

Title of Submission: A Call to a Revolutionary Cultural Change in Doctoral Education

Author: Marianne Di Pierro

Affiliation: Western Michigan University

Address: Director, Graduate Center for Writing and Proposal Development
Western Michigan University
The Graduate College
260 W Walwood Hall
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-5242

Email Address: marianne.dipierro@wmich.edu

Abstract of Paper:

Educators have long appreciated the fact that doctoral students' movement from the relatively predictable coursework stage of their programs of study into the unstructured dissertation process may negatively affect persistence. This paper focuses upon the manner in which dissertation advisors and committee members can become proactive and preserve this important contingent of students, which is currently faced with an attrition rate of 50% nationwide. As the United States assumes its position as a world leader in information technology, it is a fact that additional scholars and researchers will be required to accommodate the demand. Universities must have a vested interest in reducing attrition rates at their respective institutions if they are to provide research scholars to a technologically complex world, and further, if they are to remain competitive. Recognition of the critical need to place structure and form on the entire process of writing the dissertation should be a necessary concomitant of all university retention efforts. These efforts will require innovative approaches that will spawn a revolutionary cultural change in the doctoral education process.

Title of the Submission: A Call to a Revolutionary Cultural Change in Doctoral Education

Topic Area: Other Areas of Education: Doctoral Education

Keywords : doctoral attrition; doctoral advising; dissertation process

Name of the Author: Marianne Di Pierro

Mailing Address: Dr. Marianne Di Pierro
Director, Graduate Center for Writing and Proposal Development
Western Michigan University
The Graduate College
260 W Walwood Hall
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-5242

Email Address: marianne.dipierro@wmich.edu

Telephone Number: 269.387.8249

FAX: 269.387.8232

A Call to a Revolutionary Cultural Change in Doctoral Education

Educators have long appreciated the fact that Phase II in doctoral education, the point at which the student becomes ABD, can be a path marked by indecision, hesitancy, and self-doubt. These common reactions are ironic, yet understandable, since students move from the veritable safety and predictability of course work (Phase I) to the nebulosity of the dissertation process, a process that often leads to a sense of victimization, doubt, fear, loss of autonomy and self-esteem. How is it that highly skilled, intelligent, and seemingly confident doctoral students lose their momentum at this critical juncture and become victimized by the very process that they never anticipated as representing conflict? Moreover, how can dissertation advisors and committees become proactive and preserve this important contingent of students, which is currently faced with an attrition rate of 50% nationwide? (Bowen and Rudenstine 105). As the United States assumes its position as a world leader in information technology, it is a fact that additional scholars and researchers will be required to accommodate the demand. The University of California, for example, has projected a 20% increase in graduate enrollments by the 2005-2006 academic year (Parent). Universities must have a vested interest in reducing attrition rates at their respective institutions if they are to provide research scholars to a technologically complex world, and further, if they are to remain competitive. Recognition of the critical need to place structure and form on the process of writing the dissertation should be a necessary concomitant of all university retention efforts, but it must be followed by a plan of action.

In order to answer the first question, it is necessary to define victimization as a term applicable in its correlation to the dissertation process. Two definitions will suffice for this purpose: 1. A

victim is someone or something that is killed, destroyed, injured, or otherwise harmed by, or suffering from some act, condition, agency or circumstance. 2. A person who suffers some loss, especially by being swindled (Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary). There is little doubt that the current organizational culture of graduate schools legitimizes this perspective of student-as-victim. Patricia Hinchey and Isabel Kimmel note the metaphoric relationship between this culture and the literature that describes it in terms of "survival" (1). These metaphors lend to the perception of doctoral study as something "perilous – a downright dangerous – enterprise" that must be survived (Hinchey and Kimmel 1-2). Ironically, the issue of victimization is not only a fact for those who attrite from programs of doctoral study, but is just as legitimate for those who manage to survive.

The reasons for doctoral attrition are multifarious and complex and reflect a diverse range of issues from financial constraints upon students to issues concerning emotional health and well-being. However, one of these is posited in the current nebulous state of the doctoral dissertation process and the manner in which it is administrated, that inadvertently serves as the agency of suffering, the perpetrator of a victimization that swindles students out of the progressive outcomes they fully anticipated reaching. Lack of institutional responsibility in this critical area represents a decisive failure to own the problem, to be accountable, and to enact purposeful change.

For many doctoral students who are writing the dissertation, the experience of being injured to a greater or lesser degree represents a clear threat to the stronghold of autonomy and to self-directedness, the very qualities that the process suggests it values, and finally, to the attainment

of the coveted degree. Yet, if we were to query this highly talented, capable, and intelligent group of individuals and ask them if they viewed themselves as *victims*, they would most likely deny the label because the term itself is disconcerting. It is, however, in recounting their doctoral experiences to me that they allow their wounds to emerge, the veracity of the term *victim* only compounded.

In my current position as director of the Graduate Center for Writing and Proposal Development at Western Michigan University (WMU), I often glimpse into the private worlds of students for whom the rules of engagement within the playing field of graduate education have been cannibalized by the abstruse circumstances of the dissertation process. It is one for which students, and often advisors, are essentially unprepared. Despite the excellence of certain dissertation seminars structured to assist students by requiring that they write the prospectus during the semester-length timeframe, still, many students have no true pragmatic experience. And advisors, unless they have a firm grasp of proposal development and are comfortable directing students through the process, will also be at a loss to fulfill the advising promise so that the experience of writing the dissertation becomes an act of joy that establishes a professional platform for the aspiring scholar.

The lack of a methodological approach to the dissertation project is compounded when students sense a heightened responsibility to come up with an original monograph that will advance the scholarship in ways never before envisioned, not realizing that the movement into originality and potential obscurity may cost them career opportunities. Instead of electing for inquiry-based research projects that promote scholarly engagements and are in fact derived from ongoing

academic dialogues, some students feel charged with the monumental task of writing a *magnum opus* on a topic that remains substantively removed from the current pantheon of issues drawing critical attention. It is understandable that many students fall prey to an uneasy inertia.

