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MANAGING YOUR DOCTORAL PROGRAM: A PRACTICAL ORIENTATION*

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In this article we pass on advice for getting through a dissertation that we found useful in our roles as dissertation advisors and doctoral students. We have also included some other hints on starting and getting through a doctoral program, as well as beginning an academic career. We hope that readers in a position to advise Ph.D. students will convey the recommendations stated here to their students. Since the final responsibility for completing the degree rests with the student, the advice given here is, by and large, addressed directly to students and can be passed on to them in its current form. (DISSERTATION; DOCTORAL PROGRAM; ABD)

In the last full decade for which statistics are available (the 1980s) nearly 500,000 people worked their way through graduate school to achieve ABD (all but dissertation) status (Germeroth 1991). Of this half million, 250,000 do not have, nor will ever earn, their degrees [based on Sternberg's (1981) estimates of completion]. How can this dropout rate be reduced? Our intention is for readers who are in a position to advise Ph.D. students to convey to them the recommendations stated here. Since the final responsibility for completion of the degree rests with students, we will address our advice directly to them.

There are probably many reasons, both personal and practical, that explain the inability of longtime ABDs to achieve their goal of completing a dissertation. One could not include a lack of advice among those reasons. A quick computer search of the topic revealed at least a score of articles on how to complete a doctoral dissertation.[1] There are numerous books on writing dissertations and even an article evaluating these books (Lehmann 1990). It is conceivable that one could spend so much time reading about how to do a dissertation that the actual task of completing it would never begin.

There are some good, concise reviews on getting through a doctoral program (e.g., Oldfield

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** In the course of preparing this paper for publication Dr. Summer passed away. His contribution to this paper was indispensable, and his contribution to graduate studies will be sorely missed.

[1] Oddly enough (or perhaps not so odd, considering the number of unfinished Ph.D. degrees), a quick computer search revealed twice as many articles on procrastination.

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1988; Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box 1992). Yet, the advice provided most often seems to consist of helpful hints on what to do at each stage of the degree (i.e., pre-coursework, coursework, examination, proposal, dissertation, and post-graduation phases). While such advice is useful it may leave one with an uncomfortable sense of inadequacy. One is prompted to read a list of "helpful hints" and say, "*Oh no, I haven't done most of these things. What do I do now*?" While we would be remiss if we did not pass on useful advice, we feel that simply communicating such information is not enough.[2] We will also include hints for what to do if you have not followed the advice given and are in the next phase of completing your degree. Thus, in the first section we give advice appropriate for the pre-coursework stage and what to do if you did not follow our original advice. In this way we hope to help address the "Oh no, I haven't done most of these things. What do I do now?" problem.

Before Starting Your Coursework

There are several things you can do even before you begin your first term in the doctoral program that will help you later with your dissertation.

Picking a University

While it is likely that most readers will have already picked a university before they get around to this article, a few quick pointers might be helpful to those who have yet to take this step or are contemplating a change. There are also a number of good guides for school selection—e.g., Peterson's *Annual Guide to Graduate Study* (Hegener 1999).

There are some important items you should think about. One, is the school in a place you want to live for four or more years? A good guide for most urban areas is Savageau and Boyer's *Places Rated Almanac* (1999). Two, does the university have professors you want to work with and who are likely to be staying at the institution? We know of one case where a Ph.D. student went to a university to work with a specific professor only to find, upon arrival, that the professor had decided to take early retirement. Having a potential advisor is so important that there are those who think that if you have not chosen a potential advisor before you apply, you should not bother to apply.[3] Three, are the professors at the university of your choice conducting research in areas that interest you? Finally, will there be doctoral students in your area as a cohort and are there any a year or two ahead? These are important people to have around for a good educational experience.

You can also query the people associated with the program. Start with the program director. Important questions to the director are (a) where have your graduates placed recently, (b) what has been your graduation percentage, and (c) how long does the average graduate take to get their degree? Also ask somewhat recent graduates—assistant professors (people who graduated from the program three to five years ago and are now at other institutions)—what they *did not* learn when they were doctoral students that they wish they had learned. All programs are strong in some areas and weak in others. The student should know ahead of time the "weakness" areas and plan to buttress those areas rather than remain weak in them.

Ask Yourself, "What Am I Doing Here?"

What do we mean by asking, "What am I doing here?" Getting your degree, of course. Why do you want that degree, though? Your answer will mean a difference in the approach you take in the program. If, down the road, you want a position in a teaching school you will tend to focus more on gaining classroom experience and less on an intensive research-

[2] For most readers a great deal of the advice we pass on they may have heard before. The parts they have not heard will be very useful. The problem, of course, is that different people have not heard different parts. So we ask the readers' indulgence to bear with the parts they have heard to arrive at the additions.

[3] At a minimum, you should have a good idea of whom you might want to work or not work with.

oriented program and dissertation. If you want an academic position in a research-oriented institution you will focus more on an intensive research-oriented program and dissertation and less on gaining teaching experience. Finally, if you are interested in a private sector position you may wish to focus only on research. The direction you wish to take likely influenced the decision regarding which university you chose and will help determine the importance of the dissertation you will later need to write. Even if you are not yet sure of which of these paths to follow, but know you want the degree, you will still need to perform the basic activities mentioned below before you start your program.

Get Organized

Sternberg (1981) cites organization as the key to completing the dissertation. Germeroth (1991) suggests several ways to get organized at this early stage.

LEARN WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE PROGRAM AT THE SCHOOL YOU WILL BE ENTERING. Meet with recent ABD candidates and graduates from the program you are about to enter. Ask them about their experiences with the program, the dissertation proposal, and the dissertation. You can also discover, from a student's perspective, what specific professors demand from people in the program. We would also recommend talking to some of the faculty in your area of interest—at least the chair of the department or the head of the area in which you intend to concentrate. Do this as soon as is practical. Ask about the program and the history of the department. Finding out about the program gives you some general background. Asking about departmental history should give you some insight into the politics at the school. Other relevant questions might include: what areas have merged with, or been split off from, the department; what problems might these actions cause? *This information should aid you later in selecting committee members* for your dissertation reading committee.

LEARN WHAT THE DISSERTATION PROCESS IS LIKELY TO DEMAND OF YOU. Several dissertation guides can help you in this respect. Lehmann (1990) reviewed such guides and his recommendations are included here. For a basic introduction to managing the dissertation process, try Davis and Parker (1979) or Rudestam and Newton (1992). Scanning Smith (1984) will help with library and empirical research. Sternberg (1981) is good for helping one handle the psychological and social stresses related to the project. Boice (1990) is a good general guide for productive writing. Finally, Stock (1985) is recommended if one requires help with research methodology (although it is likely that you will use a wide range of references for this purpose). Reading dissertations in your area of interest also will help.

We recommend reading a couple of recent dissertations written in your department. If you have some idea of which professor is likely to chair your committee read a recent dissertation that he or she has supervised. By reading these dissertations you will have a better idea of what is required at your specific university and by a specific chairperson. Reading a good dissertation in your particular field from another university is also helpful. What we mean by a "good" dissertation is one that comes highly recommended by faculty you have spoken with, or is an award-winning dissertation. Last, but not least, obtain a copy of your university's dissertation style guide. This will give you an idea of the detailed final format for your dissertation.

Get Equipped

Having a computer system before you start the program will save you time down the road (Germeroth 1991). If you do not already own one, buying one at this point (particularly a laptop, for portability) makes sense. First, learning about the product and making the purchase decision can be done while you still have the time. Second, becoming more computer literate before the school year starts will save you from having to learn about how to work with the peculiarities of your machine and its software. This allows you to put your efforts into writing your papers and doing the research—rather than learning the programs.

If statistical or empirical work will be part of your dissertation, buying a machine will allow you to get a head start on that work. Finally, purchasing a computer system may aid you in setting up a bibliography that can be employed later in your dissertation research (Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box 1992). Specialized programs, like "Endnote" or "Citation"[4] can help you enter the bibliographic data into a computer to create an alphabetized list of papers by author's last name. However, even simply entering them in proper form via a word processor or spreadsheet may be a step in the right direction. *All of this will help you later on when you need to look up reference material while writing the dissertation and in turning the dissertation into articles—the sooner you start on this the better*.

