

Almost there; Completing the dissertation is all that remains for many doctoral candidates -- but that can prove an overwhelming obstacle.:[Chicago Final Edition]
Barbara Ballinger, Special to the Tribune. Chicago Tribune. Chicago, Ill.: Sep 21, 2003.
pg. 1

SPECIAL GRADUATE STUDIES SECTION: Education Today.

If you envy grad students who toil away in an ivory tower on erudite doctoral dissertations, it's time for a reality check.

Brad Campbell, 28, a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, would like nothing more than to have long periods to research and write his dissertation, "Neurosis and the Modern American Novel." But work as a teaching assistant last semester to cover tuition and living costs cut into that time; so has summer teaching.

"It's hard to juggle and squeeze in time to research and write in a coherent sense. But if I didn't teach, I'd have no paycheck coming in," said Campbell, who hopes to finish by fall 2004, seven years after he started.

Sam Garrett, a doctoral candidate in political science at American University in Washington, D.C., started his dissertation, "Crisis Management in Congressional Campaigns," in May. "Optimistically, I'll be done in 18 months," he said.

Until they finish, both fall into the long-standing category known as ABD or All But Dissertation, along with many of the 1.2 million doctoral candidates nationwide. ABDs have finished coursework, passed special exams and are ready to tackle the behemoth: the dissertation.

Exactly how many students can be classified as ABD is not known. A frequent guesstimate is that 50 percent who start a doctorate don't finish and that 15 percent to 25 percent stop when they get to the dissertation, said Gregory S. Lambeth, a licensed clinical psychologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who works with ABDs.

But, concerted efforts are under way to improve percentages through approaches not always associated with scholarly work: online sites that spoon-feed what to do and when to do it; books that motivate and guide; groups that allow a safe haven to whine but mostly solve problems; and coaches who get paid to prod.

Few resources were available 30 years ago when Michael Schooler dropped out of a doctoral program in sociology at the University of Chicago, three years after he started and before he was to begin his dissertation he switched to law school.

The prime reason, he said, was the absence of a fixed timetable to finish, not a lack of motivation or funding. "I'm a great procrastinator. On the other hand, law school had a beginning and end," said Schooler, deputy general counsel of the National Cable and Telecommunications Association in Washington, D.C.

At the same time, some attrition may be healthy, if students find a doctorate is not the right choice, especially early on, said Debra Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools, a non-profit group of 400 graduate institutions in the United States and Canada in Washington, D.C.

Why do some of the best and brightest get stuck?

Because the dissertation is a different animal than anything they've worked on and requires more than intellectual skill, Lambeth said.

"A significant percentage of graduate students have a hard time making the transition to working on a large, unstructured dissertation," he said. "They have an easier time on small projects with a firm deadline.

"Many also don't have the organizational skills to develop a time-management plan. Some go months without talking to their advisers."

In some disciplines, problems start earlier.

Engineering candidates tend to drop out earlier and before the dissertation at Northwestern University, said Larry Henschen, associate dean at the university's Graduate School who is in electrical and computer engineering.

"Some find out that a PhD isn't what they thought it was or they simply don't have the ability to do cutting-edge research. There's quite a difference in doing well as an undergraduate or even first-year graduate student versus creating new knowledge," he said.

A typical dissertation runs several hundred pages, is footnoted with 100 or more sources, and takes 1 1/2 to two years to complete. It diminishes social life, fuels insomnia and makes struggling artists seem rich. Workload varies by discipline. Humanities students often toil longer and more solitarily than science and engineering students, Stewart said.

Figuring out what to say

"The whole process has been about trying to find out what I want to say," said Gardner Rogers, 49. "I probably have 300 pages of prose that will never be seen, but I had to write those pages even though they weren't right, to find the pages that were."

He has worked on his English dissertation, "Southern fiction and documentaries from 1930 to 1976," at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for two years, often in a library carrel for eight to 10 hours a day.

A history dissertation requires similar due diligence and often means research abroad for a year or two, said John Bushnell, a professor of history and associate dean for the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern.

Once it's completed, the student orally defends the dissertation. From start to finish, a doctorate can take from three to nine years. No single problem can be pinpointed for those who encounter logjams, but the following possibilities are suspected.

Perfectionism

Student and faculty expectations fuel the desire to excel, which is further exacerbated by the competitive job market.

"There's an overriding feeling that you can't just turn in any dissertation but need one that's outstanding. With the job market stacked against us, it has to be not just good, but great," said Campbell.

Lambeth agreed that expectations are high -- and higher than they used to be.

"A dissertation used to demonstrate a student's abilities, but now it's more important," he said. "It doesn't just serve a university audience, but is used to gain employment."

In addition, many students feel pressure to publish, said Carol Thomas Neely, director of graduate studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Garrett agreed. "There's a belief that it must be publishable and the ultimate work of your career if you're going to get tenure and a job," he said.

Friends have urged him to keep it in perspective. "They tell me it should be the biggest thing so far, but if it's the best, my academic career would peak at 27 years old."

Some students complain about too little faculty input. Barbara Lovitts, a research scientist at the University of Maryland, said many candidates have a tough time transitioning from their classes to independent researcher.

"The role of adviser is critical," she said.

Professors expect the relationship to be a partnership.

"They're usually more willing to give students time when they do their part," Neely said. "If students set and meet deadlines and keep up contact, I'm obviously going to be more assiduous than if they don't pick up their half."

The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern works hard to keep its 115 or so doctoral students on track through a doctoral program coordinator in each department and an overall assistant director, said Robert P. Magee, associate dean of academic affairs, faculty and research, and director of the doctoral program.

