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First Steps Toward Your Dissertation

How to Use This Book

*I try to take life one day at a time but sometimes several days
attack me at once.*

—Ashley Brilliant*

As they attempt to build a dissertation study, doctoral students in general and nontraditional students in particular often find themselves short of time and full of confusion. Doctoral students want very targeted information dealing with the particular issue or question about their study that they face. More often than not, these students want their information when they need it. Thus, it is appropriate to list a few shortcuts through this book.

If you would like to see the typical components of the doctoral dissertation proposal that are expected by faculty in many fields, turn to the Outline of a Proposal in Chapter 2, which outlines the standard convention of providing the first three chapters of your study. If you are at the point where you know your topic or general area and want to begin researching your topic, turn to Chapter 3, which provides

As mentioned in the Preface, I have taken many quotes from a book of quotations by Robert Fitzhenry (1993) and indicate this source with an asterisk (*).

much information about locating research literature. I have taken pains to try to give you insights into the special resource that the research library represents for your work. There is an index at the end of the book that should help you locate information about particular topics. Use the index as a guide to those topics in the book that you find of particular importance.

If you are at a point where you have not yet fixed on a topic, turn to the section in this chapter on Finding a Topic. It may help give you some ideas about how to identify a researchable topic for your study. Once you have settled on a topic, read the section titled Outline of a Proposal in Chapter 2. You may also wish to read Finding a Dissertation Support Group later in this chapter. There I discuss the benefits of creating a group of fellow students that become a support group for one another.

In the construction of the dissertation proposal or dissertation, realize that not all dissertations begin with the conventional first three chapters. Many qualitative, historical, or ethnographic studies, for example, stray from such conventions in their structure. Still, it is common for the proposal and the finished dissertation to contain an introductory chapter, a literature review chapter, and a methodology chapter.

It will be obvious as you use this book that I have made one important and essential assumption: The nontraditional student has to have the technology to communicate and to gather library resources. Indeed, some doctoral programs (the University of Florida at Gainesville, for example) require that doctoral students possess and use a computer. Coursework, advising, registration for courses, and access to programmatic information all are now commonly done via the Internet. E-mail is used to communicate with an advisor, committee members, and fellow students. If you do not have an up-to-date computer and access to both e-mail and the Internet, you will find many of the suggestions in this book of limited use. Indeed, if you lack these essential resources, it will be very difficult for you to complete your dissertation as a nontraditional student.

For example, accessing a research library is normally an essential part of constructing a dissertation. Students who cannot travel to such a library need Internet access to do this work. Nontraditional doctoral students usually must be very efficient with their use of time. Remote access to a research library will significantly increase your efficiency. If you form a dissertation support group, e-mail and chat rooms are significant assets. You need to be able to communicate with your advisor. E-mail facilitates this communication significantly. Computers are essential.

Browse through Appendix D at the conclusion of the book. In this index, I list many dissertations that have been written about the doctoral dissertation and doctoral experience. These are studies by fellow doctoral students of the very process in which you are engaged. You may well find studies you wish to read.

Dissertation Conventions

Don't ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up.

—Robert Frost*

Conventions

In this introductory section of the book, I provide an overview of the issues the doctoral student faces as she or he begins to construct a dissertation. My main purpose in Chapter 1 is to introduce the conventions that typically guide the construction and writing of the dissertation and to discuss the common issues the nontraditional student will experience at this stage of the process.

I use the word *conventions* to indicate commonly expected behaviors and dissertation components one will find in most doctoral programs most of the time. For the nontraditional student, an understanding of these conventions will save both time and energy in planning, researching, and writing. Much of the material of this book relates to conventions, from the utilization of a dissertation advisor to the required format of the finished document. And, as the quote from Robert Frost implies, it is important to know why these “fences” or conventions were “put up,” especially if you intend to exclude one.

Conventions in This Section

Advisor
Supervisory Committee
Expectation of a Research Study
Solo Scholarship
Parts of the Dissertation Study
Literature Review
Method
Gathering of New Data or Information
Expectation of Objectivity

The doctoral dissertation is written for a very limited and unique audience—the student’s doctoral advisor and the student’s doctoral supervisory committee. This is one of the conventions that may be so obvious as to be taken for granted, but for the nontraditional student, a clear understanding of this convention is necessary. Any discussion of the conventions associated with writing a dissertation proposal must attend to the unique nature of the relationship between the student and the professors with whom that student must work. Attending to the personalities of the members of the supervisory committee is a responsibility of the doctoral student and the advisor. This is particularly challenging for the nontraditional doctoral student. Be alert to opportunities to learn about the professors on your committee. When you visit the campus, try to schedule time to meet with each. Look for Web sites that your committee members may have created. Interact with them by e-mail. Talk with fellow students.

Advisor

The doctoral student’s advisor is a key factor in the whole doctoral program and becomes even more central when the student begins the dissertation. Convention reserves for this individual a great deal of practical authority over the dissertation of his or her advisees. The student learns that neither a dissertation proposal nor a dissertation will be advanced for approval without the full involvement and concurrence of the doctoral dissertation advisor.

Supervisory Committee

Another convention is the supervisory committee. This is a group of faculty members drawn from the student’s major field and from other fields. This supervisory committee has been charged to uphold standards of scholarship and research imposed by the graduate faculty. In many institutions, this committee will consist of four professors with at least one of the members coming from another discipline, college, or school. The doctoral student will need the approval of this committee for any or all of the following: a preproposal, a dissertation proposal, passage of an oral examination on the dissertation, and, of course, the dissertation itself. You will note, as you read dissertations, a signature page that documents the approval of this committee.

Expectations Held for Degree

For the student, it is also important to come fully to grips with the expectations the academy holds for the doctoral degree. In most

universities, the doctoral degree is highly regarded as a study that makes a contribution to learning. The degree signals the discovery of new knowledge. However, this goal is not always recognized in programs that have come to use the doctoral degree in part as a professional degree for career development. For example, many students that complete a degree in education or business do not contemplate academic careers. Doctoral study does afford intellectual growth and knowledge of the research in one's field. But a future academic career during which they will continue to discover new knowledge is not an expectation held by many nontraditional doctoral students. Accordingly, nontraditional students often value knowledge that has practical utility. Students in educational fields frequently want knowledge that will be of use in their professional area. Thus, there may be a dissonance between the traditional goal of the academy to produce the independent researcher and the goal of the 21st-century doctoral student to acquire practical knowledge that will aid in practice. For this reason, many of the conventions of the dissertation proposal phase can appear as unnecessary to the nontraditional doctoral student who has no intention of pursuing a career as a professor or researcher. However, it is a widely held expectation that the dissertation will add to the knowledge base of its field and train the student as a researcher.