If you do intend to make this purchase, you will need to find out what types of computers are most frequently in use at your university (i.e., is your school an IBM or Apple "shop")—this will help you later with data building, analysis, and transfer. It also helps to find out if there are any special "deals" the university can offer you on hardware or software. The university, possibly in connection with the vendor or a local credit union, may also be able to assist with a "deal" on financing.

Get a Running Start

Try to find out what the assignments are for early in the first term and read ahead. Before you know it you will fall behind in your work, but at least this way you will not have so far to go to catch up. Consequently, you may be able to avoid some early burnout that could stop you before you get anywhere near writing the dissertation.

Get Connected

"Getting connected" means that you need to get connected with both the people at your institution and at other institutions. First, if you intend to have a career in research, it is highly beneficial to involve yourself in faculty research projects from the beginning of your Ph.D. program. By "apprenticing" with knowledgeable faculty members, you can learn valuable research skills firsthand, possibly get paid, and perhaps share authorship on some publications in the process.

One way to develop a broader perspective on your field is to attend academic conferences from very early on in your program. Registering for doctoral student consortia will give you the opportunity to compare experiences with Ph.D. students in other schools. As well, you should be able to pick up tips and strategies for getting through your degree. At conferences, you can meet many more people who share your specific interests than you could at your own school. By attending conference sessions you will be exposed to theoretical frameworks and analytical techniques that may not show up in journals for years. The people you meet as a Ph.D. student may continue to be your closest associates (and future co-authors) for years to come. To find out which conferences are particularly relevant, ask several faculty members whose interests most closely match your own. If you send papers to conferences and they get accepted, it is possible that your advisor or school will pay part or all of your travel expenses.

Don't Panic

If you have not done any of the above, don't panic. If you did not talk to recent graduates, ABDs, or faculty you will get a chance to do so as the year progresses. The department may also plan some opportunities for interaction during the term—e.g., a get-together early in the term, or a Halloween or Christmas party. Or simply call and schedule some one-on-one meetings with faculty members as soon as it is possible.

What if you did not read any of the books suggested above? Chances are you will read some of them later on. You may be able to get your degree without reading any of them (at

[4] More information on these bibliography programs can be found at http://www.niles.com for "Endnote" and http://www.oberon-res.com for "Citation."

least one of the authors has managed to do so). At some point you *will* read others' dissertations if for no other reason than to give you a clue as to where to begin. Despite what you might think as you pick them apart, all the dissertations you read are award winners because all the people who wrote them have been awarded their degrees. Also note that in spite of the award, even the best dissertations will almost always have typographical mistakes. No one is perfect.

If you did not have or buy a computer system before the term started, writing papers will be more difficult in the short run without a word processor. A fairly good new system complete with printer and monitor can be had for under $1,000 (a new system and a used monitor can be had for less) and you may be able to pick up a used system for a fairly low price that can be used for word processing and other basic functions. Even systems a few years old will meet a surprising number of your needs, so shop around if you have the time and you may find some good equipment for fairly little money. Yet, if you can suffer through with typing your own papers or using your university's on-campus equipment in the short run, you may end up better off in some ways. Because computer hardware gets less expensive all the time, if you delay buying a machine (and can tolerate the short-run difficulties this may entail) then you may arrive, in the end, with a better computer for a lower price. If you get involved in a research project with a faculty member right away, it may be that he/she can provide a computer for you.

If the term has already started and you did not get organized or get a running start and you are now swamped with work, what can you do? It is not too late to get some level of organization in your life. Remember you must have had some organizational skills to get your undergraduate degree. Resurrect them. If you feel so swamped that you cannot even remember what you did as an undergraduate, then make a list of what you need to do over the next week and then do it. Cross off the things on your list as you go. Give yourself some reward when you get through the list. This method will at least help you through a short-term crunch until you can decide on an organizational style that suits you. File folders, if labeled so that you can easily identify their contents, are also a great help to the organizationally impaired. Make sure your filing system is good enough so that you can later find what you want, but not so complex that it's a hassle to put material in its proper place.

If you have not started getting connected then you will have at least acquired some additional background that will allow you to better talk to people about topics that interest you. Even if you are not going to a conference you can still e-mail or call people whose research interests you. Do not be afraid to do this—most academics like to know their work is appreciated and are glad to talk with those who appreciate it. Finally, there are always conferences coming up—just be sure to try to go to the next one your advisors have suggested.

Coursework

Taking a course from every faculty member you hope to work with is important in finding out more about him or her. As well, coursework will help provide the necessary grounding in the field that will allow you to begin your dissertation. This is not to say that other areas of interest should be avoided. Indeed, some of the best ideas can come from studying outside of your area. Applying concepts from outside of business can create unique and interesting research work—but make sure you understand the core work in your field first.

Using Coursework to Generate Dissertation Ideas

Approached in the proper manner, coursework can serve as a foundation for various aspects of your major research project. Germeroth (1991) suggests that students should enroll in courses that help them focus in on a dissertation idea early in a program. A research methods class will typically require that you write a research proposal. This product can be

used as a basis for your later dissertation proposal. Term paper assignments can help you explore your research ideas and aid you in creating a literature review.

How will you know what to write about? Bouncing your ideas off other graduate students and faculty is a good place to start. Even if none of these ideas seem acceptable to those you talk to, you will at least get a feel for the kinds of research questions that are of interest and people believe are "do-able." (We will discuss dissertation topic selection in greater depth a little later in this paper.) Oldfield (1988) suggests taking a course with a faculty member who is teaching a subject in which you have an interest and whose approach is compatible with your own. Oldfield (1988, p. 271) also suggests, "In the early part of the term meet with this person and explain that you might use his or her writing assignment as a basis for your dissertation. Actually, if you do this, do not be surprised if he or she suggests several possible research questions."

Using Coursework for Publishing/Presenting Opportunities

If you are planning an academic research career, you will need to show evidence of publishing ability before you graduate. While coursework can be demanding enough to preclude outside research, nearly every course will require you to write a term paper. If you focus on writing good quality term papers, and choose your topics carefully, you may be able to send these papers off to conferences or journals. If you regularly submit your work, you will gain a better understanding of what is required in your field. If you start sending your papers as early as your first year, you will likely have had several works accepted by the time you begin your search for your first job.

Again, Don't Panic

If you have not done any of the above, don't panic. You may get to the end of your coursework and still not have a dissertation topic. Isaac, Koenigsknecht, Malaney, and Karras (1989) report that about 40% of the doctoral students in Administration did not have a proposal written prior to their general exam. For all fields of study, Isaac, Koenigsknecht, Malaney, and Karras (1989) found that about half of doctoral students did not have a proposal written prior to their general exam. However, the experience developed in your coursework will give you some background on how to write a proposal and at least give you an idea of what you do not want to do research on. Some of the research and writing you have done during your coursework might later be helpful for various aspects of your dissertation research.

The approaches suggested above are not the only way to develop dissertation ideas. Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box (1992) suggest generating as many possible topics as you can. Start to develop each topic to determine whether the idea will work. Write a mini-proposal of three or four pages. Begin a literature review by identifying two or three key words. Think about what data and methods are required and if you can acquire the data in a reasonable period of time. The last step will tell you if the project is "do-able." This will at least begin to give you a feel for what types of projects are possible. However, we will discuss below ways in which this process might be shortened, and some more detailed ways to develop dissertation ideas. Just remember that if you do not have a dissertation topic at this point you are not alone!

Before Your Comprehensive Exams

There are a number of ways in which your preparation for exams may help with your later dissertation work. This is a great point at which to get your files in order if you have not already done so, since you will need to do so in order to study the material. Again, entering data into your bibliography at this point will also prove helpful for your later research work.

These exams are like any other exam, except they cover much more material. If you study,

you should do well. Since you made it this far in your studies you probably already have developed a style for exam preparation. The only modifications you will need to make are to begin to study early, organize more extensively, and more carefully budget your study time.

