

3

Setting Your Path



Begin With Your Dissertation in Mind

Daniel P. Corts
Augustana College

Holly E. Tatum
Randolph College

Before you even begin graduate school, you are faced with some serious decisions: Where do I apply? What type of degree is right for me? How do I pay for it all? For some of these decisions, you may benefit from thoughtful undergraduate advisors, or perhaps friends and family have graduate school experiences that can guide you. Ultimately, however, you will find yourself in graduate school and you are going to have to make some tough decisions: decisions about classes to take, which research projects to work on, what graduate faculty to work for and who to avoid. Unless your undergraduate advisor just left the very same graduate school you are now enrolled in, you have to come up with the answers largely by yourself.

Research suggests that the most successful students are the ones that have a sense of direction and those who can find their own path from start to finish (Gardner, 2009). The goal of this chapter is to give a single piece of advice: When in doubt, keep your dissertation in mind. This works because the dissertation is the end point of your graduate training, so it can help you make more informed decisions—and fewer wrong turns—along the way.

The advice you will find in this chapter comes from two main sources. First, we have asked a number of Ph.D.s—all working in academia—to respond to the title of this chapter. We asked, “What does ‘Begin with your dissertation in mind’ mean to you?” The answers actually provide the structure for the chapter, and they have

been paraphrased in the text. In addition, there is a small but important social science literature on the graduate school experience relating to the dissertation. We have culled what we find most useful from this literature to flesh out what we have learned from the narratives.

When and Where the Dissertation Can Guide You

A typical graduate program includes the following requirements: coursework for the first 2 or possibly 3 years, a research or clinical practicum, a predissertation project or master's thesis (if you do not already have a master's degree), comprehensive exams or an integrative paper, a dissertation proposal, and final defense. The dissertation process can take up to 2 or sometimes 3 years. It requires that you set up a dissertation committee including your major advisor, several other faculty in your department, and often one person outside your department. In addition, you may also be assigned a teaching or research assistantship as part of your financial aid package. A Ph.D. program in clinical or counseling psychology also requires an additional year-long predoctoral internship. This is all in addition to many of the weekly activities of a graduate student described in Chapter 2—lab meetings, departmental colloquia, supervising undergraduate research assistants, data collection, and possibly even teaching your own course.

Keeping the dissertation in mind can guide many of the early decisions you are required to make, such as course selection, choosing an advisor, and even deciding which research projects to work on. But why the dissertation? Hypothetically, one could just as easily set sights on the oral exams, the comprehensive finals, or the total credit hours required and use any of these as an endpoint. So why the dissertation and not comprehensives? Estimates suggest that 50% of those who enter doctoral programs do not complete their degrees (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004), nor do 15 to 25% of those who make it to candidacy (see Lovitts, 2008). Failure to complete the degree is rarely a problem of completing classes; the problem is completing the dissertation.

Selecting Courses

Graduate school course selections are guided by multiple sources of influence. Some classes are rather obvious—they are assigned to you by virtue of the program you have entered. Other classes are purely elective, meaning you get to choose whatever interests you. Still others fall in between, as was the case for P.D.'s statistics sequence, which was a requirement, but with several available alternatives. P.D. was interested in completing a dual program in which his psychology dissertation would perform double duty, serving as a master's thesis in the statistics department. Here's how he describes his dilemma:

The first day of orientation, they had us sign up for the first-year sequence of statistics. Everyone had to complete a year of stats, the question was where: Should we take the stats courses offered by the Psychology Department or the Statistics Department? Since I was a psychology student,

it first seemed to make more sense to register for the stats sequence in my home department. However, I was planning on the joint program in statistics and psychology, and this meant using my dissertation in psychology as a master's thesis in stats. This fact made my decision for me because the Statistics Department would only count the Statistics Department's first-year sequence towards the joint degree.

—P.D.

So in this case, knowing something about his dissertation helped P.D. get off on the right track by choosing the appropriate course. Granted, P.D.'s situation was probably rare, and you may not find yourself in the exact same situation. However, you most likely will be required to choose a few elective courses to complete, and you may even need to go beyond the required number of electives. It is these types of courses that are most relevant to our discussion because the dissertation can help you make the decisions.