Solo Scholarship

It is a conventional expectation that the recipient of the degree is to be understood as a person who has demonstrated a capacity to conduct independent research. Mortimer Adler speaks of a type of learning in which one accumulates knowledge by research, by investigation, and by reflection (Adler & van Doren, 1972). Such learning is independent of the direct or indirect assistance of another. This type of learning by discovery and reflection characterizes the work of the doctoral student engaged in constructing his or her dissertation proposal. While a doctoral student still learns under the tutelage of an advisor and the scrutiny of a doctoral committee, the knowledge gained in carrying out a dissertation is, in most cases, the result of discovery.

This distinguishing independence associated with the dissertation proposal and with the dissertation itself must be recognized quickly by the doctoral student. Most educational systems rely on "aided discovery" from a teacher in order to become expert in acquiring received knowledge (Adler & van Doren, 1972). Our education, even in graduate school, does not always train us to acquire knowledge

through discovery. Such a trained incapacity to function as an independent scholar can often be a large obstacle in the way of the completion of the doctoral degree. Realize that you are now operating in a very different learning environment.

It is extremely important to make this psychological shift from thinking of yourself as a passive learner to thinking of yourself as an independent and active learner. The doctoral student writing the dissertation is almost always the initiator of action. There are no obligations to do an assignment or show up for class. There is no formal feedback along the way; the judgment comes when you turn in a proposal or a dissertation and it comes all at once. Dissertation learning is truly a different kind of learning. It is what I call solo scholarship.

There are instances where doctoral students work in teams or in pairs on common topics, but these experiences are uncommon.

The Literature Review

One of the most difficult of these conventions is the expectation or convention that professors refer to as the literature review. By this label, professors typically mean the scholarship that has been published by others about a particular topic of study. Logically, if a person is to invent new knowledge or generate new discoveries, he or she should know what has already been invented. But, an exhaustive review of the scholarship in a field does not always mesh with the goals of the doctoral student who may be more interested in using selected knowledge that appears to him or her to have widespread practical utility. The literature review is a very important dissertation convention.

Research Method

Another convention that appears in most graduate programs is an expectation that a well-designed methodology section be presented. Logically, if a person is to invent new knowledge, the process that will be followed in so doing should be indicated. Again, the doctoral student who is more interested in practical utility may find the requirement of a rigorous application of academic research standards to be less compelling than the creation of reportable results.

Gathering of New Data or Information

Finally, one of the key expectations behind the doctoral dissertation is that it will be a study that seeks to systematically gather information

or data. In most institutions, professors expect that the doctoral study will contain a framework for gathering and analyzing new data. This is why doctoral students are often told to save their book about the way the world should work for another time. Few faculty members expect to read a dissertation study that is a polemic on the student's pet set of beliefs. There is an expectation that the study will seek to objectively analyze data or information that the student has gathered. There is an expectation that any conclusions or recommendations made by the student will spring only from the data or information presented in the dissertation. Thus, while many doctoral candidates may have knowledge of a topic or problem of practice that far exceeds their dissertation focus, that knowledge must not mask or supercede the data contained in the study.

Expectation of Objectivity

Most advisors and supervisory committee members expect the doctoral dissertation writer to strive for objectivity in approach and analysis. This does not mean that the writer must rigidly adhere to a positivistic standard that eschews any admission that personal beliefs may color the interpretation of what he or she discovers or sees in the data or information. The first-person voice, for example, has become much more widely used in recent years as qualitative dissertations have increased in number. However, even in qualitative dissertations, there is an expectation that the writer will be objective in proceeding with data analysis and conclusions. Few committees, as I point out later, will accept a personal polemic for a dissertation. Eisner, in his book *The Enlightened Eye*, has written an excellent discussion of issues of objectivity and subjectivity in research (1991, pp. 41–61).

Conventions such as these need to be understood.

It is important to emphasize another obvious convention. The proposal and dissertation are written scholarly documents. If one has a weakness in writing, this weakness will quickly show up. Errors in structure, grammar, and logical expression interfere with a reader's ability to track the meaning of the writer. Likewise, expert writing can help enormously in guiding the reader to an appreciation of the content of the proposal and dissertation. If you know you have a weakness as a writer, include in your planning some provision for serious help with editing your work. I should note that it is unethical to have another person write your study or even sections of your study. It is not unethical to have another person go over what you have written and make suggestions for improvement.

Summary

Realize then that the dissertation study is guided by the following conventions:

Conventions Summarized

1. There is an established supervisory structure.
2. The study is guided by research objectives and research questions.
3. The study is informed by what other scholars have discovered.
4. The study is designed to gather new data or to analyze preexisting data in new ways.
5. An objective analysis of gathered data is a goal.
6. Conclusions must arise from the data and information gathered.
7. The study will be judged by how thoroughly the research questions are answered.
8. Faculty expect the researcher will make recommendations for improved practice or future research.
9. Those recommendations must also arise from the data and information gathered.

Realize also that one may deviate from these conventions for cause. As I will discuss in the next section, clear communication with your advisor is necessary in all aspects of constructing the proposal and dissertation. The next section covers the mechanical process or chronology of constructing the dissertation. As might be anticipated, this process is also conventionalized. There are steps one goes through that are common to many doctoral-degree-granting institutions.

The Dissertation Process

I like terra firma—the more firma, the less terra.

—George Kaufman*

What steps does a person go through in constructing and completing the doctoral dissertation? As you might surmise, this process will vary from campus to campus, but there will also be general similarities. In this section, I lay out the usual pathway along which the doctoral student travels in conceptualizing, initiating, and completing the dissertation.

I begin with the most important resource the university provides you in the dissertation process—the doctoral advisor or supervisory committee chair.

Advisor–Advisee Relations

Most doctoral programs rely on a single faculty member to supervise the doctoral student's dissertation. Occasionally, a student will have cochairs or cosupervisors. This is sometimes done as a means of mentoring a faculty member new to doctoral advising. The advisor is typically the most important resource for the doctoral student. It is critical that you have open communication with this person, and it is critical that you feel you may speak openly with this person.

For a nontraditional student, establishing a working relationship with the advisor is not always easy. You will need to have that individual's active help when you need it. University graduate programs identify advisors at different stages in the doctoral student's program. At some institutions, the advisor is appointed at the beginning of the program. At others, the dissertation advisor is appointed or selected in the later stages of the student's program. In any event, when you, the doctoral student, begin the dissertation, you will have an advisor. Sustained phone or e-mail contact with this individual is extremely important.

Before the student can settle on the dissertation topic, the advisor needs to grant approval. Before the student can feel comfortable proceeding with a dissertation idea, the advisor and/or student must bring the topic and research plan to a faculty committee for approval. In this process of negotiating the various approvals the student will need along the way, the advisor is key. The advisor normally also serves as an advocate for the student, alerting the student to requirements, expectations, and potential problem areas.