These concerns frequently emerge as students begin to craft the dissertation proposal (Phase II). If students have not been sufficiently prepared to research and to write throughout their curriculum, and if they have not given considerable thought to their research interests, they may discover that this initial stage represents a formidable challenge and the first confrontation with *dis-ease*. According to Bowen and Rudenstine, students in the disciplines of English, history, and political science appear to encounter particular difficulty in the area of selecting a dissertation topic (14). Bowen and Rudenstine write that this period of time between the completion of course work and the discovery of the dissertation topic is an “unusually vulnerable” one (14) that may require students “to spend one and two years searching for the “right” topic and preparing a dissertation prospectus” (254.) Similarly, Bonnie Sigafus identifies a “turning point” in doctoral education, where students shift away from perceptions of satisfaction experienced prior to the qualifying examinations to those of dissatisfaction and insecurity after the qualifying examinations, when the structure and support enjoyed during the course work phase of doctoral study is replaced by the more isolating environment of the dissertation process (18-22).

These facts, coupled with lack of faculty preparation, training, and support for the demands of advising, as well as lack of appropriate advising models and awareness of the practical strategies for writing the dissertation, all can prove to be an unfortunate combination for advisor and

student alike: each relies upon a knowledge or experience base that may not be present- hence, the opportunity for failed expectations and disappointing outcomes. Beyond this is the need for the advisor's sustained support of the student during the dissertation phase.

What can be done to heighten awareness about the dissertation process and those strategies that will aid students in navigating the course? Most importantly, how can we humanize the process? There are several policy-driven approaches that graduate colleges should consider to engender a dialogue between advisors and their students as well as to enhance the doctoral education process.

Professional Development for Dissertation Advisors

Professors who anticipate becoming dissertation advisors should urge their institutions to provide professional training that will prepare them for the task of advising. These measures are critical for those entering the professoriate. It would be ludicrous to even think of putting a medical doctor into the operating room to perform surgery sans training; yet, professors are simply thrown into the advising circle and expected to *know* how to advise based on the virtue of their own Ph.D.s. There are no comprehensive internships and residencies designed to provide training, guidance, hands-on experience, and expertise.

Advising takes into account a plethora of responsibilities ranging from pragmatic elements such as development of the proposal and implementation of contextual suggestions that relate to the development of the document, to time management issues as well as those relevant to

communication skills: active listening, critical thinking and speaking. Moreover, it embraces ethical considerations such as professional responsibility to the student, intellectual property, authorship rights in the case of collaborative publications and joint research. As we read a completed monograph, we look at what, in essence, is the final destination of the formal academic journey, but we have little cognizance of the creative journey and the interconnectedness of advising to the success of that final product. Exploring the manner in which the document is shaped and crafted - how a strategy or a framework for the study is discussed and then developed - how it is revised and restructured would inform the process for advisor and student alike.

Professors are entitled to receive formal training that considers the wide range of challenges confronting them throughout the dissertation process. Such training is currently not part of the professional development repertoire at most universities in the United States. In light of this fact, professors should seek out their own mentors under whom they can study and learn in a self-designed apprenticeship. Before professors lead a dissertation, they should serve on at least two dissertation committees and co-advise on an additional two under the direction of their mentors, seasoned professionals whose reputations for advising excellence are acknowledged.

Commitment to the Student and the Process

Professors should recognize that as dissertation advisors, they play a direct role in the success of the project. Campbell's study of ABDs in education conducted at the University of Delaware reveals that the lack of a strong advising relationship was a contributing factor to students'

decision to leave their programs of study, and Lenz' study in 1995 similarly bears out this finding. Advisors must be committed to working with a student for anywhere from six months to several years. Unless their schedules and interest truly permit for this sort of engagement, they should avoid making a commitment that there is little hope of fulfilling. Students have a right to know how many advisees a potential advisor is directing through the process and to ascertain the degree of the professor's commitment to their project. Moreover, they have a right to inquire about the potential advisor's own dissertation process. These issues should be discussed up front, before the final decision to select an advisor.

Forming the Dissertation Committee

A committee's organization should never be serendipitous. The dissertation advisor, as the key figure in the advising circle, also assists the student in the appointment of committee members. The committee should be regarded as a team of professionals, aligned with the student, and not as an adversarial body. We would all agree that while such bodies are not deliberately designed to ensure untoward outcomes, nevertheless, an unfortunate combination of players can create those ends. Hinchey and Kimmel write of faculty members who may have "unequal amounts of power among themselves, a situation that can cause a variety of problems for students" (104). Thus, the issue of power imbalances within the advising circle can figure prominently in the success or failure of the student to persist.

The advisor should direct the student to the best professors who are professionally prepared, by virtue of their expertise, to serve on the committee, eager and willing to commit to the project,

and who share an appreciation and respect for the student and the other members of the committee, as well as for the project and its successful completion. Students have a right to voice their opinions in the selection process, and may want to consider using interview techniques to determine that potential members are a good fit for each other and for the project. In essence, committee members, by their presence, enter into an unwritten contract with the student to deliver the means through which conferral of the degree becomes possible.

Committee Protocol

Committees are designed for an express purpose, so it is wise for professors not to make assumptions about the manner in which committees are brought together or the manner in which they serve particular ends. Recognizing the necessity for a protocol will help to eliminate mixed messages in terms of function. Presumably, members are there to guide the student through the dissertation process and to draw attention to particular details of scholarly research. They are in place to lend expertise and to serve as mentors in their own right as the student crafts the monograph. Ideally, this expertise extends into the types of contextual and linguistic editing that ensure the quality of the scholarly document. But is this the role delineated by the dissertation advisor? Just as students are left wondering about the rules of engagement regarding the dissertation process, so too are committee members for whom the protocol of serving on a committee is left in a nebulous state.

Rather than relegating it to a “learn as you go” activity, it makes better sense for advisors to call for a conversation centered in a strategic plan of action and to discuss the manner in which

particular committee members will serve. Issues concerning the method through which individual dissertation chapters are to be read and commented upon should be addressed. Are committee members to report their findings or their estimates of the project's progress directly to the advisor, to the student, to both? In addition, agreement concerning an appropriate time frame that members should adhere to in terms of returning chapters to the student should also be included in the strategic plan conversation.