"We have all sorts of students. Some are self-starters and some work best under pressure," he said.

Some universities have instituted a time limit to push completion, which can motivate or fuel anxiety.

Required meetings

DePaul University's Psychology Department has gone a step further. It requires candidates who've spent six years and aren't finished to attend at least seven of nine dissertation meetings if they live within 100 miles of DePaul, said Sheila Ribordy, professor of clinical psychology.

Those who live farther must attend one.

With fellowships harder to secure, students feel pressure to get a teaching or non-academic job, which leaves less time for the dissertation.

Being an adjunct professor this fall will consume Rogers' time, he said. "Teaching three courses will mean 40 to 45 hours weekly. Other hours will involve finishing my dissertation, preparing materials for the job market, answering ads. All are full-time jobs."

Garrett, too, works -- as a graduate assistant in the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University.

"Working gives me access to faculty and funds, but it takes time away from writing. It's a harsh reality," he said.

Campbell said a solution is to fund students early and consistently. "If I didn't have to teach last year, I would have started writing sooner and gotten closer to a full rough draft," he said.

With no classes to attend, a distant deadline and scholarly work often pursued alone, some students find it tough to hunker down, said Mara H. Wasburn, assistant professor of organizational leadership and supervision in the School of Technology at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind. She said the high attrition rate is linked most to a lack of support systems.

After she received a doctorate in 1998, she organized a campus support group to fill the gap, and she is a facilitator.

Support groups constructive

"Sessions have no agenda and can become whiney, but most are constructive," she said.

"We had a member working on a topic in distance education, who, when she looked at the literature, found almost nothing. She panicked. Someone suggested she look up what led to distance education. That started her off."

Lambeth orchestrates workshops and wrote a workbook with accountability and management checklists.

"Universities assume students know what to do. Many don't," he said. "Most talk about procrastination but what they mean is not having skills to prioritize."

Through the workshop, Rogers said, he learned to prioritize writing.

Some students, like Tom Kecskemethy, a candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and assistant dean, form study groups. Members exchange writing and share ideas on good literature reviews and sampling methods, he said.

A barrage of publications is helping to break down writing into manageable segments.

Lovitts, author of "Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study" (Rowman & Littlefield, \$32.95), said, "It's my guess that a lot of people feel overwhelmed by the prospect of having to do something original when they're still in their early 20s."

Other useful resources: Joan Bolker's "Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day" (Henry Holt, \$15.95); Rachna Jain's "Get it Done! A Coach's Guide to Dissertation Success" (MoonSwept Press, \$19.95); David Sternberg's "How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation" (St. Martin's Griffin, \$14.94);

www.allbutdissertationsurvivalguide.com and www.dissertationdoctor.com.

Professional dissertation coaches also have emerged. William Schaffer advises in person, by phone and on his site, www.bookcoach.net.

"A lot of students find that writing is like climbing Everest," he said. "I motivate by asking questions and setting deadlines. When they're accountable to an exterior person, something magical happens." His magic costs \$60 an hour.

Changes may be necessary

Despite these efforts, many think the process, as well as specific parts, needs to be better understood and maybe changed.

"We need to understand why some fail to complete their degree and what we can do to increase success," Stewart said.

Lovitts said one factor may be admissions criteria, which are based on good coursework, while the doctorate is awarded for an original contribution and different type of thinking.

Lambeth questioned the dissertation itself.

"Is it wise for students to write 300-page papers when many are required to turn out short concise publications later, and is it a good idea to put something so fundamentally different at the end of a program rather than at the beginning?"

10 tips that can help you when working on a doctoral thesis

Experts who have earned their doctoral degrees are among the best at offering advice on surviving the long process, from how to take breaks--but not too many, work with absent or difficult advisers, and believe that their dissertation is the best it can be but still get done.

Gregory S. Lambeth, a licensed clinical psychologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, shares his tips, some from a workbook he wrote that he gives to the university's doctoral candidates.

1. Develop a plan for completion that reflects your academic and professional goals. If you want to be in the job market within a year, you need to keep that in mind to get your dissertation done. If you want to get chapters or a book from your dissertation, plan for that along the way.
2. Evaluate whether it's necessary to modify your schedule to accommodate work on your dissertation. Establish routines that allow you to work on it consistently, which means not letting day-to-day tasks interfere.
3. Think of your dissertation as a job responsibility so work doesn't depend on your motivation level, which will vary greatly day to day.
4. Develop organizational strategies that will allow you to manage a large unstructured project, including filing articles and research papers, which can number into the hundreds, and managing your time in terms of a year or two out rather than days or weeks.
5. Establish relationships that give you mentoring, technical assistance and emotional support.
6. Find creative ways to balance your work and personal life so you avoid becoming exhausted. Even if you're working many hours on your dissertation and also at a full-time job, you need to spend time on yourself. Get enough sleep, nutrition and exercise; tend to social relationships, too.
7. Since developing a long-term goal of completing the dissertation can be overwhelming, develop short-term goals that you can accomplish day-to-day, such as reading two or three articles or working on reference lists, graphs and charts.
8. Be professional with your adviser, show up for meetings and recognize the complexity of this relationship. Make an effort to resolve problems, determine what motivates your adviser and what he or she expects you to accomplish.
9. Establish agreements with your adviser and committee early on, so that as the dissertation starts to take shape and an adviser suggests changes or modifies the subject, you can go back to your original agreement to show what had been agreed on earlier.
10. Don't allow perfectionist standards to interfere with progress on your dissertation. There is a difference between high personal standards and unattainable performance expectations.

-- Barbara Ballinger