But the nontraditional student may experience difficulties in establishing a working relationship with the advisor simply due to time and distance constraints.

Tip

It is worth the time, money, and effort to meet with your advisor as you plan your dissertation. Travel to the campus to do so. Make sure you have scheduled your visit so that you will be able to have sufficient time with this person. Plan to talk about your own work and your intellectual interests and possible research topics. Find out what your advisor plans to be doing during the time period when you will actively work on your dissertation. Will she or he be on leave? Will she or he be on duty during the academic terms when you will need assistance?

There are other simple things you can do to learn more about your advisor.

First, professors produce scholarly writing. This will be true of your advisor. You should know what your advisor has written. Your advisor also has a rich professional life that touches different associations, meetings, conventions, national groups, state groups, and professional colleagues. Educate yourself about this aspect of your advisor's work. Your advisor will have a curriculum vitae that will, in all likelihood, stretch for many pages. Secure a copy of this. If your advisor

publishes a Web site, locate that site and learn what it contains. You may find ways to enrich your own work and study.

Second, unlike doctoral study in arts and sciences or engineering fields, many doctoral students in education and social sciences do not write their theses in the fields in which their advisors possess in-depth knowledge. This is becoming even more common as nontraditional students engage in solo scholarship. The model of the scholar working as a junior member of a research team and publishing his or her dissertation work from that joint activity does not hold for the typical nontraditional student. There are instances where nontraditional students do work as part of a group on a common topic, but this is the exception. Thus, your advisor will have a general knowledge of your topic but may not be thoroughly conversant with the work in that field. If you know this to be the case, you can help your advisor by identifying individuals that can serve as a resource for you. Discuss this issue with your advisor.

Third, you will want to have some idea about your advisor's work with other doctoral students. This type of information is harder to come by for the nontraditional student. Has the advisor been active in helping students complete their dissertations? Does the advisor have experience in working with other graduate faculty on supervisory committees? Is the advisor one who will work with you to fully evaluate your proposal prior to your submitting your dissertation work to

the full supervisory committee? It is your advisor who is in the best position to help you assess the quality of your work.

In some institutions, a course, often called The Dissertation Proposal, is offered to help students work through the development of their proposal. If offered, such a course is an extremely useful opportunity for the doctoral student to engage in the iterative process that is typical of the creation of the dissertation proposal. The outline below delineates what most students experience as they begin the first stage of their dissertations—gaining approval to embark on a study.

Usual Conventional Steps in Creating a Dissertation Proposal

1. **Formative Stage**
(Discussions with advisor, tentative writings)
2. **Initial Determination of Topic**
(Repeated explorations and attempts to frame problem and research questions, serious reading on the proposed topic)
3. **Initial Draft of Chapter One**
(Continued conversations with advisor, growing awareness of literature about topic)
4. **Commitment to Topic**
(Implicit decision that the topic and focus is clear)
5. **Writing Proposal Draft Including Literature Review**
(Submission to advisor, modifications)
6. **Approval of Draft by Advisor**
(Communication with full committee)
7. **Submission of Draft to Committee Members**
8. **Completion of Institutional Review Board (IRB) Application**
9. **Proposal Meeting**
10. **Modifications of Proposal**
11. **Committee Approval of Proposal**
12. **IRB Approval of Study**

Tip

Who does what in terms of interacting with the supervisory committee as a whole? Do you take the lead? Does your advisor take the lead? Do you send the draft proposal to the committee? Does your advisor send the draft? Discuss these issues with your advisor.

The outline appears simple. Realize that each doctoral student experiences this process differently. For some, the determination of the topic is easy, the advisor has abundant time and energy to devote to the student, the rest of the faculty committee is helpful, the library works, and the whole proposal process falls in place smoothly. For others, the path is rocky.

The following sections capture some of the likely issues most doctoral students encounter as they seek to settle on a dissertation focus.

Finding a Topic

There's too much confusion here. I can't get no relief.

—“All Along the Watchtower,” Bob Dylan*

What is my topic? Is it the right topic? Is it a doable topic? Do I have to like my topic? In this section, I discuss what for some is the single most difficult part of the dissertation process: selecting a topic and narrowing it down to a doable dissertation.

Choosing a dissertation topic is not always easy. In fact, sometimes the topic is as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp. Yet people have written about so many different topics that, for the optimist, the ingenuity of the doctoral student will restore faith in human creativity. For the pessimist, the list of dissertation topics might confirm the absurdity of life. Here are a few remarkable titles (and order numbers) from the database of Dissertation Abstracts.

- Elvis Presley: All Shook Up (QVQ90-09636)
- Life's Little Problems . . . and Pleasures: Watching Soap Operas (QVQ91-02565)
- Electrical Measurements on Cuticles of the American Cockroach (QVQ66-08750)
- Determinants of Flossing Behavior in the College Age Population (QVQ83-21137)
- Classification of Drinking Styles Using the Topographical Components of Beer Drinking (QVQ82-07677)

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- Garage Sales as Praxis: Ideologies of Women, Work, and Community in Daily Life (QVQ90-32549)
- Finger Painting and Personality Diagnosis (QVQ00-00801)
- Communication Use in the Motorcycle Gang (QVQ89-06234)
- Ritual Drama in American Culture: The Case of Professional Wrestling (QVQ89-18545)
- An Adaptive Surfing Apparatus (QVQ13-06897)
- I Am You, You Are Me: A Philosophical Explanation of the Possibility That We Are All the Same Person (QVQ86-28990)
- Jock and Jill: Aspects of Women's Sports History in America (QVQ79-10447)

Conventional Approach to Selecting a Topic

The classic approach to selecting a topic has been described as the deficiency approach. The doctoral student pores over the research literature, building a record of past research activity that eventually leads either to a topic that begs to be explored or to a topic that scholars identify as needing to be explored. It is common for doctoral students, at the conclusion of their dissertations, to recommend future research topics. Remember this convention as you search Dissertation Abstracts. You may well find your study in another doctoral student's dissertation. One scours the literature, including dissertations, for gaps in the knowledge base about a topic. This approach remains a valid way to identify a researchable dissertation topic.

Others come to their topic based on professional or personal experience. And still others have advisors or research opportunities that place a topic in their path. Each student's dissertation journey is unique.

Tip

Talk with others about your dissertation idea and not just other students. Talk to those who have nothing to do with the university. Talk to your family members and relatives, your fellow employees, your mechanic, your mail person. The more widely you converse about your topic, the clearer you will be about it.

Narrowing the Focus and Finding Clarity

To some, everybody else's study seems so perfect and clear while their own study idea seems murky and unfocused. While it is perhaps of little comfort, the lack of focus is common. The dissertation topic almost always has to be narrowed to a point where the student has identified a suitable dissertation study. This is best done in an

iterative manner in which one tries out ideas for topics. Presenting these ideas to others allows for refinement and focus.