At times, as I attend dissertation defenses, it is clear to me that the dissertation advisor has not delineated the role of the individual committee members. Moreover and most distressing is that those roles and the duties and responsibilities connected to them, remain unclear to the professors themselves. It is often a hedging game in many respects because no one knows the rules of engagement. Some professors are left to puzzle through the level of involvement that is welcome, and suggestions for ways to strengthen the document are deferred to the dissertation advisors who regard themselves as the primary arbiters of revision. Others are involved in what appears to be in-depth constructive criticism that comes after the fact of the dissertation writing, at the oral defense, too late to avoid often lengthy and time-consuming revisions that could have been incorporated earlier. One colleague responsible for the methods design of a dissertation never settled into a definitive plan and continued to shift direction, even after the fact of the defense -when procedural concerns should have been moot. Apologies to the student aside, it simply isn't good advising practice to shift the methods paradigm in the eleventh hour, a situation exacerbated by his continued hesitation and inability to articulate an appropriate statistical plan to the student. This proclivity, no doubt couched in perfectionism, is not unlike the experiences that dog doctoral students as they struggle to write the perfect monograph.

When we consider the variables concerning time-to-degree, we must be aware that delays centered in a protracted revision process often play a direct role in a delayed graduation date, a fact that could negatively affect the student's employment opportunities. It is up to advisors to lend their expertise to the organization of the committee and then to structure the operational plan of action for committee members and for the student. Nebulous and ill-defined roles, procedures, and methods all preclude the possibility of enlisting the professional expertise of the committee as a team dedicated to the excellence and timely conclusion of the final document.

Structure the Dissertation as a Time-Managed Project

Many students initially think of the dissertation in its finished state or even as a book that they must write, and are not cognizant of the ways in which it is constructed or assembled. This lack of structure in the dissertation process is a serious impediment to completion of the project (Tluczek). Bowen and Rudenstine state that "more structure is needed in graduate education, with clearly specified objectives, incentives, and timelines" (14). The top recommendation for research intensive institutions surveyed as part of the April, 2000 conference on Re-Envisioning the Ph.D. at the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington, revealed that participants wanted a "system less opaque to students" and one that clarified not only time to degree but also outlined expectations (Walker 2). It would behoove advisors to begin with this premise in mind.

Complicating the dissertation process is the fact that students frequently do not see the integrated logic and function of the chapters and are not aware of how information is efficiently gathered and categorized. In addition, they assume that the dissertation requires a period of years to

complete. While this timeframe may be more appropriate for certain disciplines, in engineering or the sciences, for example, it is not necessarily true for many other disciplines. The tendency to exaggerate time to completion may be an example of what students perceive to be the overwhelming nature of the dissertation.

Dr. Sonja Foss, Chairperson of the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado, Denver, and Dr. William Waters, professor of English and Writing Program Coordinator at Northwest Missouri State University, Kansas City, Missouri, are writing consultants and dissertation facilitators who advocate the use of timelines when discussing the length of time required of students to complete the monograph. Foss and Waters are advocates of the *six-month dissertation*, an entirely possible enterprise for many disciplines, given the commitment of students to the research and writing schedules delineated for them. In addition, they adhere to the perspective that the time advisors spend upfront, during what they refer to as the “conceptual conversation” or proposal development stage of the project, is time well invested. Advisors who enter into these conversations with their advisees engage in a productive process that helps them to actively listen to their students’ research interests and respond with an organizational plan that culminates in the successful completion of the document. Establishing attainable goals through the implementation of time schedules is a critical factor for timely completion of the dissertation (Bauer).

Foss and Waters approach the dissertation as a project that is managed by implementing goals and structuring a viable plan to attain them, according to the number of available hours the student can commit to the project each week. The document is honed, shaped, crafted into its

final form in incremental stages that coincide with the timeline. Their approach is singular, tailored to the individual lifestyle demands of students who have busy professional and personal lives and for whom the integration of the dissertation project into an already complicated schedule could be a daunting, if not impossible feat, without an organizational schema.

Once the concept is in place and the research questions written, Foss and Waters urge students to allow those questions to lend to relevant areas in the literature review. The frequent mistake they observe is that too often, the review of literature precedes the research questions, and the student attempts to formulate research questions derived from the review. This reverse logic often tends to slow down the process and confounds the project. Moreover, the unique literature review coding system they have devised keeps students on task, focused, and productive, elements that provide them with the means to an efficient and thorough completion of the monograph.

Students who avail themselves of such *project maps* are equipped with a vision, a direction that aids them in managing the dissertation journey and the subsequent destination: graduation.

Every traveler, in the real or the metaphoric sense, deserves to know the destination and how long it will take to get there. Advisors must work with committee members to establish an organized plan that will take the student, and themselves, through the process.

The Uneven Balance of Power

The balance of power between the advisor and the student is not even. One of the most pervading symptoms of students' recognition of this fact concerns their reluctance to verbalize

concerns for fear of possible reprisals. For many, it is the *potential* for harm, any element that thwarts the attainment of the degree, which is enough to cause them to become quiescent and to surrender their autonomy through silence. Investment in the attainment of a doctoral degree is a high stakes enterprise that does not readily allow for losses. Doctoral students often enter into the dichotomous, psychological marathon of attempting to subdue their normal impulses to resist negative forces and flee to the safety of other advisors, other committees, or even other disciplines, or to submit to the process in the hope that compliance will win the day. They question what it is proper (safe) to say and what it is not, and they doubt their own intuition. Throughout, there is a subtle, but nevertheless real, undercurrent of disconnection and isolation that lends to despair and sometimes to depression.

