

# **The PSP Dissertation Process: Guidelines for Committee Members**

The doctoral degree is granted by PSP on the recommendation of the faculty. The faculty, in turn, depends upon the dissertation committee to ensure that the student's dissertation project meets the standards established and expected by PSP. At PSP the dissertation committee consists of the chair and typically two other members. (Additional readers are allowed but not necessarily recommended, especially if this results in rather fragmented or excessively contradictory guidance for the student.) In addition to monitoring the quality of the student's work, the dissertation committee provides guidance and consultation to the student in all phases of the doctoral project.

## **Dissertation Chairperson**

The chairperson of a dissertation committee is the student's primary source of guidance, and the School's primary guarantor of quality. Specifically, the chair is responsible for (a) supervising the student in all phases of the dissertation process, (b) carrying out any administrative or liaison functions as necessary and (c) chairing meetings of the dissertation committee. The chair should be someone whose judgment the student (and other members of the committee) respect and whose criticisms the student can accept.

The Dissertation chair is there to advise, guide, and support the student in completing a project that will reflect credit on both the student and committee. The chair is a source of information on what is academically appropriate or required. He or she also is there to aid the student in finding creative and pragmatic solutions to any problems the student encounters.

In identifying a potential chair and other committee members, the student should also consider how he or she works best and discuss with potential chair and committee members how they like to work. For instance, some students prefer to work very autonomously, and to present their committee members with written work in fairly final form for critique and suggestions for revision. Others prefer a closer working relationship, with regular meetings to discuss the progress of the project. Dissertation chairs and committee members also have their preferred ways of working. Some like to be involved throughout the dissertation preparation process, while others want to work only with written drafts in close-to-finished form. It is essential that

the chair's preferences in these matters be compatible with the student's. Similar discussions should be held with all committee members and a group understanding of the way that they will work together should be established early.

## **Requirements for a Dissertation Committee Chair**

Since PSP students have access to numerous individuals who are not faculty members at PSP but are fully qualified to chair dissertations and are interested in doing so, the School allows other qualified individuals to become chairs if approved by the Provost. General guidelines in determining who is eligible to be a chair are that the individual must have had experience as a researcher or scholar and at least equivalent to having been a reader on two previous dissertation committees and sufficient knowledge to serve in this leadership role.

Although the School will not consider that the student officially has a dissertation chair until the student has been advanced to candidacy, there is nothing to prevent a student from consulting with potential chairs while developing his or her proposal. Often ideas for a dissertation project will come to a student in the course of earlier studies at the school. PSP students should feel free to consult with faculty members at any time about the merit of a potential dissertation project.

## **Dissertation Committee Members**

Committee members, or readers as they also are called, may be PSP faculty members or they may be other professionals, researchers or scholars. Committee members ordinarily hold doctoral degrees in fields requiring the writing of a dissertation (most often in psychology, frequently in one of the other social sciences), though it is permissible to include as members, professionals with other academic preparation if they have special expertise. For example, health psychology studies might include physicians as committee members. A study using epidemiological methods might include a public health professional. A dissertation concerned with forensic issues or public policy might include a lawyer. Often readers are selected based on their area of expertise. In general, it is a good idea to have most of the knowledge base needed for guidance represented by the committee.

## **Assembling the Dissertation Committee**

In assembling this committee, the student should look for at least three persons who (a) qualify to serve on PSP dissertation committees, (b) possess expertise in areas in which the student will

require advice and/or assistance (either substantive or methodological), (c) are willing to serve on the committee, and (d) will be available to consult with the student throughout the course of the dissertation process. It is extremely important that committee members are able to work well together. Therefore, it is a good idea to ensure that each member knows who the other members are. In addition, the chair needs to formally approve the other members of the committee.

Once the dissertation committee has been established and its members have agreed to the proposal, its composition is considered relatively fixed and permanent, barring unforeseen circumstances. However, if the student (or chair) finds during the dissertation process that the student and some member of the committee differ seriously about the nature of the project, member roles, or expectations of the student, then the student and chair might both seek a change in committee membership. Students should be aware that changing the membership of the dissertation committee once the project is underway can cause major delays in the progress. Therefore, a change should be sought only in the case of a truly intractable problem.