Example of Narrowing the Focus

A student wants to study emotional intelligence as an important skill in nurses. She intends to do a survey of nurses. Through ongoing discussions, she realizes that in some areas of nursing, emotional intelligence may simply not be of particular importance, while in other areas, there is a logical and compelling need to be gifted in this particular type of human intelligence. She narrows her focus to concentrate on pediatric nurses.

At times, this iterative process is done with the advisor. For the nontraditional student, access to an advisor may be done via e-mail exchanges and with phone conversations. But in programs with large numbers of doctoral students, the advisor may simply be unable to afford concentrated time with an advisee, and the nontraditional student may find it difficult to sustain a series of conversations with the advisor about the topic. Consequently, proposal classes or peer support groups can be of real benefit to helping the student both select and refine a topic.

There are both mental and procedural steps that a doctoral student can take in traversing this stage of selecting a topic. Below I cover issues that frequently surface during the stage in which the student seeks to commit to the topic of the study.

Prepare for Uncertainty and Change

First, most doctoral candidates go down a crooked path on the way to their dissertation topic. There are frequent forks in the road. Frost's poetic reminiscence of how he took the road less traveled and "that has made all the difference" does not necessarily hold for the selection of doctoral dissertation topics. Sometimes a student is following a deep trail worn by early scholars all exploring an important topic. Sometimes, following the deep path made by earlier generations of scholars is a good idea. The replication of earlier studies is important. A rich body of knowledge about a topic can often lead to clarity.

Second, it is common to change the focus of the dissertation study a number of times. You might write the research purpose and questions one day only to modify them the next day. It often takes much writing to discover meaning before the study takes shape. You can generally believe that the final focus has been identified when a firm commitment has been made. An apt analogy is that of a marriage. When you feel a commitment to a course of action, you become firmly attached or engaged to it. You feel no sense of uncertainty or discomfort with what you propose to do. You no longer feel it necessary to search for additional refinements. Furthermore, when others suggest you do a different study but you are able to successfully adhere to your topic, you are on solid ground. As this commitment solidifies, it will mean not only that you have selected a focus and topic but also that you have found a topic that will sustain your interest.

Some students, passionately wishing to complete their doctoral programs, will select what is referred to as a *doable* topic. This is perhaps more common than faculty advisors would care to admit. There is nothing wrong with expedience as the basis for arriving at a topic. Realize, however, that even though the topic may have been selected for completely pragmatic reasons, you must sustain your interest in the topic for a period of time. Murphy's Law (if it can go wrong, it will) almost inevitably surfaces during the dissertation process, so your interest in seeing the research project through to conclusion must survive both time and adversity.

Beware of Gift Topics

Sometimes your advisor, your employer, or convenience presents a possible topic to you. If you are working with your advisor on a research project, the selection process will take care of itself. In most instances, your advisor and his or her research agenda will carry you through to completion. When it is an employer that influences or seeks to dictate the selection of a dissertation topic, issues arise. Because the great majority of nontraditional doctoral students in the social sciences and in education work while they study, it is common for doctoral students to try to identify a dissertation that will have some utility in their work setting. In some instances, such an arrangement works and the student reaps multiple benefits. Often, however, the needs of the work setting and the nature of doctoral study are incompatible.

Assume you are a full-time curriculum coordinator in a large school district that has been wrestling with declining reading scores

in its elementary schools. You have been directed to develop a plan for improving these reading scores. You want the plan you develop to serve as your dissertation. You propose this to your advisor. Your advisor asks, "What is your research problem? What is your research question?" You respond that your district wants a curriculum plan. Your advisor responds that a "plan" is not a problem. The creation of a curriculum plan is not guided by a set of researchable questions unless you explore the underlying issues.

The problem implicit in your proposed study is declining reading scores.

Thus, your advisor might suggest that you design a pre-post study to measure the impact of the proposed curriculum to improve reading. You would then need to gather performance data from students and subject this data to analysis to see if the new curriculum had any impact in arresting the decline in reading achievement.

The doctoral student who proposes to examine his or her own work or own program presents a similar type of problem. Creswell (1998) referred to this as conducting research in "one's own backyard" and cautioned against such a practice. An example might be the student who conducts specific professional development workshops for nonprofit organizations and wants to gather data from the participants about the efficacy of these workshops and their content. Perhaps a teacher has developed a particular approach to teaching and wants to study its effect in increasing student achievement scores, or perhaps a distance education doctoral student wants to study why fellow students in his program persist or drop out.

There are some obvious issues in terms of the relationship of both the researcher to the subjects and the researcher to the object of the study. The researcher can be expected to have a particular interest in interpreting data in ways that support the judgments he or she has already made about his or her backyard. In metaphoric terms, the danger is that the researcher may be salting the research mine. That is, like the crooked real estate agent trying to pass a piece of property off as being of greater value than it is, the researcher runs the risk of selectively valuing some data because these data serve his or her biases. The message is to beware of topics that arise from work. As James Thurber (1956) wrote, "You can't make anything out of cookie dough but cookies." You may only get work out of the effort to combine the dissertation with a work-related project. Please note that some qualitative researchers will disagree with me on this point—Behar (1996) for example.

In a similar fashion, we are frequently tempted to take advantage of preexisting data. Fortune brings our way a whole set of completed data on subjects. What we lack is a question or questions to ask of these data. So, in an effort to jump-start a dissertation topic, we decide to fashion a question for which we know there are answers in the data set. This works sometimes. Numerous studies, for example, have been conducted using the large national, longitudinal data sets like the High School and Beyond data (<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/hsb/>).

Data sets of this nature were designed with educational research in mind. However, as often as we are able to find institutional data sets that we see as a convenient source of a dissertation topic, just as often, those data are mainly descriptive and provide little basis for a theoretical study. If you begin with an issue, problem, or theoretical concern and then search for existing data sets that might be a reasonable source for information, you will have a more coherent study. Some dissertation committees operate by an unwritten rule that requires the doctoral study to develop the context and the research questions prior to the identification of how relevant data and information will be gathered. If you are considering the use of preexisting data that you do not have to compile, make sure you have spoken to your advisor about this intention.

Tip

It is easy to get demographic data about research subjects. All too often, demographic data constitute the only independent variables a researcher uses to predict variation in dependent variables. As a consequence, race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status are presented as the most important factors influencing the dependent variable. Just because these variables are easy to get does not mean they are necessarily of much value. If you intend to use such variables, make sure that you have plumbed the research literature for the theoretical basis that identifies the importance of race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status to your particular topic.