Begin Early

Start to prepare at least three to four months prior to the exam date. In order to arrive at a better estimate of how much time you will need, you should find out several things. First, what material is covered on the exam? Second, what questions have been asked previously on the exams? Third, how much material can you cover in one day (and how extensively do you need to cover it) while still meeting other obligations (work, family, etc.)? Finally, how many times do you wish to review my notes before the exam? The answers you arrive at will give some indication about how long it will take you to prepare. Allow a week or two of slack for unforeseen demands.

All this preparation may seem like a rite of passage the university and your professors are inflicting upon you simply for their own sadistic pleasure. In some cases you may be right—in which case you may want to think about either switching schools or changing your area of concentration. A more likely conclusion, however, is that this exercise will be of benefit to you later on.

Essentially, a comprehensive exam gives you a chance to review the literature in a field. This is important for several reasons. First, this review will become important when you begin writing your dissertation proposal and your dissertation. Studying for a comprehensive exam helps you integrate the material you've learned, possibly leading to new insights, interesting research questions, or a structure from which you may address your research question. Some of the material you study will become an important part of the dissertation you produce. At a minimum you will learn about areas closely related to what you are likely to research. Such information will allow you to place where your study fits with respect to other research (i.e., what are you studying that is somehow different from what others have studied). Second, this review will help you later with your teaching since you will need to have a broad background in the field in order to instruct others. Similarly, such a broad background will come in useful when reviewing the papers of others (either as an instructor, colleague, or journal reviewer). Thus, even the material you review which is unrelated to your dissertation will be useful later on in your career. Third, since you are getting a doctorate in your field, you are expected to be an expert in that field. The comprehensive exam process helps assure that you are indeed somewhat knowledgeable about the major topics in your field. Finally, this review gives you a chance to organize a big project. If you can organize yourself for this, you can probably wade through the dissertation process.

Organize Extensively and Budget Your Time

There are several items you will need to find out before you begin to organize. The best way to find out about the items that follow is to simply ask the chair of the area and other instructors who might be preparing questions for the exam.

What form the exam will take is one thing you will need to know before you organize. Will the exam be written, oral, or both? Will you have some choice in the form the exam will take? For example, a colleague of ours said that he was given a choice regarding the structure and subject matter of his exam.[5] As to structure, his options included: (1) a four-hour exam without notes, (2) an eight-hour exam in which notes could be used, or (3) a three-week assignment in which one was essentially to produce an article on the subject. If you are faced with a similar choice your preference is likely to be a personal one and determined by how you feel you are likely to perform under each of the circumstances. Thus, would it be best for you to take the exam and get it over with; would you do better if you were able to look

[5] Prof. Mark Wexler at Simon Fraser related this to us regarding his Ph.D. work at York University (Canada).

at your notes during the exam; or do you perform better at writing papers than taking exams? With regard to subject matter he was given the option of focusing in a particular area of interest or taking a more general exam that broadly covered the subject. While the former may provide you with a jump on your dissertation it also limits your exposure to material that may be important to you later in your career as a teacher or reviewer—or earlier as a Ph.D. candidate whose initial proposal does not work.

What material will be covered on the exam is another thing you will need to discover. If the material covered is fairly consistent (from one year to the next), fellow graduate students who have already taken the exam may be willing to lend you their copies and notes. Thus, all you will need to do is obtain recent additions to the list of material to be covered. Others' notes may also include past exam questions and possible answers to them. Exam questions may also be available from the department or graduate program secretary. These should give you an idea of the type of questions that you may be asked. Now that you have the material, how do you organize it?

Let us look at a specific example. The University of Washington's four-hour comprehensive, written exam in the Business Policy area covered material in over 130 articles, book chapters, or books. Copies of these notes and articles take up a good-sized file drawer once they are put into files (a task which may itself take a week). Each file could contain a copy of the article or chapter, notes from others, and related past test questions. If one reviews a book in two to three days, and two to three articles in a single day (i.e., read the article, prepare likely questions about it, and write up notes on it), the initial review might take two to three months (assuming at least one day off per week). We know of one person who typed up a five-by-seven card for each article (or book chapter). On its front each card had three to four basic questions concerning the essence of the article (or book chapter); answers were typed on the rear of the card (if this kind of task were performed on a computer, the resulting database would be an invaluable bibliography). The resulting stack of cards was employed as a study guide during the two to three weeks immediately prior to the exam. Though you may not want to go to the extreme of typing up cards, keeping your own notes and reviewing likely questions is the least you must do. This file can serve as a quick reference so that during the writing stage of the dissertation you can quickly access desired information. Breaking the process into little tasks and giving yourself little rewards as you proceed goes a long way toward getting you through the program.

Panic

If you have not done any of the above, panic. Well, at least spring into action. If you have less than the amount of time suggested above you will have to condense the time in which you do the above steps. Help in organizing—from colleagues, knowledgeable friends, etc.—might help initially. If you do not believe you will have enough time to prepare, re-schedule your exam date! Do not waste your time taking it, and the professors' time grading it, if you have not prepared. However, if you have prepared properly, the exam should be "do-able" and should help you prepare for writing the dissertation.

Your Dissertation Proposal

In some schools, the monolithic dissertation document is giving way to a set of "essays" or journal-length articles. The obvious advantage to this is that it allows quicker conversion of the dissertation document onto journal publications. On the other hand, the depth and breadth of knowledge that a longer dissertation would develop will not be created. There are other pros and cons for going the "essay" route if it is available to you. However, we will leave this debate as a topic for future discussion in another paper and stay with the notion that your school will require a dissertation. As such, we will look at ways to help you develop and "get through" the dissertation process.

While your institution may not require that you have a formal dissertation proposal, there are good strategic reasons for writing an acceptable proposal at this stage and formally presenting it to your committee. First, by having the proposal written you will hopefully be able to get the committee's agreement to do the study so that you can begin (and end) your research as soon as possible. Second, you can discover what questions the committee has concerning your research so that you are able to address them during your writing stage. This should reduce the time you later spend rewriting the dissertation to address questions which, had you known about them, could have been incorporated more easily as you were writing an earlier draft.

A dissertation proposal is a document that will generally serve several purposes. First, it will introduce and succinctly state your research question. We cannot over-emphasize the importance of the dissertation research question. The research question must be coherent, concise, and clear. This is because it is the basis of your "contract" with the committee, and it is the critical one-sentence explanation of what the dissertation is all about.[6] Second, it will serve as a theoretical background for your research. Third, it will allow you to create some hypotheses based on the literature review and your questions. Fourth, it will state your plan of attack for testing your hypotheses. Finally, it will signal faculty members about your area of interest.

The objective behind creating a dissertation proposal is to create a document that a committee will approve of as being a reasonable test of your ability to conduct original research. Thus, we will first address the issues of picking the topic for research and writing it up. In a separate section we will discuss selecting a committee. While we have separated proposal development and committee selection for the purposes of explanation, it should be understood that the two items are tightly interwoven.

Picking a Topic

We have suggested several approaches for developing dissertation ideas at earlier stages. However, if you failed to do so before (and as we said, many people do), you will need do so now. We recommend that you address several issues about what you intend to accomplish with the project in order to determine the topic you will research.

Whose project will this be? The answer is not as clear as it seems. The responsibility to complete the project will be yours; however, this does not mean the idea will be entirely your own. First, in choosing a topic you will need to take care to remember that even the greatest idea will be a poor proposal if you can find no faculty members to serve on a committee to read it. This is not to say that the selection of the topic should be based solely on the likelihood of finding committee members. Your interests are important. About 40% of the students in Administration surveyed by Isaac Koenigsknecht, Malaney and Karras (1989)[7]

[6] This is a critical element in being able to explain to others what the dissertation is all about. When it comes time to "sell" the quality of work to would-be employers, a job candidate should be able to explain the question quickly and understandably (this shows an ability to take on a manageable project that can be communicated to others). It also helps journal editors decide on the reviewers that fit the topic when the time comes to submit the work to a journal. Also, we have heard some people suggest creating a contract letter between the student and committee chair that outlines what is required to complete the dissertation. Such a letter will help avoid "dissertation creep" (requests for just one more test, etc.) but may be hard to enforce if later your chair honestly does feel that you really do need to do more than is in the "contract."