The dissertation committee selection must be approved by Provost. Any non-faculty members on the committee must have a vita on file at the School. Therefore, if any of the committee members have not been on a dissertation committee at PSP or do not have a vita on file; it is the student's responsibility to see to it that it is submitted.

## **Operations of a Dissertation Committee**

Before preparation of the dissertation begins, the student should discuss all aspects of the proposed project with each of the committee members and come to an agreement as a group on any revisions that must be made before the student can proceed with the dissertation project, and on any revisions which will need to be made in writing the dissertation itself. The committee members should sign the Agreement Form, indicating their commitment to work with the student on the dissertation project as it is proposed.

Generally, the student's contract with his or her dissertation chair and committee is for one year, unless in the proposed timeline a longer period of time is proposed and the committee agrees to commit to the longer time. If a student become stalled and his or her dissertation work extends beyond the timeline identified in the proposal, then committee members have the right to withdraw from the committee, in which case the student will need to renegotiate a committee agreement.

It is also important to realize that the dissertation is primarily the student's responsibility. Given that students at PSP are mature and accomplished adult learners, it is appropriate that they assume responsibility for the ongoing operations of their dissertation project. As a result, the student needs to be prepared to be the coordinator of this project. When submitting material to his or her committee, it is perfectly acceptable to ask committee members when to expect comments from them. Since they probably have fairly packed professional lives, they may not always be able to meet the student's desired deadline. At the same time, it is the student's responsibility to keep the process moving and perfectly acceptable to give polite reminders.

On the practical level, most professionals receive a considerable amount of mail and emails. They have many correspondences that require their attention. A dissertation student can help his or her committee members keep track of submissions amidst an accumulation of paper clutter by dating and labeling each submission. Often a student turns in a number of revisions. In time it is very easy for the committee member to lose track of which is the latest revision if it is not identified.

Another potential problem is that at times a student may get conflicting advice from different committee members who do not realize they are creating such a problem. If the student finds himself or herself in this situation, it is up to the student to approach the committee and let them know of the dilemma. If it seems important to meet to resolve any differences or if having the members contact each other would be helpful, it certainly is acceptable for the student to facilitate this or ask the dissertation chair to do so. The student must be proactive in resolving dilemmas. At the same time it is important for the student to realize that all committee members will need to put their name on the finished product. Therefore, it is reasonable for them to disagree with the student, if they feel strongly, and to insist on an alternative.

In general, at least some of the conflict can be avoided and some of the work assigned to committee members in their review of dissertation drafts can be minimized by having the review of preliminary drafts be done by one committee member at a time. After one member offers his or her suggestions and negotiates these changes with the student, a revised draft is sent to a second committee member for review. This sequential process of review eliminates the redundant editing by several committee members (there is nothing more frustrating for a committee member than to do careful editing only to find out that another committee member has also done careful editing and the student has already revised the draft). This process also reduces the extent to which a student gets conflicting advice from several committee members

who have reviewed the same draft. Obviously, the final draft of the dissertation must be reviewed by all members—but this doesn't mean that all drafts must be handled in this simultaneous manner. The use of “Track Change” (available with Word and most other software writing programs) is also valuable when committee members are involved in a sequential review process.

## **Editing of Manuscript by Committee Members**

There are three levels of editing that occurs in work with a student's dissertation (these three levels also operate in the work of publishing houses when a manuscript is submitted for publication). Level One is *basic editing* (spelling, sentence fragments, matching of tense and numbers, etc.) Level Two is *stylistic editing* (splitting up run on sentences or combining sentences that are too short; converting passive voice to active voice; paragraph structure). Level Three is *structural editing* (suggesting changes in sequencing of sections or chapters; suggesting bridges, introductions, summaries, etc).

There is a fourth type of editing, which involves scholarship. Are appropriate citations being offered and are quotes or paraphrases being properly attributed? Finally, there is format review. This has to do with proper headings and subheadings, proper referencing, etc.

Typically, all members of the committee are ultimately responsible for Level Three (Structural) editing, while one of the members (often but not always the Chair) is responsible for Level One (Basic) and Two (Stylistic) editing. The critical point is that only one member of the committee should do Level One and Two editing. Otherwise, this often time-consuming task is being replicated by two or more members of the committee. This redundant burden is inappropriate, especially given the busy schedule of committee members. This redundant editing can also create difficult problems for the student: what happens if quite different edits are being recommended by two or more members of the committee. Which recommendations are accepted by the student? Typically, if one member of the committee does the editing, then the student can send a more polished version of the dissertation manuscript on to the other committee members and they do not have to worry about Level One and Level Two editing—focusing instead on Level Three and the content of the dissertation.