Don't Try to Save the World

"My study will teach teachers how to create in the student internal and intrinsic motivation to learn." So wrote a graduate student some years ago as he began to put a proposal together. Eventually this study became an investigation of the "effects of students' attitudes toward school when competition for grades was removed from their

classroom experience” (Guenzel, 1993). The first purpose was grand and worthy. It was too large an exploration for a dissertation. The second was much more focused in scope. In constructing your proposal, set your target on a research setting or population that you can explore.

Your work has a chance to be perceived as highly significant when you set out to explore a timely and debated area in your discipline or field of study. If your dissertation topic is likely to be of great interest to other scholars and likely to be well received in competitive research journals and conferences, you increase the chances that what you discover will have an impact. Some students use their dissertation as the foundation for future professional activities, taking the knowledge from the study and using it to develop programs to help practitioners improve practice.

Don't Pick a Topic That Will Solve a Personal Issue

There is little point in going through all of the complexity and effort of designing a doctoral dissertation if you already know the answer to your research question. Usually when we have adopted a strong position on an issue or a problem of practice, we are operating from a set of beliefs. It is hard to shake our beliefs loose from their moorings. And, whatever data we gather are likely to be put together in such a way that they reinforce our beliefs. This is hardly the best starting point for a study that is supposed to be an objective piece of scholarship that is based on data and adds new knowledge to the field.

For example, the delivery of university coursework via distance education has received much attention lately. One doctoral student, convinced by argument and personal experience, wanted to demonstrate that distance learning was a much better way to learn than regular face-to-face instruction. Buttressed with arguments untested by empirical study, this dissertation set out to prove the superiority of distance learning by interviewing students who had taken distance-learning coursework for their doctoral degree. Eventually, the study came to focus on the experiences of faculty members who designed distance courses in faculty teams, and the issue of proving the superiority of distance learning was abandoned.

Another study that posed problems for its author sought to study the efficacy of an approach to the teaching of reading. This researcher was quite vested in a phonics-based approach that he had designed and sought to examine its success in a classroom. The classroom was the researcher's classroom. The teacher designed and implemented the intervention. In such a design, it is difficult to save the researcher

from the researcher. The study could have shifted to a qualitative examination of the lived experiences of the teacher in trying to implement a change. Such a shift would turn the obvious personal bias into a strength by shifting the focus to a qualitative study of the teacher's own experiences. It is difficult to study oneself but some dissertations have, in fact, done so to good effect (e.g., Heaton, 1994).

Try to avoid a topic in which you have a clear and vested interest. James Thurber provides the following wry thought: "Get it right or let it alone. The conclusions you jump to may be your own" (1956). One should let the data and evidence have some say in the results of the study.

Pick a Topic That Will Be of Service to Your Field

If, after you complete your study, you present your research to a professional or scholarly assembly, will anybody come to your presentation? If the answer is yes (as best you can guess), then you have selected a topic that has relevance to your professional colleagues. In this regard, you must read voraciously. Look up dissertations in Dissertation Abstracts. Search on the online electronic databases like ERIC. Look at what has been presented at scholarly research meetings such as the American Educational Research Association's annual meeting.

Your dissertation is unlikely to be of much service to your

Tip

In doing any sort of study that relies upon you as the source of data and information, your committee will want you to discuss the issue of bias. How will you guard against allowing your personal views to distort your data? How might your personal experience and values be an asset if you intend your study to contain personal narrative and experiences? Remember, the dissertation convention expects objectivity. If your study purpose and design set this convention aside, be prepared to defend your choice.

Tip

Identify those national research associations that encompass your academic area and your dissertation topic. Search the program of their annual meetings for topics in your area. If you find closely related presentations by other scholars, consider calling them and talking with them about your work. Researchers, even the most distinguished of scholars, are normally quite open to such conversations with those who share their interests.

Tip

The annals of doctoral research are full of examples of doctoral students and advisors presenting research and publishing papers together. Discuss this possibility with your advisor early in your dissertation efforts. You will profit from such a discussion by learning more about publishing research. In addition, publications are the highly valued currency in the realm of the university, so your advisor may well be especially interested in such opportunities.

field if it sits unread on your shelf. It used to be the case that a doctoral student expected to publish papers from his or her dissertation. This is still an expectation in a number of fields. For the nontraditional student who does not plan a career as a research scholar, the pressure to publish from the dissertation is decreased. Still, if your study is of worth, it deserves a wider audience than your advisor and supervisory committee. Thus, as you begin your study, consider

what sort of a product you might produce from it. Perhaps you will want to publish several scholarly papers for research journals or practitioner journals. Perhaps you will want to create a book from your study. The practice of professionals in the education and social science fields is increasingly built upon a foundation of research. In the field of education, this is sometimes referred to as *best practice*. The most recent federally funded school reform effort (No Child Left Behind) requires that funded projects be grounded in research as a condition of funding. This promises to enhance the utilization of research activities such as dissertation studies in education. In professional fields, there has always been a need for research that has clear implication for practice. Thus, consider what value your work may have in helping professionals improve their work, and consider how you will get your news to these professionals.

Summary

Prepare to read voraciously as a means of settling on your dissertation topic. Talk about your intentions with lots of people. Write to discover. Read other doctoral dissertations. Attend national conferences that have sessions relating to your interests. If your institution has a course designed to help you construct the dissertation proposal or dissertation, sign up for that course. Be patient. The topic will come to you.

Finding a Theory

Data data everywhere but not a thought to think.

—Theodore Rosak*

This section offers a lengthy discussion of one of the difficult topics the nontraditional student faces—the place of theory in the doctoral dissertation. I devote space to this topic because I have found the use of theory to be perplexing to many nontraditional students.

The ubiquitous symbol that Nike developed, the Swoosh, serves as an icon for our age. “Just do it!” This icon says to us at one level that we should not worry about why we do something. It is more important to act than it is to reason about why we act. If we think too long about our behavior, we run the risk of not risking, of not acting. The slogan is both a call for mindlessness and an expression of cultural impatience.

Doctoral students are sometimes infected by the urge to just do it (get the dissertation done) and by the feelings of impatience that often accompany the slow process of designing and completing the dissertation. Still, masterful as the Nike slogan is as a marketing tool for a company that wants to sell shoes, it does not serve as a useful mantra for the doctoral dissertation writer. All dissertations, like all practice, are predicated on beliefs. Put another way, all dissertations explicitly or implicitly arise from theories about the way things work. The degree to which a dissertation author uses or recognizes theory will vary widely.

For nontraditional doctoral students who have not spent a great deal of time being socialized into academic life at the university, there can be many aspects to doctoral study that appear strange and mysterious. One of those pieces of doctoral research that may seem abstract and difficult to grasp is the notion that the dissertation is expected to spring from some theoretical perspective. What is a theory? Do I have to build my study using some kind of theory? What if I just want to gather some data and see what these data tell me? How do I use a theory in framing my research questions? Does the theory come first or do the questions come first?