So just how does one choose courses? If you keep your potential dissertation topics in mind, there are a few suggestions that can help. For starters—and perhaps most obviously—a dissertation topic can lead you to content areas in other departments. If you are a psychologist studying language, check out the graduate courses offered in speech pathology or philosophy. If you are interested in health psychology, explore classes in biology or public health. Work with your advisor to identify some potentially interesting areas, and you are likely to find some fascinating and rewarding classes to take. A less obvious benefit is that the right course selection can lead you to potential dissertation committee members. This was the case for P.D., whose course choice led him to a statistics professor that joined the dissertation committee. These are just a couple of the benefits of choosing courses with the dissertation in mind.

Developing Research Skills

Research and statistics courses should be taken early on in your graduate career, specifically in the first year. The timing, quality, and quantity of research coursework influences dissertation preparation, writing, and completion time (Cuetara & LeCapitaine, 2001). However, a significant proportion of graduate students feel that their coursework did not adequately prepare them for their dissertation (Golde & Dore, 2001). Therefore, developing the necessary skills to complete independent research is an integral part of your graduate training, and it may take place outside of class. In research conducted among counseling psychology programs, those graduate students who had research experience prior to the dissertation reported feeling more prepared to conduct their dissertation research and lower negative affect such as depression and anxiety during the dissertation process (Cuetara & LeCapitaine, 2001). In a longitudinal study of graduate students from different disciplines, participants reported that their research experiences provided the skills and abilities to design, carry out, and write up research for publication (Austin, 2002). If you have not completed a master's thesis prior to entering a Ph.D. program, then you will likely be required to conduct a predissertation project or a master's thesis before beginning your dissertation. Look at this as an opportunity to

practice for a larger and more comprehensive dissertation project. It will also give you experience with your advisor as a research mentor. See Chapter 14 for specific advice about developing your research skills.

To put this advice into context, consider what happened to a friend of ours, S.C., a graduate student who thought he had plenty of research experience. Unfortunately, it did not prepare him for his dissertation project:

I spent most of my first three years working on projects that were tangential to what I had in mind for my dissertation. I thought it was great preparation because I was able to read almost all the relevant literature. I thought I was way ahead of the pack until it came time for my dissertation proposal meeting. I had the research question in mind and a hypothesis to go with it, but I was less certain about the specifics of the methodology and I was totally clueless as to how I would analyze the data. None of the work I had done up to that point had adequately prepared me for my proposal. I wound up falling behind because I had to go back to the literature to learn the methods and statistics before I could finish my proposal. Luckily, it didn't set me too far back, but I do wish I had better prepared myself.

—S.C.

S.C.'s experience illustrates the vital importance of exposure to research prior to finalizing your dissertation topic. Keep in mind that in psychology, graduate students are more likely to receive teaching assistantships than research assistantships (Austin, 2002). Get involved in research projects—you can ask to become involved as soon as you start. If your advisor does not have a current or ongoing project, then ask other graduate students. Join another research lab or research team and offer to help run subjects or code and enter data. Ask to sit in on research or lab meetings. Offer to proofread or edit submissions for conferences or journal publications for your peers or advisor. If there are no projects available, get together with a peer or two and put together your own research project on a topic of interest.

Even if you do not know what your dissertation topic will be, it is important to be prepared for a variety of possible statistical analyses, including learning additional software programs. Because of this, we suggest you go beyond the basic required methods courses and take additional research and/or statistics courses to improve and hone your research skills. Often these courses are offered outside of the psychology department, such as in statistics, sociology, or business.