[7] Isaac, Koenigsknecht, Malaney and Karras (1989) also listed the top three factors influencing topic selection by Administration students as: (1) their own preference, (2) trends in the field of interest, and (3) their own life experiences. The phrase "own life experiences" is somewhat less clear than preferences or trends. An example of "own life experiences" would be the situation one of the authors found himself in during his search for a dissertation topic. At the time, his financial condition went beyond normal student poverty to the point that monthly payments on debt equaled 150% of monthly income. A logical interest in bankruptcy and turnaround strategies followed (the former became the dissertation topic and the latter succeeded in helping him out of a looming financial disaster). "Own life experiences" can best be described as the story behind the topic.

said they alone (without consulting the chair or the committee) selected their topic. This does not mean that their selection was done without considering the likely preferences of such committee members. There must be some aspect of the proposal that is likely to be of interest to potential members if a committee is to be formed. Thus, you may want to include certain variables that you may not have otherwise considered in order to persuade faculty members to serve on a committee. Yet, the essence of the research question may remain the same.

Second, it may be easier to be a contributor to some professor's ongoing research program rather than arriving at the idea on your own (Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box 1992). While this allows for fast completion and likely acceptance of the proposal there are two major problems with this method: one is emotional and the other is economic.

On the emotional side, the worst topic you can have is one you do not care about because it will be all the more difficult to keep working on if you have no interest in the topic. Sooner or later you will get sick of your topic. However, if you started off passionate about it, chances are you will not get sick of it until you are close to completing your research on it.[8]

On the economic side, you will lower your effectiveness by using this tactic: your lower degree of investment will result in higher costs later. Put another way, you will not develop the scope of talents needed to develop an idea from beginning to end. The development of your own research questions and feel of the literature in the area will not be as great as if you had developed the idea more independently; while you may finish a little more quickly, you will have much less to show for it. Though the idea you develop more on your own may be slower in emerging as a well-developed work, the resulting skills you will acquire will make you a better researcher down the road. So at this point, how do you develop the idea you may have?

HOW DO YOU DEVELOP AN IDEA? Ask yourself in a general way, "If I could have the answer to any five questions about managing a business, what would they be?" Is the research question you have in mind among these questions? Remember, the five questions you ask are much more broadly delineated than the specific question you will end up studying. Thus, what you are really asking yourself is: does the question I have in mind fit within any of these five questions? Focus in on your research question. Oldfield (1988, p. 272) suggests, "The guiding principle for selecting a research question should be, in one word, 'focus.'. . .[Avoid] Topics such as 'The Causes of War' . . ." Scan recent entries in your research area in the *Dissertation Abstracts* for an idea as to the degree of focus to which we are referring. Such focus will not make the dissertation less interesting but simply more manageable.

WRITING SOMETHING INTERESTING. What is, and is not, interesting? Davis (1971) tells us that what is interesting are ideas that affect attention by denying an old truth, attacking the taken-for-granted world, and by having practical repercussions. Studies that seem interesting take an approach which basically says, "It has long been thought . . . But this is false . . . We have seen instead that . . . Further investigation is necessary to . . . ." Davis also lists some items that are not interesting: the obvious, the irrelevant, and the absurd. To the first two items (the obvious and irrelevant) people will say, "So what? Why is this important and why should I care?" The final item (the absurd) may stray so far from what people know that it is totally unacceptable (this will be of great concern when defending your dissertation).

SWOT YOURSELF. What unique Strengths and Weaknesses do you bring to the dissertation process? Try to use what special skills you may have acquired in your academic and professional training. If you have a bachelor's degree in philosophy you need to ask yourself how those skills can come in handy in writing the dissertation. Ask yourself, "What trends

[8] On the other hand, Oldfield (1988) suggests that you "pick a topic you can HATE" so that it will at least keep up your interest. This makes sense especially if there are some unpalatable parts of the theory you are trying to refute. Either way one should feel strongly about his or her topic.

in the literature present the Opportunity for me to apply to the dissertation process the unique skills and perspective I may have? Because of my weaknesses, what areas would be a Threat (i.e., what research am I ill-equipped to undertake)?"

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE KNOWN FOR? This is important because you will probably be working with the same broad theme that was in your dissertation for many years. First, the dissertation will take two years. We would suggest you give yourself five months for each of the following steps: (1) writing, rewriting, and defending the proposal; (2) collecting data; (3) data analysis and job hunting; (4) writing, rewriting, and defending the final draft; (5) slack. (Thus, in some ways you can time when you are likely to be completed before you start full-time employment.) Next you will spend two or three years after that on chopping up the dissertation into publishable parts (and rewriting at the reviewer's request). Then, wanting to later convince the tenure committee at the university where you earn your salary that you have some kind of research agenda, you are likely to stick to related topics. This is less constraining than it sounds. If you define your agenda broadly you may find that you can study a wide variety of subjects from a unique perspective. This unique perspective will not only lend a common thread to your research but also give you an original place from which to begin your study of a subject.

Writing the Proposal

Your objective at this stage is to develop a proposal in a reasonable length of time. Thus, we will suggest some ways below in which you will be able to save time and still do good research. You should, even at this stage, find out what the final dissertation should look like. Some schools prefer a five-chapter format (e.g.: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and discussion); others use different formats, and many have no specific rules for organizing the dissertation document (other than the publication format guidelines regarding margin widths, etc.). If you know the accepted format now, it will go a long way toward making your proposal the "front end" of your dissertation. That is, by writing the proposal with the idea that it is the first, say, three chapters of the dissertation you will go a long way toward completing the work later.

SAVING TIME IN THE THEORETICAL DESIGN PROCESS. The design problem you face toward the beginning of the dissertation is as follows. You have read large amounts of literature ranging over a wide range of subjects. You begin to become interested in some focus—some set of variables to investigate. At this stage, your idea is more or less fuzzy in your mind. Maybe you get excited and feel you have found something important. So you decide to do more reading. But the more reading you do "around" and "tangential" to this idea, the more complicated it becomes. You discover new angles and variables, chase down interesting literature from footnotes, etc. All the while your original idea keeps changing. You feel the need to do more and more reading. You may try to draft a "background literature" chapter at this point and it becomes a rambling conglomeration of ideas. Some ideas are central to your eventual focus, some merely tangential to it. What you thought originally was such a good idea now becomes an information overload. This is the process of iteration of successive theoretical frameworks. It is a normal and necessary process in the execution of original research. It always consumes time, but it can also waste unnecessary time. Some students iterate for months on end. How do you avoid getting caught in this trap?

Guideline 1. At each iterative stage (i.e., when you discover some new variables or relationships), draw a diagram which shows (1) the variables you are now investigating, (2) a theoretical name and crude definition for each variable, and (3) the relationships between the variables.

Guideline 2. You may want to select from certain diagram templates that we have found useful to depict theoretical frameworks (see Figures 1–4). What you are essentially doing

FIGURE 1. Simple Correlation Between Two Variables.

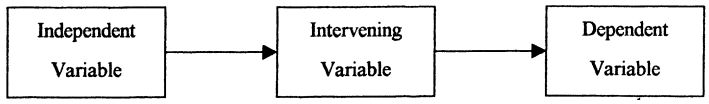

FIGURE 2. Chain Correlation With Intervening Variable.

through this exercise is boiling your idea down to a picture—one worth at least a thousand words.

SAVING TIME IN THE RESEARCH DESIGN PROCESS. The research design problem you may face is that two forces are pushing you in opposite directions. One force is to satisfy your own creative ambition, and become famous by "inventing" all variables, relationships, and measurements yourself. In this case the whole framework would be original. A second force pushes you toward needing to please diverse committee members, finding the time to look for a good job, and finishing the dissertation. If you give in to the first force you are likely to have your hands full down the road. You will need to precisely define each variable, devise measurements for (or "operationalize") each variable, and devise measurements for each relationship. These are very time-consuming tasks.

In a dissertation, you should optimize these two forces. Don't try to maximize the first force. There are three guidelines for optimizing.

Guideline 1. Do not try to "set the world on fire" in the dissertation. Do good research but give priority to pleasing your committee and getting the degree in a sensible amount of time. If necessary, satisfy your urge to be original *after* you get the degree and become a faculty member.