If a person reads through the dissertation abstracts in the research library, one will soon note that many of these research studies fall into the category of descriptive studies. Sometimes students use the useful term *exploratory* as a means of signaling that their study does not test

a theoretical hypothesis. The key elements of such studies are that the researchers gather data of either a quantitative or a qualitative type, present those data, and discuss the data in limited ways. The analysis and interpretation of these data usually is limited to the perceptions the researcher can bring to the task. There may be a noticeable lack of comment and insight from other scholars. There will be little utilization of a theoretical perspective as the foundation of the study.

What do female educational leaders say about their experiences attaining leadership positions? What are the factors school superintendents describe as important in their relationships with school boards? What factors influence classroom teachers to resist inclusion as a classroom practice? What factors influence at-risk college students to remain in college? What institutional behaviors do minority college students perceive as barriers to completion? Does a particular set of clinical practices change the communication patterns of autistic children? If these researchers used some set of beliefs to attempt to answer these questions, their studies would be grounded in theory. If they sought to build a theory about behavior from data they gathered, their studies would be labeled as grounded theory studies. If they simply sought to describe perceptions or factors with no effort to advance or test an idea or an explanation, these studies would be atheoretical. That is, the researchers neither set out to explore a theory nor utilized any particular theoretical perspective in arriving at their conclusions.

Much philosophical controversy has centered on how to draw the distinction between the observable and the unobservable. Did Galileo observe the moons of Jupiter with his telescope? Do we observe bacteria under a microscope? Do physicists observe electrons in bubble chambers? Do astronomers observe the supernova explosions with neutrino counters? Do we observe ordinary material objects or are sense-data the only observables?

—Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*

Audi's quote suggests to us that there is much about the world we cannot know with certainty. Thus, we develop explanations. Einstein suggested that we should imagine a clock encased in a box. We cannot open the box to see the clock in action, but we can observe

its actions. Understanding the elements that lead to that action involves theory. Many dissertation studies begin with a theory that is intended to explain action prior to the gathering of data or utilize theory in seeking to explain what has been observed.

I begin my own work with doctoral students with a theory. My theory is this. Practice is based on theory (or belief) whether we choose to recognize this or not. If this idea of mine is true, then all of our explorations into practice are based on our beliefs, on our theories about why we and others do what we do. When a school administrator instructs a teacher to gain more control and discipline in her classroom, that instruction is based on a set of beliefs about schooling and learning. When a teacher utilizes study centers in a fifth-grade classroom, the teacher does so because of implicit or explicit beliefs about what makes for effective learning. When a student of higher education studies different financial programs to learn what appears to best attract new students, that study is predicated on a set of beliefs about external incentives. When a social worker insists that family involvement in decision making is essential to long-term results, that conviction arises from a set of beliefs. When a special education professional uses animals as a motivator for autistic children, she or he does so because of implicit beliefs in what works for certain types of children. Indeed, our very choices about what to study in the doctoral dissertation are influenced by our beliefs about what matters. It is sometimes hard work to find the theories that do guide our work, but if we do not begin with some attempt to plumb our beliefs or the beliefs of others, we run the risk of contributing little to the understanding of others.

An illustration about the influence of theory follows. In 1968, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson published the results of a study they had completed of teacher expectations. The two believed that when teachers expected high achievement from a student, that student's performance would rise to the expectation of the teacher. Conversely, if the teacher held limited expectations for the student, that student's performance would reflect that low expectation. Rosenthal and Jacobson were operating on a theory called expectancy theory. This theory guided their exploration into teacher behavior. Their study, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development*, added to our knowledge of how formalized learning in schools can be better organized to promote student achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

While Rosenthal and Jacobson did not invent the theoretical concept that guided their exploration, they did apply it to an educational

setting. Expectancy theory was a notion that resonated with teachers and educational researchers. In the decades since this study was conducted, expectancy theory has spawned generations of curriculum developers and instructional specialists who stream out like missionaries to the school districts of the nation, armed with the idea or theory that if you think a child will do better, she or he will do better.

I offer this research as an example of how a belief in the way that the world works guided the exploration of a research project. This is what a theory does.

Here is another example of a theory. Alfie Kohn's work provides us with another equally useful but challenging set of assumptions about what works in classrooms and schools. Kohn (1999) challenged the prevailing belief that rewards serve to motivate the learner to learn. "Many of us," Kohn wrote, "believe motivation is direct: I tell you to do this and you will be rewarded. If the reward is sufficient, you will do what I ask." "Do this, and you will get that!" is Kohn's succinct summary of this belief that one will perform based on an expectation of some external reward like grades. Kohn offers us a competing theory. Internal rewards are more powerful motivators for learning. Rewards have a negative value in encouraging long-term motivation to learn and be creative. Acting in expectation of external rewards quickly becomes a matter of acting for the reward. In such instances, intrinsic motivation suffers. Kohn offers us a theory that we can systematically test by observing what works and what does not work.

Theory is a word derived from the Greek *theoria*, meaning "act of viewing, contemplating, considering." One of the early meanings of the word was that of the imaginative contemplation of reality. For Plato, a theory was a contemplated truth, a universal aspect of some thing. For Aristotle, a theory was pure knowledge, an abstraction of practice.

Theory causes confusion in the landscape of dissertation construction. Here are my suggestions for how to integrate theory into the doctoral dissertation. First, since your study may have its inspiration from the experiences you have had, begin by taking an inventory of the explanations that have been developed to account for the behavior or phenomenon in which you are interested. Such an approach requires that you dig beyond your own beliefs. Reading the literature about the subject that interests you will help you identify various explanations.

Second, think about how you might use these theories to guide the process you use to search for information and that you will use to

help you interpret information once you have gathered it. The subject you intend to explore has probably been explained by competing theories, especially if the subject has been the object of study by generations of scholars. Think about causes. If you look at the outcomes or results of human or organizational behavior that interest you, try to identify some of the causes that lead to those outcomes.

Summary

Theory can provide you with a real focus that will go a long way toward helping you build a solid and coherent dissertation study. This does not mean you have to ground your study in theory or that you have to interpret your data according to some theory. The use of theory will, however, increase the probability that your study will make a contribution to your field and profession.

Finding a Research Method

I want a house that has gotten over all its troubles. I don't want to spend the rest of my life bringing up a young and inexperienced house.

—Jerome K. Jerome*

Like Jerome's inexperienced house, you may not want a research method (the process for answering your research questions) that has yet to get over all its troubles. In other words, you want a process that is clear, that gives you guidance for the collecting and analyzing of data, and that promises to provide you with a certain level of confidence that the conclusions you reach are based on a reasonably objective process.