Finding an Advisor

S.C.'s story brings up an important point—make sure you find an advisor who will prepare you for your dissertation work. It is important to find someone who meets your needs—not only with regard to your area of interest but also your personality and work habits. If you need lots of feedback, make sure that you choose someone who is willing to provide it and is accessible. Sometimes, finding the right

advisor might actually mean changing your advisor. As a graduate student, it can be a stressful experience to decide to leave an advisor. However, as H.T. describes, it may be just the right move to make you successful:

I switched dissertation advisors after completing a Psychometrics class with a professor who was enthusiastic, energetic, and supportive. He had multiple graduate students working with him on various projects and was excited to include me in his research. It was the first time that I felt someone was going to make sure that I finished. He provided the structure and push that I needed to get my work done. We emailed or talked on the phone almost daily during the data collection and analysis phase. Although my topic was not in the original area of psychology I had planned, I am glad to have chosen him as my advisor.

—H.T.

As you can tell from H.T.'s experience, dissertation advisors come in all shapes and sizes, and it might be best to consider your options before committing to one. Having an advisor who is enthusiastic about your project can mean the difference between getting sound, prompt feedback on your progress versus a sluggish or even resistant response from someone who views supervising you as a chore. In fact, in graduate departments with a shorter time to degree and high completion rates, advisor involvement has been identified as a major factor contributing to student success (deValero, 2001). Be sure to read Chapter 20, which provides a more in-depth discussion of choosing and working with a major professor.

Preparing for the Challenges of the Dissertation

We now turn to some of the challenges you will face. Once you start on your dissertation, you will find a whole new collection of obstacles. You will be expected to write like a professional, to persevere through data collection and revisions, and to do so on your own. To help you through this process, we would like to share a bit of research and personal experience with you in this section.

Scholarly writing. Writing in and of itself is typically not taught in graduate school. It is assumed by most graduate faculty that you can both articulate an argument and write in a scholarly manner. Unfortunately, undergraduate students vary in how much they are prepared for graduate work. In fact, graduate students may have little to no experience with scholarly writing before entering graduate school (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). In response to the lack of preparation, faculty are developing writing programs to cultivate these skills before the dissertation work. One such program, the Scholarly Writing Program, included three main areas of focus—content, process, and critiquing (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). The critiquing aspect of the program included feedback from both professors and peers on multiple drafts of a manuscript. Programs such as these may be offered in your department or in another related department. You may also want to explore the types of workshops offered at regional and national conferences—some of which may relate to scholarly writing, such as those focused on getting publications. It may be

beneficial either to seek out specific programs or courses that focus on writing or to engage in some of these activities early in your graduate program. Suggestions for writing experiences include those mentioned earlier—get involved in ongoing research, proofread or edit others' work, and offer to help review submissions for conferences or publication. Any coauthoring experiences you can glean will give you practice in both honing your writing skills and responding to feedback. In addition, when submitting written work in classes, ask for feedback. Your professors may vary on how much they offer, but usually if you ask for additional feedback, you can get it. Ask for clarification or to see examples of what your professor considers good scholarly writing. See Chapter 11 for a more in-depth look at developing your writing skills.

Isolation. Unlike students in the physical and medical sciences who often work in research teams, graduate students in the humanities, social sciences, and psychology tend to work individually with some guidance from their faculty mentors or advisors (Austin, 2002). Because of this, graduate students in psychology may experience more isolation while conducting their dissertation research. Unlike your peers in the biochemistry department, for example, who are working in more structured research labs with other graduate students, you may be the only graduate student working on a research topic or project. Developing strong peer relationships may be integral to your success in graduate school. These relationships will likely form early on when you begin your classes. After your coursework is over, you may be essentially on your own to complete the requirements of the program. Graduate students often rely on the social support from their peers to help deal with challenges in teaching and research, as well as problems that arise while completing the dissertation and comprehensive exams. Because most students are working on their own in the later stages of the program, it is important to create a peer group or cohort that meets on a regular basis to discuss these issues. Not only can you meet to talk and discuss, but you could also meet to work on statistical problems or data analysis, share resources, collaborate on presentations, or brainstorm about research ideas. It is not only important to maintain regular contact with your peers, it is also imperative to keep in close contact with your advisor throughout the problem formulation, proposal, implementation, and writing stages. Be sure to choose an advisor who is accessible and present. Losing contact with your major advisor or leaving to take a job before finishing your dissertation will almost certainly prolong your degree completion. Again, Chapter 20 has excellent suggestions on these issues.