Guideline 2. When you find background literature that includes certain variables already defined and measured, or certain relationships already measured by other authors, use their work to operationalize those variables. To do original research, you can then create one or two variables or relationships that nobody else has studied or created (e.g., see Figure 3, "The Contingent Variable" template).

Guideline 3. You may be lucky enough to conceptualize an original work and become famous, but it can still be simple and elegant. This is a situation where you can "see" a new relationship between two variables that other authors have already defined and measured (and in an area that has already attracted attention in the literature). In this lucky situation, all you have to do is define and measure one relationship. (See Figure 1, "Simple Correlation.")

WRITING AND REWRITING. At some point you will need to sit down and write up your ideas. Obviously, this is easier said than done.[9] We will discuss procrastination in more detail later, but at this point, there are three important things to remember. First, set an absolute deadline for how long you will spend reading background material. Second, when the deadline is reached, you must start writing. Dedicate a minimum amount of time each day toward this task of writing. This gets you into the habit of writing every day. What would be even better is to try to write a set amount of lines or pages per day. This way you know that some progress is being made. Third, do not forget to reward yourself. If you get through your quota

[9] Students who are comfortable with coursework (with its forced deadlines and endpoints) may have difficulty organizing their own research. It sometimes takes a while to understand that you, as the student, are in control of the dissertation process.

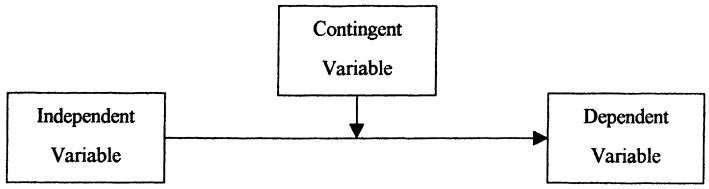

FIGURE 3. Simple Correlation With Contingent or Confounding Variable.

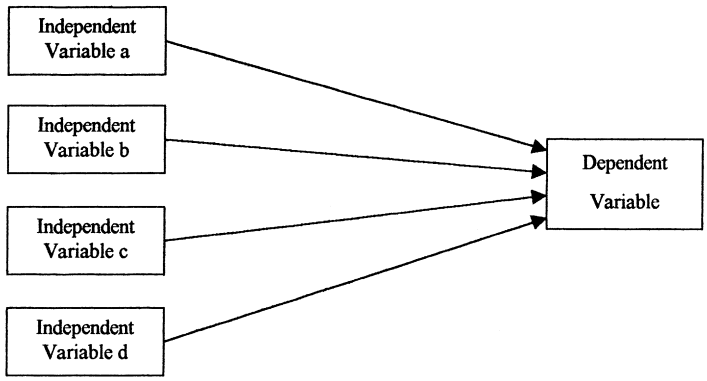

FIGURE 4. Multivariate System of Variables.

of writing for the day, spend some time on rest, play, etc. Avoid bingeing—i.e., avoid intense periods of activity on your proposal followed by long recovery periods. This kind of pattern is less productive than doing a little each day (Boice 1989).

Three things may stop you from writing each day: (1) a busy schedule, (2) procrastination, and (3) writer's block. First, your schedule may not be as busy as you think. During the course of the week write down the time you actually spend on various tasks. You could discover that you are spending less time actually doing the task than you believe (Boice 1989). What you are likely doing is attributing to the task time spent on associated activities that postpone your work: organizing your files, getting your desk in order, cleaning the house, etc. These are things we will call "*procrastination patterns*."

This brings us to the second point: procrastination. Procrastination patterns become little rituals you may go through before you start work. Many serve no useful function for performing the task at hand (e.g., cleaning the house). Some may be useful: organizing your files, getting your desk in order. How will you know which is useful or not? Try this: write down all those items you do before actually writing anything. Then, when you get done writing that day, immediately execute what is on the list—e.g., if making coffee is part of your *procrastination pattern*, set up the coffee maker for brewing tomorrow's pot at the end of your writing day. Do this before you give yourself a reward for getting the day's work done. By putting these tasks between the work and the reward you should quickly decide which are necessary or not. If they are necessary, you are likely to discover ways to do them more quickly.

Suppose you are ready to write and you cannot think of what to say or how to say it. What do you do? First, ask yourself, "What am I supposed to be writing about?" In other words, "With which part of the proposal am I concerned?" If you are on the introductory chapter you are addressing questions of: what, why, how, and so what (why is this important). In the literature review you are addressing questions of: what and so what (why is this important). In a theory section you would address what your contribution is and what a testable theory might be (and your hypotheses). Finally, in the methodology section you will be dealing with

questions of how, who, and what data to use.[10] Knowing all this you simply need to address one of the smaller questions mentioned above. This is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to get you re-started. What you need to do is think about the question you are trying to address for five or ten minutes and consult the diagrams you drew previously if you are trying to recall relationships. Imagine someone has said to you, "Tell me, in your own words, what you are trying to say." Write your answer; you can always clean up the language (i.e., translate what you have written into academic language) later. If you cannot come up with an answer, write *anything* that has something (however loosely related) to do with your subject. Eventually you will wander back onto the right path (some of what you write may actually be useful at some point). The point is to get moving again!

Finally, you need to circulate the dissertation proposal or brief among faculty and Ph.D. students. You will soon find out if your dissertation proposal does not perform the tasks required of it: (1) introduce and succinctly state your research question, (2) serve as theoretical background for your research, (3) allow you to create some hypotheses based on the literature review and your questions, and (4) state your plan of attack for testing your hypotheses. Faculty or other students will advise you to narrow your focus down to a few specific questions, hypotheses, and tests. They might also be able to advise you on what the related literature is for each focus (and if they cannot, they should be able to send you to someone who could). Use the feedback to improve the proposal. Ask faculty if they would be willing to serve on the dissertation reading committee. Erase the red ink they put on the proposal—i.e., address the concerns faculty and others raise about the proposed research.

One thing you will need to determine is how your advisor likes to deal with drafts. Some advisors like to see extremely early, very rough drafts. Other faculty will lower their opinion of you if they get a rough draft. Find out what style works best with your advisor—ask her or him—then stick with that style for that faculty member. If you are dealing with a faculty member that wants a more polished draft, rely on fellow Ph.D. students (preferably those a bit ahead of you in the program) for early feedback on your drafts.

Selecting a Committee

Finding a committee means choosing a group of faculty you feel comfortable with on a personal level, a professional level, and as mentors. This means that you should be able to work with the group, that at least one of them knows about your specific area of interest, that at least one of them knows statistical methods involved, and that there is at least one person in the group who will help you complete a good dissertation. The last of these should be a mentor who will check up on you to make sure that your procrastination patterns are not getting the best of you. Use other students to find out about faculty. When deciding on a committee chair, examine other dissertations they have supervised and even their own dissertation if possible. Oldfield (1988, p. 272) advises that you "choose people with a reputation 'for getting people through.' Faculty known for not quickly reading and returning work, or who will soon take sabbatical leave should not be appointed." He also advises that you make sure all your committee members get along on a personal level so that meetings with the committee are not strained by personality conflicts. It also helps to go to dissertation defenses to see what is accepted and the kinds of questions faculty ask.

Work with your advisor. Give him or her several names of people whom you feel would

[10] At any one of the previous points you may want to carefully consider how you are going to be able to obtain the data you will need. This can save you a great deal of time later in trying to obtain data. Ask yourself if you would rather (1) employ primary data, which may create a unique study but be time-consuming to gather and is risky if, for example, your survey does not provide a good response rate, or (2) employ secondary data, which is easier and less risky to gather but may not perfectly suit your purpose. Some research questions may force you to use one type of data over the other. However, you may be able, if you are conscious of it early on, to phrase your question so that you can use the type of data you prefer.

be appropriate choices and let the advisor guide you on who would be best. Do not let the advisor put people on the committee you think would be terrible. Remember that this is a negotiated process. Yet you must make sure the entire committee gets along with not only you, but each other. When you approach other potential committee members let them know who is already on the committee or who you are thinking of as a committee member. This will ensure that all the committee members know who will be on the committee and if they will be able to work with each other.