Constructing the right process and procedure to address your research question is a matter of great consequence for your study. Many students find themselves attracted to a method before they know exactly what they wish to study. Students averse to statistics announce that they will do a qualitative study. Students comfortable with mathematics determine early that they have no patience for the fieldwork of the ethnographer. In both instances, the cart is going before the horse. The method you elect should be more determined by the purpose of the study and the question(s) that are to be answered and less determined by your taste for or aversion to a particular method.

If you have begun your study with a problem, then your research question(s) will be framed around that problem. If it is a problem that

affects a particular population in some particular way, you can develop either a qualitative or a quantitative approach in order to answer your questions. If you elect the former, you may be able to make some valid recommendations relative to this population. If you elect a qualitative approach, you may be able to provide this population with some interesting perceptions. Using quantitative methodology, you may be able to speak with some authority about your target population. Using qualitative methodology, you may speak with authority about the experiences of those in your study. This extrapolation of the experiences of your subjects may provide meaningful information to others.

However, the method you select should also be influenced by the nature of the question(s) you ask.

While I have painted the preferred way to go, I know that it will remain the case that students will often select their method based on factors other than their research question(s). Their comfort levels with either quantitative or qualitative methods, the amount of time they have to devote to gathering data, the expenses associated with gathering data, and the skill level of the student in carrying out a method—all will be factors in the decision about finding a research method.

Summary

Be thoughtful and intentional about your choice of a research method. Make sure you have your research questions well formed before you settle on the method. Seek help from others about the options you have for addressing your research question(s). Consider at least two or three different design approaches. Read about research methods. Check out the research texts in the annotated bibliography in Appendix A.

Finding a Dissertation Support Group

Asking a working writer what he thinks about critics is like asking a lamppost how it feels about dogs.

—Christopher Hampton*

Good, constructive criticism is fundamental in building a sound dissertation. Such criticism may be unpleasant, as the quote above implies, but it is important. How does the nontraditional student create opportunities for such criticism?

For the nontraditional student, an informal peer group can be just the right antidote to the liability of what I have labeled solo scholarship. Solo scholarship is just what the label implies; it is researching and analyzing in isolation. Solo scholarship is a reality for most doctoral students at the dissertation stage, but that reality doesn't always lead to the best of outcomes. A lively focus on a research project by a number of people will typically result in a richer study. For example, a recent book titled *The Sociology of Philosophies*, by Randall Collins, finds that most major creations and innovations were brought to fruition within some kind of a movement or social group (Collins, 1998). If creativity was nourished socially for Freud, Degas, Hegel, Darwin, and Saturday Night Live, as Collins argues, creativity can be nurtured in the doctoral student by social interactions (Gladwell, 2002). Criticism of the right kind is essential in the construction and completion of a dissertation.

One of the best places to get criticism of the right kind is from a supportive group of peers. Students who pursue their degrees on campus or close enough to attend face-to-face classes often find ways to work together. When these students are all at the point of developing a doctoral dissertation, an opportunity exists for what graduate faculty now refer to as a dissertation support group, an informal group analogous to the class or course in the development of the dissertation proposal. Such interactive peer groups can go a long way toward replicating the type of experience many on-campus students find as they work to complete the dissertation.

Benefits of a Dissertation Support Group

The benefits of a peer support group are many. Psychologically it can be an important boost to be able to share issues, concerns, and doubts with others who are in a similar position. Shared experiences help the doctoral student overcome the obstacles that stand in the way. Dissertation support groups also tend to create a form of overt and covert pressure to work on the dissertation. This pressure is overt in that members of the group will typically help you improve your ideas and encourage you to move ahead. The pressure is covert in that you will feel a pressure to have something to communicate to the other members of the group about your progress.

A dissertation support group also gives you the weight of a larger group of students in dealing with the doctoral faculty and program administration. Often, nontraditional students suffer from not being able to voice their concerns or questions with professors. This is not

due to intent. Faculty and program administrators have multiple demands on their time and the most immediate demand often receives the most attention. Thus, the nontraditional student may not feel well served by the institution.

A dissertation support group also provides students with the opportunity to practice developing clarity and rigor in their study. Having to present and defend your ideas before an audience is a solid way to bring strength to a dissertation study.

Organizing a Support Group

As you go through your program, you become familiar with other students. Either in face-to-face classes or in distance classes, you will have had an opportunity to come in contact with others. Your program may facilitate the formation of such support groups. If so, take advantage of this. If not, find ways to form your own. Ask your advisor about peer group support. You will be able to

Tip

If at all possible, arrange for face-to-face meetings. All will benefit.

identify your fellow students by requesting names from the program administration or from class lists. Often, distance classes provide you with the names and e-mail addresses of others. Communicate with these individuals about forming a dissertation support group.

Who, how, and when are three factors you will want to keep in mind.

What students will be in your group? For on-campus groups, there is often the opportunity to know students from other doctoral programs, and thus the support group may consist of individuals from different programs. The nontraditional student tends to know best those students from the same department or program. It is probably best to begin with students in your program, although there may well be reason to involve others. It is also best to keep in mind that the group should consist of three to five students. The question of how to form a support group may require assistance from a faculty member or a program administrator. Establishing communication links is necessary. When to form a support group depends on need. Doctoral students at the dissertation stage can most benefit from such a group. Prior to that stage, there may be limited interest in devoting scarce time to an activity that does not seem relevant. Still, if you have worked in a class with others on a project, you might well have developed relationships that you value that could easily lead to a dissertation support group. Here are some suggested steps in forming a dissertation support group:

1. Identify students with whom you would like to work.
2. Either extend a specific invitation to students whom you know and respect to form a group of three to five students, or extend a more general invitation to the larger list of your peers, inviting all who wish to express their interest in participating in such a group.
3. Consider proximity in constructing a group (i.e., if possible, do you want people who can meet face to face?).
4. Consider personality (as best you can) in constructing such a group.
5. Consider how you will communicate and interact.
6. Give initial consideration to how often you will commit to interacting.

Getting Started

Here are some suggestions for beginning the work of the group. Below is a list of items to discuss. You can do so via e-mail, a chat room, a phone conference, or if possible, a face-to-face meeting.

1. Provide each member a chance to talk about his or her dissertation study.
2. Discuss what you want to accomplish as a group.
3. Discuss how you want to organize your group.
4. Discuss what you need to do to establish both asynchronous and synchronous ways to communicate (in all probability, you will want both).
5. Determine how you feel about establish for each other.
6. Determine how you feel about other people joining your group.
7. Determine how you want to achieve a supportive but critical environment.

I present specific activities for the support group in Appendix D.

Summary

Persistence is one of the characteristics that distinguishes those who complete their doctoral degrees from those who remain ABD (all but dissertation). Finding ways to persist is important. Obviously, how students organize their time and energy is important. A dissertation support group of peers can be an invaluable tool in helping you persist to completion.

The Doctoral Dissertation in Historical Perspective

Universities are the cathedrals of the modern age. They shouldn't have to justify their existence by utilitarian criteria.

