative strategy is to modify the dissertation proposal as your dissertation evolves, and then seek approval for the modified proposal prior to seeking approval of the dissertation. Most institutions are still working from a hypothesis-testing perspective where more definitive proposals are appropriate. As hypothesis-generating and ethnographic proposals are developed, more open-ended expectations will prevail, reducing the need to modify a proposal.