Perseverance. The last and probably the most demanding component of the graduate school experience is the perseverance required to complete what often feels like an overwhelming task. Writing a dissertation requires a level of self-regulation that challenges even the most self-disciplined students. There are not a lot of experiences that can prepare you for this part of the process. However, there are strategies that graduate students can develop and practice early in their training before starting the dissertation.

There will be many projects and papers throughout your graduate coursework. You may be given an assignment on the first day of class that is not due until the end of the semester. You may not be given any structure or guidance on how to complete the task. And, unlike many undergraduate assignments, you cannot pull an all-nighter and succeed. You need to learn how to develop a timeline for the work. Learn to break down larger papers into sections and pace yourself. You may

spend the greatest proportion of your time just collecting the resources needed to complete the project. You may also underestimate the time required to complete the task, especially if it involves collecting data.

This is when it's time to start applying some of that psychological research to yourself. Setting timelines with your advisor is a great way to stay on track. Also, contingency contracting is another way to get others involved in your progress. J.S. came up with a brilliant idea to keep her motivated.

I really wanted to complete my integrative review paper. No one would hold me to a real deadline. So, I took matters into my own hands and decided to give myself a deadline. I wrote a check to an organization that I do not support. I gave the check to my boyfriend and told him to put it in the mail if I was not finished by my self-imposed deadline. As a poor graduate student, this really gave me the motivation to finish it on time.

—J.S.

We are here to tell you that incentives worked for us, and there is research that supports the claim as well (e.g., Garcia, Malott, & Brethower, 1988). It doesn't have to be expensive; for one of us (DPC), a completed dissertation chapter meant a weekend off for a camping trip in the mountains. Incidentally, completed chapters still mean a reward for us.

In summarizing her qualitative work on who is successful in graduate school, Lovitts (2008) surmised that the *distinguished completers*—those students who are able to make the transition to independent research—are described as those who

display intense intellectual curiosity, are willing to work hard, take the initiative, and have the power to persevere in the face of apparent failure. They are motivated by a strong intrinsic interest in their research and are passionately committed to their projects. They also have good advisors and are willing and able to seek out and take advice from them. (p. 320)

Chapter 2 deals in more depth with similar issues.

Choosing a Dissertation Topic

Our advice in this chapter is based on the premise that the dissertation can serve as a decision-making tool. Unfortunately, it overlooks perhaps the biggest decision you will make in graduate school: What will be your dissertation topic? Graduate students often suffer great angst while choosing the perfect subject to study. It is imperative to choose a topic of high personal interest that will support your academic and career goals. You may spend at least 1 to 2 years working on your dissertation, so the topic should sustain your interest and passion over the long, arduous journey. Furthermore, if you are headed to academia, your dissertation may serve as a springboard for an entire research program in your future. In the academic job search, your dissertation topic may define you, and therefore, you should choose carefully and take time to consider both the topic and the advisor who will best serve you.

Reviewing all the topics we have touched on in this chapter, you will see that there are pros and cons to choosing to work on part of your advisor's research as

your dissertation topic. Certainly your advisor can provide resources that will support your research, including funding, equipment, training, research assistants, and laboratory space. You will likely have access to the research tools and methodologies that are being utilized in that line of inquiry. And you will have an advisor who is familiar (if not an expert) with the topic. All of these factors may facilitate your progress. Furthermore, working in an active research lab helps students avoid the isolation that often accompanies dissertation writing (see below). On the other hand, you may not be thrilled with the topic or you may want to work on the research problem from a different angle. So you might want to consider the advice of J.R., who had to choose between a ready-made dissertation topic that was less than thrilling and the topic that led her to graduate study in the first place.

My advisor had a lot of experience with dissertations and that definitely worked in my favor. He essentially handed me a topic and said that I was welcome to try this simple, ready-made research project, but then he warned me that the simplest projects always took the longest. It seemed paradoxical until he explained: Even the simple projects require a year, and the students who take these run out of steam in just a couple of months. A really good topic is a puzzle that you can't stop working on. The idea is that you'll work harder, but you'll be so engaged that you won't mind at all. Those are the projects that work.