You should also find committee members who match your working style (Germeroth 1991). If you like to work independently and present large sections or complete revisions all at once, make sure your committee (or at least the chair) is comfortable with this. Alternately, if you want closer supervision, you will have to find a committee that will give the degree of supervision you wish. Other graduate students or recent graduates should be able to advise you on this question. However, you should remember that the final responsibility to finish the project rests with *you* (after all, it is *your* degree). A final point is that you should try to choose the minimum number of faculty required to form a committee. The more committee members, the more difficult it will be to get them to agree on what you are doing and how you are doing it.

In looking for committee members you should spend some time to try to understand the motivations of the dissertation advisers. Many advisers are genuinely interested in scholarly development of students and others are not so wholly interested. Try to understand why that professor may be willing to advise you. Is it for a scholarly development reason? Is it because the professor needs a cheap research assistant? Is it for reasons concerning departmental politics and prestige? Such an analysis will help you to better understand and manage the relationship with the adviser.

You should feel comfortable working with the committee chair on a professional and personal level. If any conflicts develop with the committee, the chair will be the one likely to iron them out. You should (for obvious reasons) avoid direct conflict with committee members (Oldfield 1988). Though you could change the composition of the committee (including changing the chair) such a move is an extreme one and should be done in such a way as to minimize "ruffled feathers." That is, you should have some other reason than a personality conflict for changing members. For example, you can alter the focus of your topic (i.e., change the literature or theories used to support the hypotheses) or employ different methods to test your hypotheses. In this way the change in the committee looks as though it were predicated upon factors other than personality difficulties and no one comes off looking as though they are in some way "hard to work with." Again, it is better to try to avoid conflicts in the first place—or have the chair address them—rather than changing members once you select them.

Other factors that could change the composition of your committee are tenure decisions, retirements, and sabbaticals. To keep the composition of your committee consistent you may want to avoid faculty who, in the next one to two years, are coming up for tenure or who may retire. Due to the inherent communication problems that may result, you may also want to avoid faculty members who intend to take a sabbatical while you are writing your dissertation.

GETTING THE COMMITTEE TO AGREE TO YOUR PROPOSAL. Sell the proposal by convincing potential committee members of both its importance and its fit with their own research interests. Get agreement on what the committee expects from you and what you expect from them. What kind of results do they expect? Some committee members might feel that in not locating any statistically significant relationships you still have results that can be defended (though they might not be what was expected). Other members might support the idea that you should be able to uncover some of the expected relationships. The latter type of committee member is not problematic if your research involves a large number of variables

or relationships. Such a study is likely to produce some significant relationships. If the type of study you propose is *very* tightly focused, the amount of data you are likely to collect is small and if your skills at statistical manipulation are weak, such results-oriented committee members should be avoided. If you have such a member, to satisfy her or him you may have to collect more data and/or enlist the aid of colleagues to help you use inductive logic to arrive at novel ways to stratify and analyze the data (commonly known as "torturing the data until it confesses").

After selecting the committee, make sure that you have addressed most of their concerns about the proposal before you orally present it to them in a formal manner. Personally contact each member of the committee a day or two before the proposal defense (or final defense) to see whether the committee member has any final questions, disagreements, or other concerns. Doing so shows respect to each committee member and also helps reduce the chance of a "broadside" at the defense itself. This way, when you defend the proposal, you will have already addressed most of the serious objections and will be knowledgeable about the minor ones. However, listen carefully to the instructions given by the committee when you defend the proposal, as they will be looking to see whether you address their concerns in your later drafts.

Dissertating

Congratulations, you have made it to ABD status. Now what? If you are ever to complete the degree, the actual task of writing the dissertation must occur at some point. How does one best approach and complete this formidable task and come out of it all mostly sane? We have several suggestions. First, stay organized; leave a paper trail so that you know how you arrived at your conclusions. Second, keep a set schedule; work a set amount each day. Third, get support. Finally, do not forget that although a dissertation should be seen as a substantial research project, it is best viewed as one that comes to a reasonable closure in a specified period of time (e.g., two years). Leave the refinements and extensions until after the dissertation is accepted.

Organization

Organization is important for all the stages of your degree. However, with the dissertation, you are likely to encounter many more requests for revisions than you ever did before (including the ones made by the committee at the presentation of your proposal). The important thing to try to do is keep a good record of the changes made to each draft. "As revisions are suggested, note the who, what, when, and why of the change. It is a good thing to keep in mind that whatever you do, you will have to defend your decisions, formally and informally, many times" (Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box 1992, p. 16). Additionally, keep copies of original data and results at various stages. You never know when you may need to resurrect such information to further develop a particular aspect of your study (either at the request of your committee or later for journal reviewers).

It is also important to *back up* your computer data, manuscripts, and programs. *Do it often,* and make sure you clearly label the different files. This way, if your office is destroyed, or your hard drive crashes, all is not lost (we know of hard drive crashes where people lost enough months of work that they ultimately gave up trying to complete their degree). With adequate backup you can retrieve your data and get your system back up and running in a matter of days (and do it with a minimum of work to redo). By keeping computer files organized and frequently backed up—as well as keeping several copies of files in different places—you ensure that misfortune or natural disaster will not spell doom. We know of cases where Ph.D. students periodically sent their parents hard copies and electronic copies of

chapter drafts, coding forms, databases, etc. for safekeeping.[11] Having this information stored one to three thousand miles away can add greatly to your peace of mind. If this seems paranoid, think about how long it would take to redo all the steps of the dissertation process.

COLLECTING DATA. If you have designed your study so that you are simply able to acquire all the data off a computer database, you will still spend considerable time putting it into some kind of acceptable form for analysis. For example, you may get raw data that you need to aggregate and transform to be used as one of your measures. One might call this "cleaning up the data." Having someone familiar with the data clean it up so that it is usable for your purposes may save you some time. Otherwise, there is not much you can do to save time in this regard. If you can simplify the steps involved in gathering the data, you may be able to enlist the help of family, friends, or students needing to make some quick cash (assuming you can afford to pay them). This should allow you to save some time.

You will also probably end up spending more time than you may have first thought on seemingly mundane tasks such as cleaning up data (perhaps a considerable amount of time if the study requires a great deal of data gathering). This is all part of the normal process. In addition, it may be helpful to keep the raw data since you may need to access it for different purposes in the future. Finally, you may wish to gather additional data that, though not a part of your current study, may be useful for future studies you are contemplating. If the data can be obtained at little additional cost, such a move could prove useful in your early career.

ANALYZING THE DATA. Your proposal should tell you what tests you will be employing. At various stages, committee members will ask for additional tests to be run so as to validate your initial results. This will likely add to the value of the dissertation. In some ways analyzing the data is the most interesting part of the dissertation. This is because you finally discover whether those theories you discussed in your proposal are valid. On the other hand, analyzing the data can be the most frightening part of your research. You may not get any of the expected results, or even worse, no results at all. Here is where you discover (if you have not already done so) the secret that research does not go as smoothly as it appears when done. In the papers and dissertations you have read researchers undertook "*obvious*" steps to ensure that they used certain types of measures to avoid "*obvious*" problems with other types of measures. Sometimes researchers do this in advance, other times they do not.

For example, one of the authors did a bankruptcy study where one of the independent variables was return on equity (ROE). *Obviously*, the lower the ROE the more likely the firm is to fail. This is not true with these types of firms, however. A firm going bankrupt can have a very high ROE—large negative returns over a small negative equity number will result in a highly positive ROE. (The simple solution would then be to use ROA or adjust ROE to account for these kinds of anomalies.)

