

The posting below looks at some practical suggestions for choosing the right dissertation topic in the humanities and social sciences. It is from Chapter 4 Finishing the Doctoral Degree in a Timely Fashion: The Dissertation as a Key Factor in the Humanities and Social Sciences, by Cynthia Verba, in *Scholarly Pursuits: A Guide to Professional Development During the Graduate Years*. A Publication of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Copyright © 2005 By the President & Fellows of Harvard University. Reprinted with permission.

## Finishing the Doctoral Degree in a Timely Fashion: The Dissertation as a Key Factor in the Humanities and Social Sciences

### The Dissertation from the Faculty Perspective

Additional insights for choosing a dissertation topic were offered at a panel discussion by faculty members (entitled "What Makes a Good Topic and How to Find It"). The professors were able to approach the subject from their experiences both as dissertation advisors and as scholars who have gone through the process of choosing research projects themselves. The speakers acknowledge that choosing a dissertation topic is a challenging process that can produce considerable anxiety. A student's ego and identity are involved-it is almost like choosing who you are.

They then devoted themselves to dispelling anxiety by offering a series of practical suggestions for choosing a good topic. They stated at the outset that they could not provide a strict set of rules. Topics are as wide as human knowledge; different fields have different criteria, different paradigms, and different methods. In the absence of a clear set of rules, the speakers proceeded instead to apply common sense and experience to arrive at helpful advice.

\* Originality is a principal criterion of a good topic. You can be original in diverse ways. You may examine material that has never been studied before; or you can examine well-known material, but provide new interpretation.

\* Another way to view these different concepts of originality is to recognize that some topics are central to the field and that there is always new work being done; other topics are on the periphery and have been neglected.

\* It is important to choose a topic that is congenial to you, that you think is worthwhile not only within the framework of the discipline, but on a personal level. It is not all irrelevant to consider how much you like interviewing, computers, dealing with insects-or whatever it is that a topic demands.

\* The specific topic that you study may have a personal and idiosyncratic origin. It is no accident that research on certain groups is likely to be pioneered by people of that group: women have often led the way in women's history, Blacks in Black history, immigrants in the history of immigration.

- \* You should have a doable thesis that has boundaries; you have to be able at least to imagine where and when it would end. It is hard to start a thesis, it can be even harder to end one.
- \* This means that you should be ambitious intellectually, but not too ambitious, think of it as a task that will enable you to get on with your career. Students sometimes ask if their dissertation should include A, B, C, and D after the dissertation is finished.
- \* One speaker put this idea in a different way. He suggested that instead of writing a dissertation prospectus it is best simply to write a dissertation chapter. He explained that what he really meant was that it is best to do a little piece of research think small. If it is interesting it will lead to a bigger problem. The best proposal is a pilot project; once you have picked a path you can add on different forks as you go along. He observed that everyone knows the BIG IDEAS, it is harder to do the little ones.
- \* Modesty is also helpful in choosing a manageable topic. Some students set out to write a dissertation that will change the world; others just want to write a dissertation. In terms of results, there seems to be no correlation between the quality of the dissertation and the ambitious nature of the topic.
- \* They noted that it is useful to make the dissertation separable into parts with short-term goals. Work on the dissertation often competes poorly with other tasks that offer more immediate gratification. Confronting the dissertation as a whole can lead to endless postponements.
- \* There was also a warning that dissertations seldom turn out as planned; it is important to hedge your bets and be prepared in case you do not find data that speaks to the issue.
- \* A good dissertation topic should also allow you to say something that is convincing to other people. Each field has its own rules as to what is compelling evidence. There is always a topic of explanation and there must be interpretable results.
- \* One speaker suggested that topics that involve comparisons provide a more structured framework than studies of individual subjects. He also recommended building on the work of others. This does not mean replication, but rather looking for gaps or for ways to extend other investigations. He stressed that very few things start de novo. Having a framework, testing things that others have done is very helpful.
- \* To find out what it is you would like to do, it is helpful to be attentive to your reactions in your scholarly reading. If you find yourself saying "I wish I had written that," you can use that as a key to finding something similar.
- \* Preparing a research design also requires conversation. Research is often a solitary activity, but designing research is an activity that should be carried out collaboratively. Decisions made at the stage of research design are so crucial to the value of subsequent labor that issues must be talked out thoroughly at the outset. Even highly experienced researchers often collaborate with colleagues, teach courses on methodology with them, or pop into each other's office with a query twice a day. Rule number one for graduate students beginning their first large research projects

is: engage in an extended conversation with your advisors. Even Jove, with his legendary powers, could not generate a good research design full-blown from his head.

\* Looking to the future, the speakers addressed the relationship between the dissertation topic and job prospects. Both agreed that job considerations should be subordinate to intellectual interests. In any case, predicting the market is like "guessing in the dark." A topic that is in the mainstream of the discipline might appear to be safer, but it may be in an overcrowded field. That problem is not completely solved by choosing a more peripheral topic, since there may be less demand. In general, you should avoid choosing a topic because you think it is fashionable. They also added that the dissertation topic does not necessarily identify your field that precisely-hiring departments tend to work by broad fields.

During the question period, several students wanted to know how best to choose a dissertation advisor-especially how to factor in problems of personality or accessibility versus area of expertise. Both speakers strongly recommended working with more than one advisor-it can be beneficial even if there are no conflicts. The arrangement would depend on departmental policies; in some cases it could be a formal dissertation; in others, it may be more a more informal consultation arrangement. It can extend to faculty members outside of your department and even outside of your department and even outside of the University. In general, it is wise to have a number of potential advisors in mind. Some of the most popular, professors can be too great a demand.

The speakers tried to reassure students that most professors care about their dissertation advisees-indeed, professors often find it a source of personal pride to be an active part of the process of training a new generation of scholars. They added that the faculty have an obligation to teach and advise graduate students-that is what they are paid to do. The speakers urged students to be more active than passive in seeking an advisor, to be more aggressive in their outreach to professors. They strongly recommended that students work hard during their first year or two in getting to know the faculty beyond their classes-interviewing professors, and attending lectures or seminars.

Another student asked about the role of advisors in getting a job-he particularly wanted to know what to do if an advisor was planning to retire soon. The speakers responded that a professor's retirement need not pose a problem. He or she may even have more time to give to students. It is common for professors to continue to work with students after they have left an institution. It is important to talk frankly with a retiring professor about this issue.

Finally, a student asked why Harvard students seem to take so long in finishing the dissertation. The speakers observed that the problem arose from a combination of external pressures and internal factors. After exams, most students start teaching, which is a major distraction from the thesis. In addition, some topics take a long time. However, both speakers had the impression that students take longer than they have to, and that they are especially slow to begin. Both felt that this was a mistake and that students ought to plunge in as quickly as possible. It is very important to work hard enough during the first year of the dissertation to keep it alive even while teaching.

Timing of the dissertation was also discussed in terms of reaching a crucial point in the dissertation where the problematics become clear; you reach a conceptual breakthrough that allows you to imagine the end. The earlier that you reach this crucial point, the better. If you reach it during the first year of the dissertation work, then you can probably finish in two years, which in many fields is a respectable amount of time. You should be able to project even early in the dissertation what a reasonable amount of time would involve. There was a warning that people tire of dissertations. The ideal is to pick a congenial topic, work at a reasonable pace, and FINISH.