—J.R.

For J.R., choosing a dissertation topic meant that she had to understand a paradox: The easiest projects are sometimes the toughest to complete, whereas the more challenging topics are sometimes, somehow, less demanding. According to J.R. it is easier to understand this paradox once you find yourself hard at work. Students who try to take the easy topic often are not as interested, so they have to force themselves to set aside work time and to sit and concentrate. On the other hand, if you are really excited about a project, it doesn't matter if it is challenging—you will live and breathe the topic, and you will look forward to those moments when you can actually sit down and write!

So where do these dissertation ideas come from? Reading, reading, and reading. To formulate a well-defined research question, you must first become familiar with the topic. A key strategy is to choose classes where research assignments or papers may serve as predissertation preparation, where you might start working on the background or literature review. Gordon (2003) suggested that one of the biggest dissertation hang-ups is the fragmented nature in which graduate work is conducted. Students divide their time between classes, research, teaching, and additional requirements and are then asked to come up with a dissertation topic. He suggested keeping notes throughout all aspects of the graduate program (e.g., coursework, research, or comprehensive exams) will help you generate possible research topics and problems.

Conclusion

When you begin your graduate program, begin with your dissertation in mind. It may seem a long way off, but it is never too early to start preparing for the challenge. You will need to know the research methodology and analytical tools when the time

comes, so take advantage of the coursework and laboratory experiences of the first few years to prepare. You will also have the chance to meet people who can help you—choosing advisors and committee members with your dissertation in mind will ensure that you have access to the expertise and support you need. And remember that you will need to persevere through a year or two of intense work, often in isolation, so before you begin, it is important to make sure you are passionate about the topic.

❖ References

- Austin, A. E. (2002). Preparing the next generation of faculty: Graduate school as socialization to the academic career. *Journal of Higher Education, 73*, 94–122.
- Caffarella, R. S., & Barnett, B. G. (2000). Teaching doctoral students to become scholarly writers: The importance of giving and receiving techniques. *Studies in Higher Education, 25*, 39–53.
- Council of Graduate Schools. (2004). *Ph.D. completion and attrition: Policy, numbers, leadership, and next steps*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.
- Cuetara, J., & LeCapitaine, J. (2001). The relationship between dissertation writing experiences and doctoral training environments. *Education, 112*, 233–241.
- deValero, Y. F. (2001). Departmental factors affecting time-to-degree and completion rates of doctoral students at one land grant research institution. *Journal of Higher Education, 72*, 341–367.
- Garcia, M. E., Malott, R. W., & Brethower, D. (1988). A system of thesis and dissertation supervision: Helping graduate students succeed. *Teaching of Psychology, 15*, 186–191.
- Gardner, S. K. (2009). Conceptualizing success in doctoral education: Perspectives of faculty in seven disciplines. *Review of Higher Education, 32*, 383–406.
- Golde, C. M., & Dore, T. M. (2001). *At cross purposes: What the experiences of today's doctoral students reveal about doctoral education*. Madison: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.
- Gordon, P. J. (2003). Advising to avoid or to cope with dissertation hang-ups. *Academy of Management Learning and Education, 2*, 181–187.
- Lovitts, B. E. (2008). The transition to independent researcher: Who makes it, who doesn't, and why. *Journal of Higher Education, 79*, 296–325.

❖ Suggestions for Further Exploration

- Bolker, J. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: A guide to starting, revising, and finishing your doctoral thesis*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. Joan Bolker, Ed.D., is a psychologist and a writing counselor. Her psychological training is quite helpful when it comes to identifying reasons people struggle with the dissertation and how to address those problems.
- Fitzpatrick, J., Secrist, J., & Wright, D. J. (1998). *Secrets for a successful dissertation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. This book is an easy read—like getting advice from a friend. It provides a lot of clear, concise, and easy-to-use tips on completing your dissertation.