## **Human Subjects Review**

The purpose of the review is to ensure that the student's work conforms to the principles of ethical research as established by the profession and articulated by the American Psychological Association and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC) is concerned with protection of individuals' rights to privacy, the researcher's obligation to obtain informed consent of subjects, protecting the confidentiality of data, and protecting subjects from physical, psychological, social, and legal harm.

It is standard procedure, when research is undertaken within an institution, to submit a Human Subjects protocol to the Human Subjects Review Committee, regardless of the type of study and regardless of one's assessment of risk. For this reason, all proposed research, including theoretical or anthropologically-oriented research, whether involving human individuals or not, and regardless of method and sample, must be submitted for review and approval by the HSRC at PSP. However, protocols for research projects not involving human subjects are abbreviated in form and length.

The student should not begin collecting data until his or her project has been approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee. This would be a serious ethical violation which, just as with other ethical violations such as plagiarism, breach of confidentiality of research data, and breach of confidentiality within a therapeutic relationship, could have serious consequences. It is not the function of the HSRC to assess the merit of the proposed project or the appropriateness of the methods per se. Therefore, the HSRC protocol should be fairly brief and, as a rule, only address ethical aspects of the dissertation project. (In any case the dissertation student definitely should not submit the entire proposal.) Additional information about the dissertation design and purpose are needed only if the proposed project design requires some degree of risk which the student (and committee) want to defend as necessary in fulfilling the goals of the dissertation project. In such a situation it would be important for the student to describe how the benefits of the proposed project outweigh any risks of the procedure.

## **Oral Defense of the Dissertation**

After committee members agree that the dissertation project is substantially complete, the student schedules the oral defense. The student must provide committee members with a

complete draft, including references and abstract, and incorporating all their suggestions from prior drafts, at least two weeks before the scheduled oral defense.

The oral defense is a special meeting of the committee to review the entire project. The committee members can raise any questions or concerns they may have about the dissertation and the student can respond to these questions as well as discuss the implications and significance of his or her findings. If committee members have reviewed drafts of the dissertation manuscript as the student has written them, and if the student has incorporated or responded to their suggestions for revision, this meeting should hold few surprises, and the student is unlikely to have to “defend” himself/herself or choices that the student has made in his/her work

Each oral defense is unique, responding to both the individual project and the styles and concerns of the individual committee members. It is common for the chair to begin by asking the student to give a brief overview or description of the dissertation project: the problem addressed, the method employed, the findings and their implications. From there, committee members may ask the student to discuss in greater depth various aspects of the project. The student may be asked to speculate upon the implications for practice or further research based on findings in the dissertation.

The student should bring at least two copies of the signature page for the dissertation on the kind of paper (acid-free or 100% cotton archival paper) and using the type face that will be used for the final copy. Ordinarily, the oral defense is held in person; however, with students and committee members spread throughout the world, it is totally acceptable for the oral defense to be conducted virtually through the use of conference call facilities, Skype or other digital media.

At the end of the oral defense, the committee formally decides whether or not to approve the dissertation. Students are normally asked to leave the room (or step off the conference call) so that the discussion and decision are made by the committee in private. It is fairly rare for a committee to decide not to approve the dissertation at the oral defense and, if the student has maintained regular contact with committee members during the process, it is not likely to happen. However, particularly if the student were rushing the last stages of the dissertation and scheduling of the oral defense in order to meet a deadline, committee members may have some criticisms or concerns for which the student is not prepared. In these cases, it sometimes happens that the committee will approve the dissertation conditionally, contingent upon the student making specified changes. Many committees will delegate to the chair responsibility for seeing

that the changes are made in the dissertation. Others will want to have each member review the revised final copy before the dissertation is completely approved. Some committees may wish to reconvene in another oral defense. In order to avoid these tedious and avoidable delays, the dissertation student should plan the timeline carefully and update it as necessary, stay in touch with committee members and respond in a timely manner to their critiques and suggestions, and be sure to give committee members at least two weeks to read the final draft of the dissertation before the oral defense. The Chair of the Committee informs the Registrar of the successful completion of the dissertation and provides the Registrar with the date of completion (to be recorded on the student's diploma).