—David Lodge*

This section provides the nontraditional student with general information about the basic convention of the dissertation itself. As doctoral education becomes more a part of professional preparation, there is a need to understand the origins of the doctoral dissertation in the scholarly academy. This section is written for those interested in the dissertation as a scholarly convention.

In any given year, it is common for U.S. institutions of higher education to award over 45,000 doctoral degrees in various fields and subject area disciplines. This is a large number that grows each year. Sheer numbers tax the institutions and faculty that provide the education that leads to these degrees. Table 1.1 presents information about doctoral degrees just in education.

For the student and the faculty advisor, the most challenging part of the degree program is the dissertation. Berelson noted that the doctoral dissertation stands at the center of the many issues associated with doctoral study (1960, p. 172). Matters have not changed in the years since that comment was made. Completing the dissertation is the stumbling block for many. It is often the first significant research project a student has attempted. It is often the first time in a person's educational career that learning is undertaken as such a solo activity. Completing the dissertation is often attempted against a backdrop of personal and employment obligations that constantly disrupt the study.

There have been significant changes in doctoral study over recent years. Both the nature of the experience and the students who

Table 1.1 Number of Doctoral Degrees in Education by Decade Using Subject Identifiers

| | 1960-1971 | 1971-1980 | 1981-1990 | 1991-2000 |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Educational Administration | 636 | 1,880 | 5,572 | 6,168 |
| Curriculum & Instruction | 138 | 5,723 | 7,620 | 12,526 |
| Education | 32,228 | 73,079 | 75,228 | 86,333 |

Data Source: Dissertation Abstracts.

undertake the completion of a dissertation have changed in many ways. In order to understand the magnitude of these changes, it is helpful to recall the origins of doctoral study and doctoral dissertations.

Those who study higher education find that a university revolution occurred in the last part of the 19th century. During this time period, professors at places like Johns Hopkins, the University of Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, and Yale created the model of graduate programs that we know today. In the 19th century, many university officials advocated for graduate study, but resistance to innovation and disagreement over what graduate education should be provided much discussion. Several factors pushed the creation of new graduate programs and colleges. New fields of knowledge were creating great pressure on the classical curriculum. Significant numbers of U.S. students, dissatisfied with the classical offerings of U.S. universities, were studying abroad. Advanced study also had inherent appeal to many. Berelson (1960) provided an apt characterization of the shift in post-secondary education during this time period.

Prior to 1876, the following characteristics described U.S. post-secondary education:

1. The college positioned at the top of the educational hierarchy
2. A largely ministerial faculty (often a faculty drummed out of their church congregations)
3. A recitative class session as the pedagogical model
4. A small student body selected for gentility and social status
5. An unearned master's degree given to alumni for good behavior
6. Advanced students who went abroad

After 1900, the following characteristics prevailed:

1. The university at the top of higher educational hierarchy
2. Utilitarian and community-centered programs of study
3. New subjects of study
4. Seminars, labs, and dissertations added to pedagogical array
5. A growing attractiveness for new class of students
6. A graduate faculty

One hundred years later, doctoral education is again experiencing significant change. One can make the following list of new challenges to the type of doctoral education that was developed in 1900:

1. New providers, including corporations and proprietary organizations, are challenging the university monopoly over doctoral education.
2. Increasing numbers of part-time students stress the traditional graduate system.
3. Program administrators increasingly attempt to allow non-graduate faculty a role in assisting doctoral students.
4. The doctoral degree in some fields, particularly in education, is becoming less grounded in theory and more rooted in practice.
5. Students are demanding a greater customer orientation by doctoral programs in terms of access and expectations for practices in keeping with adult learners.
6. Faculty members witness a decline in the socialization of the student into the academy and discipline.

The traditional model of graduate education in which a graduate student works closely with a graduate faculty member is less common in many disciplines. Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (2000) wrote, "Gone is the hallowed tradition of graduate students as apprentice scholars, privileged to work closely with the greatest minds of their universities—and armed with the promise that upon completion of their apprenticeship they will gain a seat alongside their mentors in that lofty ivory tower" (p. 24). These changes have naturally altered the dissertation process experienced by the student.

The students who receive these degrees have changed as well. When the academy first invented doctoral dissertations, the

common practice was that these students came to the university and studied there. More often than not, these doctoral students of earlier generations studied for many years. They labored in libraries and laboratories; they read deeply in their fields. Their doctoral studies were incubated slowly. Once they commenced their study, the collection of data and its analysis was labor intensive over an extended period of time. This depiction of the experience of earlier generations of doctoral students is probably not entirely accurate. If a person were to look at past dissertations, he or she would find many that show little evidence of this imagined type of rigor. Still, the image of the doctoral student cloistered in study for many years remains as an ideal.

The word *dissertation* comes from the Latin word *disserere*, meaning to discuss, treat, or examine. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies an early use of the word in an essay by Hobbes from 1651: “A dissertation concerning man in his severall habitudes and respects.”

Other early writers also used the term:

Observing this, I made pause in my dissertation. (Dryden, 1783)

He composed three dissertations in a week, all on different subjects. (Pope, 1728)

Warton has expressly written a dissertation on the subject. (D’Israeli, 1841)

The sermone is a dissertation and does violence to nature in the effort to be like a speech. (Gladstone, 1879)

In these, as in most other contexts, the word dissertation means a spoken or written discussion of a particular topic. As professors at those U.S. institutions who set forth the new shape of graduate education debated what requirements they would impose upon students, one component that was quickly resolved was that of the dissertation. Students earning a doctoral degree would write and defend a dissertation. This was done in the expectation that such a requirement would help serve the goal of producing new knowledge and original thinkers. Thus the dissertation was established as the culminating experience of the doctoral student.

Today, as doctoral study becomes increasingly connected to professional development in many social science and business fields,

some question why the writing of a dissertation is necessary. What sense is there in requiring a student to write a large academic research paper? Responses from the academy in defense of the dissertation vary, but here are some of the arguments. First, the doctoral degree is a research degree even in a professional program in education or business. Such degrees are granted by a governing board upon the recommendation of a graduate college or by the faculty of a college. As such, that academic community shapes degree requirements. The graduate faculty of a university controls what students must do in order to earn a degree. The dissertation is expected to demonstrate mastery of the field and to advance or to modify former knowledge; that is, it should analyze new material, find new results, or draw new conclusions. It may interpret old material in a new light.

Summary

This section has covered some of the underlying expectations of university faculty for the dissertation. Because the nontraditional student does not always have the luxury of assimilating this type of knowledge through a sustained campus presence, the underlying assumptions faculty hold for the dissertation study were covered. You should now have a better understanding of why you have been asked to design and carry out a dissertation study. The next five chapters of the book delineate the actual component parts of a dissertation and describe each.