The only way you may realize that these kinds of problems exist is to look at the data. Once you locate the problem and figure out what is causing it, it should be fairly easy to fix (but only after you spend a great deal of time trying to locate the problem, and consulting with various colleagues and committee members as to what might be the cause). In the end you will write it up as though this was an obvious problem and you did X, Y, or Z to correct for it. None of the hours of "head banging" will show. You will know, however, and in many ways so do all the Ph.D.s who went before you. Make sure you notify your committee about these kinds of changes and your reasons for the changes. This way they will not be

[11] For the computer—and Internet—savvy, keeping your work in a subdirectory that can be zip filed and uploaded onto an Internet location will make it readily available should disaster strike. Many schools offer space for pages and you may also be able to find freely available ones that can be used for the purpose (e.g., http://www.bizland.com). You may not wish to make the file publicly available and the simplest way to accomplish this is not to put a link to the file on the index page (just have a hint on the index page like "the backup is stored at http:\\yourname\yourserver\your-mom-and-dad's-birthdays.zip" or some such fact that only you would know).

completely surprised when they receive the next revision. If other things go badly, take the advice of Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box (1992, p. 17): "If your initial ideas do not work out . . . or if too many subjects fail to follow through . . . shift to an alternative plan . . . . Once you decide to change your original plan, let all the committee members know what you will be doing and why. Be prepared."

Additionally, have your data collected and some preliminary results by late summer or very early fall of the year prior to the one in which you expect to finish your degree. You need to do this for two reasons. First, if you are this far along in your research you are likely to finish by the following fall—a factor highly weighted by prospective employers. Second, if you are this far along in your research you will have time to develop a short paper and presentation for use in interviewing. This will also help you to put your results into a more clearly understandable form that will not only help you in the results section of your dissertation but also make them easier to interpret for discussion.

INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION, AND FINAL WRITE-UP. At the end of the dissertation process you will be answering your initial research question and addressing your hypotheses. You will also need to show how other theories might offer better or alternative explanations of your findings given the restrictions of your data. Even if you think your dissertation is perfect, your committee is likely to ask for numerous rewrites. Germeroth (1991, p. 78) tells us that ". . . the candidate can expect every sentence in the dissertation to be rewritten or revised and [should] not take the comments personally." Keep working at it; eventually you will stem the tide of red ink to complete the research.

The Daily Grind

Though the above mechanics are straightforward, getting through them is somewhat more problematic. In this section, and the next, we offer some hints as to how to manage this and stay (mostly) sane. We have already discussed avoiding dysfunctional patterns like procrastination, but how can you be more productive? First, prepare a schedule of what you want to have done by when and give yourself enough time to do it (this can be as simple as putting due dates next to sections of your outline). Know what work pattern is best for you. Some people feel that concentrating large blocks of time works best (Germeroth 1991); others suggest two-hour blocks to avoid fatigue (Martin 1980). In either case, make sure you work a set number of hours per week. It might also help for you to have a separate area (such as an office, or at least a desk) that has been designated for your dissertation work. For some people having a separate "dissertating space" helps to alleviate the distractions of ordinary life.

Give yourself rewards for meeting deadlines (an afternoon in the park, a bicycle ride, etc.). When you complete an entire rewrite, make it a bigger reward (e.g., go shopping and buy something you have been thinking about obtaining). Also make sure you give your family and friends some time. This is for your mental health and theirs. Remember, in some ways they are going through this process too. Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box (1992, p. 18) reminds us to ". . . try to put aside a few minutes each day for one-on-one time with each family member. But remember, talk is cheap; do not make promises you cannot keep [regarding giving them time]."

For some people the promise of a reward is not enough incentive. Germeroth (1991, p. 76–77), citing a case discussed by Harris (1974), describes an interesting technique employed to motivate a woman who had completed all the work on her dissertation except the actual writing:

> She was instructed to take fifty envelopes and address them to an organization of which she did *not* approve. Into each of the 50 envelopes, she was to put the same amount of money and give all the envelopes to a friend. At the end of each week, if the woman did not have five or more pages written

on the dissertation, the friend was to mail one of the envelopes to the disliked organization with the instructions that the enclosed money was a donation.

The money was returned if the required number of pages was completed. For a chapter rewrite the process was modified. Three envelopes, each with increasingly larger monetary amounts and a request that someone from the organization call on the woman, were employed to expedite the rewriting. By employing these methods the woman received her degree within a year.

While you may not want to go to the lengths mentioned above, some incentive system (other than receiving your degree) should be helpful in completing the dissertation. In addition there are some other forms of support you should think about.

Maintaining Support

There are two methods we have come across (in addition to those mentioned previously) that may help you complete the dissertation. The first is a *dissertation support group*, and the second is the *dissertation partner*.

A *dissertation support group* can help its members stay focused on their dissertations, feel less isolated, and obtain moral support and positive suggestions. Stalker (1991) suggests that these groups can be organized either informally by the students or externally by degree-granting or ABD-hiring institutions. The former type of support is usually aimed at dealing with social and emotional issues, while the latter type emphasizes research methodology issues. Basically the aim of such groups is to bring doctoral candidates a sense of community, commitment, and direction. While you may get some support from your family, they might not be that much help with the particular problems you are facing with the dissertation. "You will be speaking a foreign language in which few others are fluent" (Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box 1992, p. 18). To a great extent those in the support group will speak that language.

Stalker (1991) suggests that degree-granting institutions try to facilitate formal as well as informal groups. Your university may require that doctoral students enroll for credit each term. With the help of a faculty member a formal meeting time could be set up and enrolled doctoral students would be encouraged to attend and discuss their research. Such an arrangement may help people with some problems in methodology and give them practice in presenting their ideas. Informally getting together could help people deal with the social aspects of trying to finish the dissertation. Stalker (1991) suggests several things to do to start a support group at your institution: (1) secure support of department chairs and other interested parties, (2) advertise meetings, (3) keep group size below eight—have several groups if necessary, (4) establish definite confidentiality guidelines, (5) have the group determine meeting frequency and focus, (6) plan some discussion topics but stress the support function, (7) keep in touch with members who do not attend meetings regularly, (8) plan some activities that include significant others, and (9) provide refreshments.

The *dissertation partner* is another method by which you can obtain support. Monsour and Corman (1991, p. 182) describe dissertation partnerships as "two individuals, both of whom are at the same point in their graduate careers, who agree to team-up and provide one another support throughout the dissertation process." The partners are chosen a couple of terms before ABD status is obtained so that they can provide each other with help on the dissertation proposal. The advantages of such an arrangement, according to Monsour and Corman, are that the partners furnish companionship, emotional support, and empathy. For example, they can provide each other with encouragement during those long hours spent in the library. As Monsour and Corman (1991, p. 185) state it, "Misery does not love any kind of company, only miserable company."

Monsour and Corman (1991) suggest the following functions of the dissertation partner. First, the dissertation partner ensures that the many tasks involved with the dissertation are timely and accurately performed. This will also involve making suggestions and providing

guidance where needed (if possible) about better or different ways to address various issues. Second, the dissertation partnership involves the weekly setting and analysis of goals. While you could do this individually, having a partner makes you highly accountable to someone. This function can be performed through regular (e.g., weekly) one- to two-hour meetings. Such meetings, Monsour and Corman suggest, have four objectives: (1) discussing the number of hours to be spent on the dissertation in the following week; (2) discussing the goals of the previous week and whether or not they were met, and if not, why not;[12] (3) setting realistic goals for the following week;[13] and (4) discussing ideas and issues involved with the dissertations (e.g., bouncing ideas off of each other and the normal complaining about the process).

If you are more comfortable working alone, then these kinds of support may not be for you. In addition, the mentor on your committee will also keep tabs on your progress. Use whatever approach you think will work best for you in getting the job done. As previously noted, "there are two types of dissertations, finished and unfinished" (Shimada, J., personal communication). For perfectionists, a variation on this theme is that "there are two kinds of dissertations—perfect and done" (Germeroth 1991, p. 77). The point is to get the degree—preferably before you leave for full-time employment. After starting work, finishing the degree becomes much more difficult (Oldfield 1988). However, we will discuss shortly what to do if you start your academic career before completing the degree.

Your Dissertation Defense

The dissertation defense is publicly announced (e.g., an announcement of it may appear in the school newspaper). Thus, everyone knows when a dissertation will be defended. Use this to your advantage. Ask someone in the business school who is about to defend their dissertation (and the chair of their committee) if they would not mind if you sat in on the defense. See how the process works—this goes a long way toward reducing some trepidation you might have about the process if you have never seen a defense. Also, remember you are on fairly safe ground if you have something significant to say, have tightly framed your research question, and set out the limitations of your study. You *will* have done these things, because if you have not, it is unlikely that your chair would allow you to proceed to the defense.

