

The Completion Agenda, Part 1

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Advice

Graduate students should remember that the dissertation is the beginning of their research, not the endpoint



Mark Shaver for The Chronicle

By David D. Perlmutter April 20, 2015

Graduate school, the job market, the tenure track, and every other stage in an academic career are so fraught with challenge that you cannot afford to dawdle too long on foolish ventures or waste time holding out for perfection when "pretty darn good" will do.

The first supreme hurdle — the one that scares off many potential academics and cripples the progress of others — is, of course, the dissertation. What counts as a dissertation and how long you should take to complete it vary across disciplines, institutions, and committees. But that you must complete it — and that others must approve it before you can move on — is essential.

The Completion Agenda

In any academic career, the first supreme hurdle you face is finishing your dissertation. This series explores how to get it done.

In this series I will focus on the "getting it done" aspects of the document that are not field-specific. But let's begin with that existential imperative: No excuses, you must actually finish. Yes, there may be factors beyond your control and, yes, you may want to strive for perfection. But let me make the case for a completion agenda, above all considerations.



The dissertation is not your final scholarly statement.

During my master's program I conceived of a brilliant idea for a dissertation topic. Completing it would have involved my learning two foreign languages (one ancient and no longer spoken) and exploring four case studies spread over millennia. Much travel also would have been required, and an extra-large committee. I would have needed a generous budget, too.

My idea was categorically not welcomed by those to whom I pitched it. I could really sense it was not going anywhere when even my professor-mother shook her head and said, "You are setting yourself up for failure."

I was disheartened until talking with a wise professor who did not assess the idea itself but commented, "You know, your dissertation should be the worst thing you write in your career." He was not joking. At first I was insulted by the comment: What do you mean my intellectual contribution toward changing the world would be anything less than incredible?

I tossed and turned over the notion. Ultimately, I realized that, as my academic career moved forward, my greatest hope would be that I wouldn't peak in my doctoral years but rather would produce better and better research (and teaching and service as well).

The dissertation was the beginning of my research, not the endpoint. So technically, it should be the least good of all the stuff to come. Accepting that concept reduced my anxiety.

The dissertation will be a published document — no less but also no more. Another piece of advice I have taken to heart and passed on to both graduate students and tenure trackers came from the co-conqueror of Mount Everest, Sir Edmund Hillary. He argued, to paraphrase, that successfully climbing a mountain involved getting to the top and then getting down again alive.

So it's not actually a dissertation until it's finished, defended, and deposited. Yet so many doctoral students keep climbing year after year even when they have already reached a very good summit and need to wrap up the journey back at base camp. Why do they keep climbing? Among other reasons, they:

- Discover an interesting new offshoot of research suggested by a previous interesting offshoot of research.
- Identify another case study to explore to give further triangulation on the main thesis.
- Find a new book/paper/dissertation to add to their reading list.
- Locate a course offered in a different department with some relevance to their topic.
- Want to send a section of the manuscript to yet another outside reader who might give a new perspective on it.

And so on. All of those orthogonal quests are honorable considerations that could objectively improve the

dissertation. But then you would never get down from the mountain safely. Moreover, you can classify many of those additional items under the heading of "to look at after I finish" and even cite them in the dissertation's "future research" section.

So do a very good job on your research and writing. Then stop. Then submit it. Remind yourself that research is almost always "unfinished" to some extent. You will build on it in the years to come. That's why successful professors have a consistent track of inquiry.

You can't build the ideal committee. The dissertation committee is one of the most crucial entities that affect the labor and sanity of a Ph.D. student. Alas, one of the sad commonalities of doctoral student life is that your committee is like a beautiful sand castle. No matter how much work you devote or how carefully you construct it, forces beyond your power can erode or destroy it. In my case, personal animosities and departures restructured my committee several times. I have talked to many doctoral students who saw their committees splinter, fade, and reform.

An important step to finishing is to try, as much as possible, to make the project not wholly dependent on the people involved. Consider, for example, having a list of "Plan B" committee members — faculty with whom you have had positive interactions on dissertation-related topics but who are not on your actual committee. They can be your go-to's if a committee member becomes unavailable. Also try, and in the bench sciences this is hard, to avoid becoming the acolyte of one professor.

Plan what you want to accomplish, and then check "done." The dissertation is a tool as well as an intellectual statement. In many humanities disciplines — such as history, for example — it is generally accepted that the dissertation must become a published monograph. Among the social scientists in some areas within my discipline, such as health communication, it is a commonplace to project: Six dissertation chapters equals six published journal articles equals halfway to tenure.

To extend the mountain-climbing metaphor, even better than making it back to base camp in one piece is getting home to tell the tale to your friends. Research is not really research until peers — not just your committee — can judge and respond to it.

You can reverse-engineer what you need your dissertation to achieve by a simple method. Talk to successful late-assistant or early-associate professors you admire in your field. Especially seek out those — not necessarily at your institution but at similarly ranked ones — who conducted studies and employed methods similar in scope and design to your own. How did they parse out the outcome of a dissertation? Nothing is sadder or more of a career-killer than the new assistant professor who finds very little of value to publish in her or his dissertation. It should be the seed corn for the next chapters of your career.

The first step to finishing your dissertation is to muster the will. To do so requires the acceptance that it will never be perfect. Many doctoral students have shown that it's possible to produce an excellent dissertation. But even if yours is only "very good," that in no way means "bad."

Just remember, there is no such thing as a great *unfinished* dissertation.

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