Advisors' words and actions, or their absence, carry the weight of the law where the student is concerned. Striking a balance is necessary; moreover, it is humane and ethically warranted. Advisors cannot be mind readers, but they must be aware of the fact that a student's silence itself can tell a story. The work of Scott and Bobbi Kerlin has focused on students' phenomenological experiences and "seeks to make visible the inner silence of the graduate experience to those in positions of power who might otherwise not see or know these student voices" (19). It is disconcerting that so many who occupy these "positions of power" are sufficiently removed from their own graduate experiences that they no longer relate without the benefit of studies to enlighten. Hinchey concurs, finding that "faculty abuse of power...is only partly indicated by statistics on attrition and the number of ABDs" but notes that even those who succeed and earn the degree often inherit a legacy of "bitterness, cynicism, and a sense of failure and/or

unworthiness” (107). As long as the power of the advising circle remains unbridled and faculty members left unchecked and unaccountable, then we can be certain of this hereditary estate.

As academicians, we want students to demonstrate scholarly independence, and yet, it is ironic not to recognize that such independence, within the parameters of a project never previously embarked upon, may not always be possible without sage guidance and direction dispensed in a non-threatening manner. This fact of advisor involvement does not in any manner diminish the value of the degree or the merit of the student pursuing it. The successful doctoral candidate is not born in isolation but rather is the product of a collaborative enterprise among advisors, dissertation committee members, and a wide network of supportive individuals. Commitment to the student, to the process, and to the successful completion of the degree is the mentor’s goal. Structuring an egalitarian relationship nurtures that commitment.

The Advising Model: Replicating Good Models and Rejecting Poor Models

Advising models are frequently based upon the ones to which advisors were exposed during their own doctoral process. Advisors who themselves enjoyed a nurturing, supportive advising relationship, will most likely replicate that particular model in their own advising style. If the experience was poor, they may make a conscious decision to avoid replicating that version or may end up subconsciously incorporating it and repeating the pattern. Either way, a pattern of normalization occurs. This fact may help to explain how and why poor advising models can be perpetuated and viewed as appropriate for so many universities.

One of my colleagues tells of her successful six-month dissertation, wrested not only out of her own scholarly excellence but also from the professional commitment of her advisor whose turnaround period for submitted chapters was twenty-four hours. When asked if she duplicated that pattern with her own significant number of advisees, she replied that while she couldn't always respond as expediently as her advisor did, she managed to return documents within forty-eight hours. In addition, she had been seasoned from early in her education to think about the research questions that most interested her and to craft research papers around those contexts. By the time she had completed her coursework, her literature review was essentially completed, and she was prepared to begin the work of writing the dissertation. As professor and dissertation advisor, she transports these positive experiences into her own advising circle and is, in effect, teaching her advisees how to advise as they embark upon the path to their own degrees and their own future advising responsibilities. Another colleague's experience entailed meeting only annually with his advisor, a model that he thinks is the appropriate one for students in the sciences. In addition, his model is also characterized by a three to five year dissertation writing process.

As teachers, we learn early in our careers that the best way to proceed when designing a course is to ask, "What do students need to know and what is the best way to impart this information?" Dissertation advisors should ask and then answer this same question in an effort to serve their advisees as they design the monograph. At the heart of the advising process is teaching and mentoring at its best. It is imperative for students first to know what the process is but, more importantly, to recognize what the process can tell them about themselves as human beings. Advisors can serve to enlighten this existential journey by first reflecting upon their own example and questioning its pragmatic value. Do their theories about advising have pragmatic

application in the real world of the advising circle or not? Then, they can seek to bring mentoring to its apex by formulating “power with” relationships that inspire a shared egalitarian vision (Heinrich 450).

In addition, professors should be curious about the ways in which other committees in other disciplines work. After a recent oral defense, the director asked me, “How did we do?” His question confirmed my suspicion that committees are virtually isolated within their own experiences and do not necessarily engage with other professionals in terms of the advising experience. How unfortunate that the benefits of sage advisors’ experiences, expertise, and philosophical concepts concerning the advising process are not disseminated through formal avenues. In this instance, the director was responsible for a monograph turned scholarly book, the student’s first publication. Moreover, this project was expanded into an opportunity to produce an educational video. In another department, a director handed me four published books, the result of four dissertations that he was instrumental in preparing for publication in two years’ time. Such accomplishments certainly deserve recognition. As professionals, we need to look to stellar advising models and learn from those who are most successful. We cannot do this if our advising processes remain compartmentalized.

The Empowerment of *Knowing*

Experienced advisors have the advantage of their expertise, but students have never encountered the dissertation experience before and reside in a virtual no man’s land in terms of *knowing* what to do and how to proceed. To compound the problem, students frequently are reluctant to ask for

information because they don't wish to appear ignorant: something about the status of being doctoral candidates implies that they should be in possession of the answers. Because students frequently do not frame their questions, advisors logically assume that their advisees are comfortable and secure. Dr. Sonja Foss tells of a woman who sought out Foss' expertise as a dissertation consultant, to work with her outside of the woman's committee. Foss suspected that the woman was experiencing a difficult relationship with her advisor, but the student assured her that the relationship was very good; simply put, she didn't want to ask questions that would make her advisor think she was "stupid." Entering into Foss' advising circle provided the student with a safe haven in which to collaborate, to seek professional support and guidance, and to write the dissertation in a risk-free environment. The preservation of self-worth and self-esteem through the cultivation of positive alliances is critical to students' success.

The disquieting element of being unaware is not restricted to inexperienced students who find themselves at a loss to begin, but also is witnessed in students' inability to see their own professional merit. Recently, at a dissertation proposal workshop conducted by Foss and Waters, we encountered a scientist who was unable to see the conceptual and developmental correlation between his published articles and his nascent dissertation. In his mind, he had isolated the dissertation task from his other professional writing accomplishments and envisioned the dissertation as something different than or apart from his previous work. This *not knowing* or *not recognizing* had become a potential barrier that he finally overcame by virtue of the fact that the correlation was delineated for him to see. In addition, by drawing on his strengths and accomplishments, his substantial list of publications, his teaching expertise, and over twenty

years of bench experience, we drew clear parallels to those capabilities and talents that will lend to his success in producing the monograph.

