
Preface

I hope that this book will live up to its title as a portable advisor. The book is directed at those unable to work as full-time students on a university campus or who must study from a distance. Throughout this book, I refer to such graduate students as nontraditional graduate students. Often the nontraditional student does not have ready access to information about the doctoral dissertation. She or he will not have the information-laden informal networks available to the full-time, on-campus student. Lacking quick access to a research library, the nontraditional student may have difficulty identifying relevant research. Communicating with an advisor and the members of a supervisory committee may prove to be a daunting task. The pace of the academic calendar may be at odds with the work-life of the nontraditional student. In short, there are many reasons why the nontraditional student operates at a disadvantage. This book is intended to offset this disadvantage.

The dissertation phase of doctoral study is one full of myth and convention at most institutions. This book also attempts to dispel myth and reveal convention. I want to say at the outset that each person's journey through the dissertation is unique. Paradoxically, your study will look like no other person's study, and your study will also look like all other dissertations. By this I mean that when you have completed your study, you will have made decisions appropriate to your exploration, but you will also have made these decisions in light of those requirements that faculty members impose on your study. Hence your study will be like no other, but it will share common characteristics with the conventions of the doctoral dissertation.

The dissertation phase of one's doctoral program is potentially a phase of great satisfaction and accomplishment, metaphorically like climbing a challenging mountain. Effort, labor, risk, new insights, and satisfaction are all associated with the task. For some, the most

rewarding aspect of the mountain is the climb to the top. For others, the reward comes by reaching the top. We experience and value the journey differently. There is a key difference, however, between climbing a mountain and writing a dissertation. Mountain climbers have noted that one may climb a mountain because it is there. One does not usually write a dissertation because it is there. One writes a dissertation in large part because one is required to write a dissertation. One may eagerly carry out a study and report findings, but one does not usually leap to carry out a study under the supervision and critical eyes of an advisor and of a group of university professors. It is a challenge to find a topic; it is a greater challenge to find a topic acceptable to the supervisory committee; it is an even greater challenge to implement a study that will also be acceptable. But, that is the goal.

You, the doctoral student, will appreciate this challenge more fully on the day when you shake your advisor's hand and are complimented with the title of doctor before your name.

Most doctoral program faculty supervisors require a proposal or preproposal prior to the final determination of the dissertation study. This book should be helpful company in that regard as well. Structured opportunities to have one's ideas discussed and criticized almost always help students develop dissertations. For the traditional on-campus student, such conversations occur with peers and with one's advisor. For the nontraditional student, such opportunities for interaction are different. This book provides many suggestions for interacting with others.

The book is not intended to stand in place of the advisor; rather, the book is intended to stand with the advisor as an additional resource for you. As I will say repeatedly, consistent communication with an advisor is one of the factors associated with successful completion of the dissertation. If you are a nontraditional student unfamiliar with the U.S. approach to doctoral education, you should realize that U.S. and European universities differ in their approach to doctoral education. In the U.S. university, the advisor usually plays a significant role in the development of the dissertation proposal and monitors the dissertation process from start to finish.

I should like to add a note for doctoral student advisors, particularly in the various education disciplines. In recent years, many of us have experienced changes in our work with doctoral students. It has become more common for the student to select a dissertation topic that may lie outside our areas of expertise and interest. The part-time doctoral student is more common. And the student who must work

full time while writing the dissertation is also more common. Thus the generative conversations that used to characterize the relationship of advisor and student are less likely to occur. This changing relationship may not be desirable but it is, nonetheless, a reality. For all these reasons, a book such as this should help ease your difficulties in working with a nontraditional student. I wish also to note that as this book has circulated in draft form, many doctoral students have told me it would have been helpful for them to have a copy of it as they began their doctoral program, long before they actually began to work on the dissertation.

There are a number of examples in this book drawn from dissertation studies. Many of these are taken from work completed or undertaken at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln because my most sustained contact with doctoral students has taken place at that institution. These examples should not be dismissed as nonrepresentative because they were written at one institution. A perusal of dissertation abstracts reveals a commonality of conventions in doctoral-degree-granting institutions and a similarity in the types of work done by doctoral students. While our practices in guiding doctoral students through the dissertation may vary, our end products display a similarity.

My perspective on the doctoral dissertation is intentionally pragmatic in large part because I have found over many years of helping students construct dissertations that doctoral students want pragmatic advice. To be sure, there are intrinsic reasons for doctoral research; to be sure, there are weighty intellectual issues to be examined; to be sure, getting the degree may not always be seen as the most important motivation for completing the dissertation. Still, there is the matter of “getting done.” This book is intended to help.

Chapter 1 presents what I call first steps. The sections in this chapter cover a range of issues and topics that doctoral students typically experience as they begin to define both their topic of study and the framework within which they intend to carry out the study. Chapter 2 covers the introductory chapter of the dissertation or dissertation proposal. I include in this section the typical material that the advisor and supervisory committee expect in the introductory section of the dissertation. Chapter 3 covers the literature review and includes information about using the research library. Chapter 4 identifies the general issues associated with the research method and identifies some problem areas that doctoral students often experience as they seek to design a method to answer their research questions. In Chapters 5 and 6, I go over issues associated

with reporting the data that have been gathered and in writing up results. The last chapter, Chapter 7, discusses a number of topics that frequently surface as doctoral students seek to better understand events like the oral defense, dissertation abstracts, the supervisory committee, and graduation. Four appendices provide additional resources: (a) an annotated bibliography, (b) a bibliography of helpful dissertations, (c) an assessment form for evaluating the dissertation proposal, and (d) a list of suggested activities for a dissertation support group.

You will note many little quotations with which I begin sections. Implicit in these quotes is some message or bit of humor that I would convey to you about the section. I also wish to model for you the rhetorical device of beginning a piece of writing with a quote. Often this device or *hook* helps a writer introduce an idea. I have taken many quotes from a very useful book of quotations by Robert Fitzhenry (1993) and indicate this source with an asterisk (*).

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