## APPENDIX A

### SUMMARY OUTLINE OF STEPS IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

- 1a. Enroll in Dissertation Design course *or*
- 1b. Find a committee chair who is willing to guide you throughout the proposal as well as the later stages of the dissertation and file a form to waive the Dissertation Design class. Secure the agreement of this qualified professional to chair your dissertation committee
2. Complete a satisfactory draft of your proposal and have your committee chair submit a passing grade for the class.
3. Secure the agreement of two other professionals to serve as members of your dissertation committee.
4. Submit a Dissertation Committee Designation form for approval, and the Vitae of any non-faculty committee members.
5. Review and alter your proposal as necessary for your committee's approval.
6. Submit a copy of the final draft of your proposal, your signed Dissertation Committee Proposal Agreement form (including any stipulations or conditional plans for covering problems (such as low subject turnout).
7. Submit *two copies* of your Human Subjects protocol, with the appropriate form signed by you and your chair, and all required attachments.
8. When all approvals have been received and any conditions met, then begin dissertation project.
9. Submit drafts to chair and committee members, get feedback, and incorporate suggestions.
10. When you and your chair agree you are ready, schedule your oral defense.
11. Hold your oral defense. Bring at least two copies of the signature page for dissertation on the kind of paper (acidfree) and using the typeface you expect to use for the final copy.
12. Submit a complete *final* draft of your dissertation, incorporating all necessary revisions identified at your orals, for format clearance with form, checklist, and headings.
13. Make format revisions as required. Submit two hardbound copies of your dissertation (on acidfree paper), one loose copy, and a digital version.
14. Submit Diploma Clearance Form to PSP when all obligations have been met.

## **Appendix B**

### **Guidelines for Evaluating Dissertations and Dissertation Proposals**

#### **Dissertation Proposals**

1. The proposed project is supported by a review of the literature that establishes its originality, its importance to the field, and/or its place in an established area of inquiry. The design, measures, and analysis planned for the project are appropriate to the question. Specifically,
  - a. Multiple sources or types of measurement are ordinarily included. It will usually not be appropriate for a dissertation study to include only a single type of measurement (e.g., only paper-and-pencil self-report measures; only projective measures).
  - b. If the question being investigated addresses differences between groups, appropriate provisions should be made for inclusion of control or contrast groups.
  
2. For projects whose primary question is psychometric, special care may be required to ensure that the project has sufficient scope. For example, the measure being investigated should promise an original approach to investigating a construct or problem of dear importance to the discipline or to practice. In general, dissertations whose purpose is to validate a measure of limited utility will not be appropriate, nor will those whose scope is confined to statistical treatment of existing data.
  
3. Applied research in psychology includes an honorable place in its tradition for the single case study design, but special care is required to ensure that the known limitations of such designs are taken into account. For projects whose focus is a single case, both multiple data sources, measurement types and a sufficiently broad theoretical base are employed to provide adequate internal validity and promise of reasonable generalizability beyond the index case; use of time-series methods is especially encouraged for such studies.
  
4. Any project involving human subjects or informants provides for the protection of subjects' or informants' privacy and physical, psychological, social, and economic well-being.
  
5. Proposals for non-empirical studies address questions appropriate for such treatment. That is, they do not investigate matters susceptible to empirical investigation. A proposal for a non-empirical study meets the highest standards of rigorous and scholarly investigation. It is not simply an extended review of the literature in an area, but provides critical synthesis of existing theory and research as a basis for asking new questions or positing new relationships. In addition, students intending to conduct non-empirical studies must secure the agreement, in writing, of a member of the faculty to chair the dissertation committee before the proposal is complete.

## **Dissertations**

1. The dissertation represents a contribution to psychology.
2. Conclusions and interpretations are appropriately derived from and based upon the study findings.
3. Implications for further research and for practice are identified and discussed.
4. The written presentation of the study reflects the competence in organization and clarity of expression expected of doctoral-level practitioners.

(Note:these are not guidelines for the oral defense, but are for the committee's use in evaluating the final draft.)