It is the process of the dissertation itself and its complexity that causes students to hesitate. If they would normalize their reactions, their fears and concerns, and recognize that many students struggle at precisely the same point, they would be better able to overcome the inertia that usually begins when they first internalize the compelling fear that they may not be Ph.D. material. Advisors who recognize that many students suffer from this *imposter syndrome* and are somewhat insecure about the dissertation process can allay some of the natural hesitancy that surfaces, and they can better anticipate students' questions and provide detailed information. Moreover, they should understand that it is beneficial to draw upon the student's own strengths or academic assets and mirror these back to the student. Our students are also professors, teachers, and clinicians who often have well-established careers. It would be wise if we drew attention to their professional accomplishments, the assets upon which their future successes are hinged.

Coming To the Dissertation

Regardless of advisors' expertise, no one has all the answers to all the questions all of the time. This recognition releases advisors, professors, teachers, and students from the tendency toward perfectionism. Advisors will require time to brainstorm for a direction or angle into the dissertation, what I call *coming to* the dissertation. These strategies require time to develop and are not readily decided upon. I advocate that advisors let the student know up front that we *come*

to the dissertation as a team; it is part of a process that is continuously developed through the conceptualization stage. I also advocate drawing out the process on paper to indicate connections to ideas and to map out the direction so that the student sees or visualizes the dimensions of the dissertation proposal, the research questions, the literature review, the chapters. This time spent at the beginning is ultimately the most valuable commitment that advisors can make, and they must be generous. Advisors are responsible for knowing how to develop the prospectus, and not simply for the ability to recognize a legitimate document when it is placed in front of them.

Sending the student off to write up the first three chapters of the dissertation without a clearly delineated structure is an economic loss of time and energy. Recently, I read almost one hundred pages of a student's convoluted and amorphous dissertation proposal. In addition, the student had elected for a methodology that was unwieldy and time consuming. In the end, he was faced with the task of restructuring the chapters, a formidable emotional and academic challenge that he might have avoided if he had entered into more productive preliminary conversations with his advisor. Advisors need to instruct their advisees about the manner in which proposals are developed: as a recursive process that draws back upon itself and then expands in different directions until it reaches uniformity in design, shape, and purpose. It is the product of intensive conversations and careful communication skills and is not ready made. To allow students to embark upon the writing process when the direction is not clear is to most assuredly court future delays. To lay out the process in terms of modules of information that the student can envision and then write into is one way to help students remain focused on accomplishing the goals of the monograph.

The example of my colleague who completed the dissertation in six months' time stands as a testimony to the great accomplishments that can be realized when the research concept evolves naturally out of the student's educational training and coursework, and is not simply tacked on after comprehensive examinations. A survey conducted by Maresi Nerad and Joseph Cerny at the University of California at Berkeley indicates that programs designed with a "structure that called for an early start to dissertation research tended to have shorter times to degree" (in Baird 33). Students can *come to* the dissertation long before they officially reach candidacy and should be encouraged to think of themselves as research professionals early on in their programs of study. Such measures would help to reduce the protracted time to degree periods of which Bowen and Rudenstine warn.

Advising Ethics: What are the Rules of Engagement?

As a result of the fact that the rules of engagement and the ethics of advising are not delineated, advisors may find themselves treading the same nebulous path as their advisees, wondering about the most efficient and rewarding pathways to doctoral success and struggling with time management issues, as well as their own sense of isolation and disconnectedness. Students may not know what it is proper for them to ask of their advisors or to expect from them. Neither advisor nor advisee intends to transgress boundaries, but those parameters are often blurred. What is the distinction between *advising* the student and *carrying* the project? By helping their students, are advisors thinking for them? Here are some observations derived from my experience that will clarify the process.

Advisors should listen to their students as they talk about their ideas for the dissertation. Students should be connected to the project by intense interest or passion for the topic, despite the fact that for some, it will always remain a square to fill. Dissertation advisors should unleash and focus this interest and help students to design a dissertation of personal as well as scholarly worth. Helping a student often means taking the lead, guiding, and instructing in the selection of a viable topic that enters into an ongoing dialogue among scholars. Paul Cantor warns of the dangers of students' proclivity to select obscure topics as a means through which they will distinguish themselves, not cognizant of the fact that the more narrow the topic, the more narrow the employment opportunities (13). Awareness of the professional marketability and attractiveness of the student is a factor for advisors to consider.

Advisors should be aware of their students' professional development and growth. Is this dissertation or parts of it publishable? If so, advisors should encourage students to take on the task of crafting one or two publishable articles from the dissertation or structuring the monograph into a book. Gary Olson advocates for a philosophical shift in defining the dissertation not as "the last major project a scholar performs as a 'student'", but the "first major project that a scholar completes as a 'professional'" (59). Therefore, the manner in which the document is shaped and crafted will bear substantial consideration and a definite commitment on the part of advisors to keep publication, in the form of a monograph or several articles, as a goal. Olson observes an unfortunate shift in the genre of the dissertation away from the "good scholarly monograph" (59) that advisors should cultivate, to instead, the "last important exercise that students will do in

their graduate careers”(56). He finds it ironic that in the current climate, the dissertation assumes increasing importance in terms of securing professional opportunity, and yet, “directors are advising students to write dissertations of diminishing usefulness” (61). Advisors must be cognizant of this dichotomy and re-center initiatives in an effort to enhance students’ career potential. It is logical for advisors to indicate to their students the clear correlation between the types of writing strategies that are required for the dissertation and those that students will encounter later in their careers, when they are expected to publish. Relegating the dissertation to a project that is unique and will never again be encountered is to create an anomaly of it.

Advisors should recognize that the dissertation proposal bears the weight of a contract.

Once the prospectus has been delineated, it should not be subject to a major re-conceptualization. The advisor and the advisee structure the direction, write the research questions, delineate the hypotheses, consider the variables, organize the literature review, and set the plan into action. This prospectus is then sent out to committee members for their approval, and a formal meeting with the committee members should be arranged. At this point, there should be minimal changes. Whatever is revised is entered formally into the document with the approval of the advisor and the student. This is the only point at which the *contract* (the prospectus) should be negotiated to account for changes or recommendations. Such a procedure protects the student, the advisor, and the committee members. The case of the methods professor who remained undecided about an appropriate statistical approach to the student’s work, even after the oral defense of the

dissertation, would almost never occur if the prospectus were regarded as a contractual agreement.

Keith Allen Noble warns of the danger of verbal contractual agreements between advisors and advisees and states that “where no written contract exists, the relationship can degenerate to a point where the adviser and/or advisee can suffer greatly because no recourse may be available- without suffering greater loss” (105). Noble offers another prototype that includes a statement regarding the departmental attrition rate, as well as time-to-degree, to the advisee. In addition, the adviser and advisee agree that they “will not exploit each other in any manner,” and that they “will each maintain written records” of all meetings that relate to the doctoral degree (Noble 104). The contract includes an arbitration clause that brings problematic issues to the attention of the dean and the chair, the two signatory witnesses to the contract (Noble 104). Admittedly, the issue of contracts necessarily carries with it ,in its most extreme form, legal implications. However, what the contract also does is re-center the balance of power between advisor and advisee and create a level of accountability for deans and chairs.

Advisors should recognize the importance of timely feedback and accessibility. Failure to return chapters and provide feedback in a timely manner translates to apathy in the mind of the student, and in its most exaggerated form turns alternately into impatience, anger, and acquiescence. Doctoral students already sense disconnection and isolation in the process of writing the dissertation; perceived and prolonged separation from their advisors only exacerbates these negative reactions. Barbara Lovitts’ study reveals that

“75 percent of the [survey] responses concerning [advisers’] accessibility were negative” and that students who had expressed dissatisfaction indicated that “this lack of availability and involvement with their work either slowed down their progress toward the degree or impeded their completion” (163). In addition, students were dissatisfied when advisors were “uninformed and uninterested in helping them through their programs and in achieving their professional goals,” and when they had “controlled them and had not given them enough independence or advice” and “had been too busy to interact with them” (Lovitts 163-164.) Moreover, students who expressed satisfaction centered this response in the accessibility of advisors who were interested in their “intellectual and professional development” and were “genuinely interested in them as people and in their ideas and research” (Lovitts 163-164.) It is important to recognize that the advisor/advisee relationship carries with it far-reaching implications in terms of program completion and future career potential.

Advisors who establish a timeline in which to return materials alleviate the impression that they are apathetic and create safe parameters concerning the administration of the dissertation process. Timelines can be adjusted when advisors experience schedule conflicts; however, it is wise to adhere to the newly established timelines as closely as possible. Most individuals respect the fact that advisors are busy professionals upon whom there are great demands. However, professors whose email and voicemail accounts are full for extended periods of time send a clear message to students that they are unavailable. Students’ telephone calls or email should be acknowledged as expediently as possible, for it is only common courtesy to do so. If there isn’t sufficient

time for a complete or lengthy reply, a brief, “I can’t respond to you at this moment, but I am aware of your communication and will get back with you shortly,” sustains the relationship and assures the student that the advisor is still interested. Having access to advisors is something that students indicate to me is critical to their ability to progress.

Advisors should know the value of Signposts. The length of the dissertation, for example, is one signpost that helps students to determine the complexity of the project, and therefore the time requirement to ensure completion. Students should be apprized about the length of their intended dissertation. For students, there is often an uneasy concern about length, and while every study is singular and therefore requires a singular academic investment, it also requires some projection or rough estimate in terms of the boundary of length. Advisors are understandably reluctant to address this question and hesitate to make a prediction, perhaps for fear of compromising the scholarly contribution by framing it within the context of a certain number of pages to be delivered. However, students would be better able to frame the proposal and focus on the project’s timeline if they had at least some comprehension of the parameters of a dissertation in their respective fields. Bernard Berelson states that while an exact number of pages cannot be established for the project, nevertheless one can “give a sense of order of magnitude” concerning the final product (239).

The entire issue of time projections as signposts is not new as Oliver Carmichael indicates in his 1961 study of graduate education: “Perhaps it is the tone of the graduate school that is at fault- the preoccupation of members of the staff, their indifference to the

student, the uncertainties with respect to the program, the thesis, or dissertations....” (180). Carmichael argues that “the entire operation needs to be tightened up. More rigorous demands, more clearly defined procedures, more definite and explicit instruction as to expectations should replace the usual uncertainties...in short, what is needed is a more efficient operation (180). Bowen and Rudenstine, writing forty-one years after Carmichael echo the same concerns and argue for “more structure...in graduate education, with clearly specified objectives, incentives, and time lines (14).

Advisors should understand the value of frequent one-on-one conferencing. The one-on-one collaborative interchange is the hallmark of the work we do here at the Center for Writing and Proposal Development. This approach offers students the opportunity to focus in a safe, confidential setting, upon the dissertation and its development. Moreover, the approach could, when incorporated into the advising circle, solidify the professional relationship between advisor and advisee and impart an affirmation of the project, as well as raise the student’s self-confidence and sense of direction. One-on-one conferencing can take place in fifteen-minute sessions anywhere, and can even be conducted by telephone. The issue is centered in commitment and continuity, as well as the implementation of time management strategies so that students are trained to utilize professors’ time during conferencing as the precious resource that it is; in this manner, advisors keep the process and the student moving by establishing on-going contact. One-on-one conferences can be sustained through the variant of the email communication, another way in which advisors can signal their ongoing commitment to their students’ projects. Students relish learning about grant opportunities, websites, titles of books, and

information about conferences. Moreover, simple notes of encouragement or inquiries about the status of their projects do much to affirm advisors' interest and support.

Advisors should close the gap and refuse to permit students to defend dissertations that are not ready in terms of scholarly development and writing, formatting, and editing. I

have noticed in several instances, gaps of time as many as eight months between the oral defense and graduation because students do not have the dissertation in presentable condition at the time of defense or, as in the case of the methods colleague stated above, an aspect critical to the completion of the dissertation remains unspecified. Students hold little enthusiasm for a project that has evolved to a formal defense but yet still requires substantive revision and the signature of one or more dissenting committee members. Frequently, procrastination creeps into the picture as students defer implementing the necessary revisions. It is not that they make a choice *a priori* to delay; often, it is a matter that they are overwhelmed and discouraged by a process that has not taken them to official completion, despite their efforts and an oral defense that seems to connote completion. The institutional as well as the existential losses are not insignificant. Institutions that are committed to preserving their Carnegie Classifications must be aware of the dangers that such gaps pose to the statistical numbers that are one of the hallmarks signaling doctoral success. And doctoral students who have not officially graduated with the degree in hand are at risk for encountering difficulty in a highly competitive job market that may not wait while revisions on the dissertation are being made.

Advisors should initiate an annual review of all doctoral students. Departments should consider the implementation of an annual faculty review of their doctoral students that commences in the first year of doctoral study and continues throughout their respective programs. These assessments prevent students whose performance is not up to par from remaining in programs of study for which there is little hope of success. Such measures ensure the integrity of a program and the reputation of the degree-granting institution. Moreover, they uphold ethical considerations, for it is unfair to students to reach the dissertation stage and then discover, after an incredible investment of effort, time, and money that they lack the critical skills necessary to the academician.

Advisors should form collaborative interdepartmental teams apart from the dissertation committee. Just as students are isolated within the doctoral dissertation process, so too may be first-time advisors or even more seasoned advisors who struggle with the substantial demands of their advising responsibilities. Each advisee proffers a new set of advising needs, and each must be addressed in a singular manner. It would be beneficial for advisors to support each other throughout the process and to value their colleagues' experience. Forums that permit for an open dialogue and a free exchange of information, ideas, and concerns would inspire productive conversations and contribute to the formulation of appropriate advising models. In addition, such teams would help to alleviate the barriers to communication between departments and enhance awareness of discipline-specific approaches that could be adapted for use in other programs.

Advisors and committee members should be evaluated by departments and by advisees.

We must delineate the measurements of our own success so that we can recognize our effectiveness within the advising circle. Are we asking our advisees to write evaluations about our performances, and are we asking for our superiors to evaluate us according to a set of metrics? Have we even established metrics to better assist us in continuously evaluating and improving our advising system? If we cannot measure our processes, we won't know the degree to which we are succeeding or failing.

Advisors should be aware of recent graduates' Aftercare needs. There is a dearth of information about the type of depression that presents after the culmination of the doctoral degree requirements and the heady graduation celebrations. It is ironic but understandable that some individuals experience short periods of restlessness, vulnerability, sadness, and depression after they have secured their degrees. Responsible advising extends to this area, and while most dissertation advisors are not trained psychologists, nevertheless, cognizance of this phenomenon will help them to acknowledge their advisees' feelings and direct their students to appropriate counseling sources.

Advisors should recognize when "It's not working." The advising relationship may begin wonderfully and with the best of expectations, but may atrophy as time progresses. Like any other human relationship, advising is highly complex. At a certain point, it may become abundantly clear to both advisor and advisee that they are not making progress, are no longer working well together, and are not connected to the project. In this event,

and after alternatives have been explored, it may be best to consider dissolving the relationship. Such decisions do not have to carry the stigma of failure or defeat, but rather represent positive steps in a new direction with an enhanced opportunity for success with other team players.

Looking Ahead

What lies ahead for the advancement of doctoral education can only be restricted by our silence in the face of the near 50% attrition rate that mars doctoral progress and that has been described as a “national scandal” (Lovitts, MAGS Conference). These statistics alone are sobering, but even more so when we examine this trend against the number of minority doctoral candidates who are lost each year, despite the upward trend in minority doctoral graduates from 3,845 to 4,014 between 1997-1998 (Doctoral Recipients: Summary Report, 1998). In 1998, fewer than 1,500 African Americans; 1,190 Hispanics; 1,168 Asian Americans; and 189 Native Americans earned doctoral degrees (Harvey 76). In all groups, with the exception of African Americans, women earned fewer degrees than their male counterparts (Harvey 76). The 50% attrition rate that categorizes all doctoral students may not accurately reflect the actual percentage losses among underrepresented groups, a circumstance that challenges the very concept of diversity to which most universities are committed.

We need to continuously look to the implementation of quality perspectives and to ask ourselves if we are indeed serving our customers: our advisors, our doctoral students, and the wider communities and institutions that will inherit them. We need to ask, “What do advisors and

doctoral students need to know about the process of writing the dissertation?” Then, we must be willing to answer the questions and initiate purposeful change substantiated by the implementation of policy changes.

Begin to collect data, interpret trends, and make assessments. Based upon the patterns observed, we can initiate programmatic interventions, but until the moment when analysis occurs, we can only make estimates about the types of solutions we require. Here at WMU, we began to collect data during the spring of 2002, and are incorporating our findings into ways that will inform the implementation of specific interventions. As Dr. Debra Friedman, Associate Provost for Academic Assessment at the University of Washington, Seattle, explains, “You have to begin somewhere” (Conference notes). Our journey began with the painstaking task of researching the hundreds of dusty archival records of matriculated doctoral students for fifteen markers of information that will permit us to analyze discipline-specific time to degree measurements. We are just now, in the summer of 2002, beginning to gather data on doctoral attrition at our university. Thus, we will compile a comprehensive profile about our university’s doctoral programs.

Honor the accomplishments of advising faculty. Dissertation advisors deserve to be recognized for their profoundly significant work, and the manner of that recognition rests not only with individual departments, but also with the university proper. Arranging for publicity, stipends, award dinners, expense-paid conferences, and framed certificates are efforts through which we can indicate appreciation and draw public attention to the

professional contributions of so many excellent advisors. Most of us simply want to know that our efforts are not invisible and that our talents and expertise are valued.

Standardize fundamental elements of the dissertation process and create uniformity in administration. Thus far, our on-going data collection reveals facets of our administration policies that warrant attention. One of these concerns the need for the observance of uniform policies regarding extensions, continuous enrollment, and readmission procedures, for example. Departments should not operate independently of their graduate college procedures but should seek to ensure continuity of administrative policies.

Some departments sagely incorporate dissertation seminars into their programs, the end product of which is to have three written and approved chapters of the dissertation that the student then defends. The experience for seminar participants is that they have the opportunity to observe the process of *coming to* the dissertation, a fact lost for other students in programs not requiring dissertation seminars. For them, the entire matter of proposal development occurs between advisor and advisee in isolation, and is not part of the collaborative exchange among members of a cohort.

In either circumstance, approval of the prospectus is often verbal and is not accompanied by a form signed by all committee members. Thus, there is no record that establishes this important date, a factor critical to establishing time-to-degree. Moreover, there is no formal document that delineates the proposal as a contract between committee members

and the student and that holds everyone to the prospectus for the intended monograph. We have recommended the addition of forms as they relate to these respective circumstances.

Issues concerning matters as simple as placing a date on the Request for Extension form can, if rectified, help to explain the timeframe in a student's program when he or she recognizes that completion at the anticipated date is no longer a possibility, and would permit for an evaluation of our own processes and future intervention. Further, it helps us in establishing the length of time that The Graduate College responds to the student's initial request. The varied history of extensions that we unfolded reveals the lack of a consistent period of time that constitutes an extension as well as a legitimate reason for requesting an extension, with rare exceptions noted. We found few statements that enlightened the decision to grant multiple, ongoing extensions. Extensions that continue for a period of years, without the benefit of periodic review to ascertain the student's progress, do not serve the student or the process. Extensions granted on a semester-by-semester basis may prove to be the impetus in encouraging students to complete their programs of study.

In addition to ensuring the implementation and use of standard forms, there is also a need to flow out the process of the dissertation for each department, and to establish time-to-degree across the university as a whole, and then against individual departments and programs. In this manner, the metrics we gather will help students to know the process

and help respective departments to understand their own processes and the manner in which they can be improved.

Lastly, universities must establish policies regarding returning students and determine the cut off period for doctoral students who have abandoned their programs. Is it 20 years, 15 years, 10 years – and what are the procedures for returning? This issue may take into account the student's ability to demonstrate competency by submitting to another round of comprehensive examinations, taking other courses or independent studies, conducting additional reviews of the literature in their respective fields and research interests. Given the current economic climate and the fact that many individuals are seeking graduate education in an effort to make themselves more marketable, it is not surprising that we will see more ABDs return in an effort to salvage their degrees. Therefore, we need to consider policies that address this trend.

As educators, we must take ownership of our graduate education process. For decades, scholars have called for reform of doctoral education. The time for mere recognition of the problem has passed and must become transmuted into action. Much like the doctoral student who, in search of the perfect monograph, becomes stagnant -so too has academe, lured by its penchant for the perfect solution, stagnated in implementing positive change to rectify this shameful situation. We can no longer afford to simply ignore the causalities of our doctoral educational process or to cite them endlessly in journal articles that arouse empathy, but yield little if any change. The cultural revolution must begin with action. The time is now.

Works Cited

- Baird, Leonard L. *Increasing Graduate Student Retention and Degree Attainment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
- Bauer, W.C. Pursuing the Ph.D.: Importance of structure, goal-setting and advising practices in the completion of the doctoral dissertation. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 45 (09), 2770A. (University Microfilms No. AAG8428480)
- Berelson, Bernard. *Graduate Education in the United States*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960.
- Bowen, W.G. & Rudenstine, N.L. *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Campbell, R.B. A study of the completion and non-completion of the doctor of education degree in educational leadership at the University of Delaware. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53 (06), 18113A. (University Microfilms No. AAG9232596)
- Cantor, Paul. "The Graduate Curriculum and the Job Market." *The Future of Doctoral Study English*. Ed. Andrea Lunsford, Helen Moglen, and James F. Selvin. New York: MLA, 1989. 9-14.
- Carmichael, Oliver C. *Graduate Education: A Critique and a Program*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1961.
- Doctoral Recipients From United States Universities: Summary Report 1998. Trends in Doctorate Recipients/Doctorates by Race/Ethnicity.
<http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs00410/secta.htm#race>
- Friedman, Debra. Associate Provost for Academic Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington. Conference at Western Michigan University, February 22, 2002.

- Harvey, William B. *Minorities in Higher Education 2000-2001: Eighteenth Annual Status Report*. American Council On Education. . Table 18: Doctoral Degrees by U.S. Citizenship, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender:
- Hinchey, Patricia, and Isabel Kimmel. *The Graduate Grind: A Critical Look at Graduate Education*. New York: Falmer Press, 2000.
- Kerlin, S.P., & Smith. B. *Electrifying stories: Virtual research communities in graduate education*. Paper presented at the Pacific Northwest Association for Institutional Research and Planning, Portland Oregon. (1994).
- Lenz, K.S. A multiple case study examining factors affecting the completion of the doctoral dissertation by academically able women. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 55 (12) 3714 A. (University Microfilms No. AAI9511965)
- Lovitts, Barbara E. *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure From Doctoral Study*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001.
- Lovitts, Barbara. *Midwest Association of Graduate Schools Conference* April 2-5, 2002.
- Noble, Keith Allen. *Changing Doctoral Degrees: An International Perspective*. Bristol, PA: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1994.
- Olson, Gary A., and Julie Drew. “(Re) Reenvisioning the Dissertation in English Studies.” *College English* 61(1998): 56-66.
- Parent, Elaine. R. “What We Know – And Don’t Know: Factors Determining the Outcomes of Doctoral Experience.” <http://www.geocities.com/College Park/Den5501/DA text.html>
- Sigafus, Bonnie. *The Creation of ABD’s: A Turning Point in Educational Doctoral Programs?* AERA, San Diego 1998.
- Tluczek, J.L. Obstacles and attitudes affecting graduate persistence in completing the

doctoral dissertation. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 56 (05) 1683A. (University Microfilms No. AAG9715268)

Walker, George. Vice President of Research and Dean of The Graduate College,

Indiana University. Session Chair, Conference: "Re-Envisioning the Ph.D." University of Washington. Tomorrow's Professor Listserv.

<http://sll.stanford.edu/projects/tomprof/newtomprof/postings/238.html>

Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979.