Think of your own defense as another presentation made for a job interview. The only differences are that this job does not pay anything (you only get a title) and some committee members may try to "kick your tires." The latter item refers to committee members who wish to see how well you handle tough questions. Treat this as you would tough questions from any class: stay calm and answer them the best you can—in all probability you are the most knowledgeable one in the room on your specific subject (Oldfield 1988).

Once you complete the oral defense there may be additional revisions that need to be made. Before you make the revisions take your next-to-last draft to the graduate office and find out if it is formatted correctly (you may want to do this earlier to head off last-minute problems). Thus you are less likely to encounter problems when you hand in the final draft. Make the needed corrections, get the needed signatures, and hand in the dissertation to the graduate office. You are now done with the dissertation. The good news is that now you can take a few weeks off. The bad news is that you are not really done with the dissertation. It will follow you, as mentioned before, into your early career.

[12] It is easier to explain away an unproductive week to yourself than it is to a partner. Also the partners can help each other over those difficulties that may have caused the non-productive time.

[13] Each dissertation partner should write down the other's goals and provide a copy to their partner. This way there is no misunderstanding what the goals were. A phone call or visit (or two) during the week to check on the partner's progress toward his/her goals also helps in their attainment.

Employment and Your Career

Hopefully you completed the dissertation before you started work.[14] Wright (1991) notes the great time demands of being a new faculty member can either delay or stop the completion of the degree. Oldfield (1988, p. 273) states the need to complete the degree distinctly: "*Do not leave campus without it*—your incentive to complete the degree will decline upon leaving campus."

DO YOU REALLY WANT A CAREER AS AN ACADEMIC? One thing the dissertation will help you determine is if the independent research aspect of academic life is for you. You may well decide that this experience was difficult enough without trying to make a career out of it. There are Ph.D.s who never go back to academic life and who use their degree in other employment. Some faculty members may disapprove of this alternative so it is best to keep such intentions quiet if possible until after you have your degree in hand. In general, look at Kronenfeld and Whicker (1997) for a good review on the nature of job searches, academic job interviews, dual careers, non-academic jobs, etc. In fact, their work is one of a very useful series you may wish to check out. The series is called *Survival Skills for Scholars* (Sage Publications).

SUPPOSE YOU NEED TO ACCEPT EMPLOYMENT BEFORE COMPLETING THE DEGREE (for the obvious financial reasons, if no other). There are several things you can do. First, before you start at your new university, negotiate release time with your future employer. For example, have your university release you from committee responsibilities or from some of the teaching load for your first year (e.g., teaching one less class than the "normal" load). Additionally, negotiate for a reduction in the number of courses for which you will have to prepare. This will reduce the time you spend preparing. One way this can be accomplished is by being assigned courses that are basically the same ones you prepared for at your degree-granting institution. Another way to do this is by teaching the same courses all semesters of your first year (e.g., one section of strategy and one section of methods each term). If you do not bargain for these kinds of releases before arriving, you should still be able to negotiate for the last one and this should help you in the second term. If you do complete your degree before going to work, your negotiated release time should help you dedicate more time toward writing and thus furthering your publication record.

Why should your new employer give you this time? Typically, there are "up-or-out" clauses in the contract a university makes with an ABD. That is, ABDs must complete their degree in a reasonable amount of time (thus moving "up" from Instructor to Assistant Professor) or they must leave the university ("out"). This is a problem for the ABD for obvious reasons.[15] It is also a problem for the university. It directly costs thousands to recruit new faculty: transit and room and board for all the interviewees and moving and administrative

[14] This assumes you have found full-time academic employment. Though it is not our intention to discuss strategies for job hunting, we would suggest that getting a copy of a good academic resume from a recent job candidate would be helpful in showing you the proper format for such resumes. Also, Heiberger and Vick's *The Academic Job Search Handbook* (1991) is a good reference regarding the resume and job search.

[15] There are advantages to accepting employment as an ABD. First, if you had not previously taught, you can discover whether you like it. If not, you may want to find a job outside of academia. Second, by taking an academic position you prove that you are a peer, not a student. This may improve your status with your committee (and your chance of getting the degree). Third, you will put pressure on faculty at your degree-granting university to give you the degree. They hire ABDs and can sympathize with them. Also, the academic community is a small one and your committee members do not want their university to get the reputation of blocking people that are "almost finished." Some faculty take into consideration how difficult it is to work and complete the degree and may lower the hurdles you must jump. You will still have a tough time, however. Teaching takes a great deal of time and energy. It provides immediate feedback and dissertating does not. However, you should still try to work a set number of hours per week on the dissertation. Try to reduce time spent working on teaching (this a topic one could devote a book to) but not to the extent that you feel you are giving your students a poor education. Poor teaching ratings are not marketable.

expenses for the new hire. So it is in the best interests of the university not to have to go through the process twice (once for you and once for your replacement). Thus the hiring institution has an interest in seeing its ABD hires finish. In this regard, your hiring institution may also be able to provide some assistance to you in promoting a dissertation support group if one does not already exist for ABDs they have hired.

CONVERT THE DISSERTATION INTO A SET OF JOURNAL ARTICLES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. This is important. The data in your research becomes dated quickly—your data is already a year old when you finish and may be another year or two older by the time the article is accepted. Add to this another year before the article goes to press, and you see how dated your information will be if you delay. Besides, your dissertation is the closest thing you have to a finished article (except for some massive editing). Germeroth (1991) cites some useful guides in helping convert your dissertation into workable articles; they include a chapter in the *Handbook for Academic Authors* (Luey 1995) and suggestions in the books by Davis and Parker (1979) and Martin (1980) mentioned earlier.

We must mention that review times for many journals have become extraordinarily long in recent years. We know of a case in which a new author had only one of the first four papers submitted to journals come back with reviews in less than nine months.[16] Such lengthy review times are quite common and a real problem for someone concerned about the "tenure clock." You should make it an explicit strategy to balance the reputation for short review lead times with the scholarly reputation of the journal.

There are several additional ways to decide to which journal you should send the article. First, your dissertation supervisor should have some idea as to where you might send it. Also, passing around the manuscript to others on the faculty might help. In addition, using a guide such as *Cabell's*[17] (Cabell 1994) might help you find possible outlets. Try to first send it to the best journal with which you think it fits. If it is rejected, either be able to validly argue with the editor against the rationale for the rejection or have another home for the article in mind.[18] Remember that submissions are sometimes rejected for irrational reasons.[19] Senior, accomplished researchers will tell you that the review process can be a "crapshoot." So recognize that good papers sometimes do not get accepted and have a resubmission strategy (either discussion with the editor or move to a new journal). All of this is part of developing a portfolio of articles that are under review at any one time. Also do not turn down the opportunity to be involved in some other projects which interest you, which you are knowledgeable about, and which have the potential for publication. You will need something to do after "cutting up" the dissertation.

Finally, you are as original as your dissertation. That is, you are unique. Not all the

[16] A special note of thanks to one of our reviewers for sharing this and a great number of other helpful words that we have included in this article.

[17] *Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities in Business and Economics* gives the names, addresses, circulation data, publication guidelines, and review information (including acceptance rates) for over 400 journals. Copies can be obtained from Cabell Publishing Co., Box 5428, Tobe Hahn Station, Beaumont, Texas 77726-5428 for about $100 (Phone: 409-898-0575). There is also an edition for the education area.

[18] Article rejection may occur because: (1) it does not fit with the journal's requirements, (2) the article is not interesting the way it is written, or (3) it is not of sufficient quality for that journal. In the first case, it is best to simply re-submit the paper "as-is" to another journal of similar rank. In the second case you may want to approach the topic from a slightly different literature background to make it more interesting and re-submit the rewritten paper to another journal of similar rank. In the final case you can do one of two things. You could improve the piece by addressing the reviewers' concerns and submit it to another journal of equal quality. If it is impossible to address their concerns (e.g., it is for some reason impossible to collect the data they request) then move to the next tier in quality and submit it there (publications in second-tier journals look better than a stack of rejections from top-tier ones when you are coming up for tenure). Another alternative is to switch the submission to another field (e.g., from management to sociology) where a different set of reviewers can look over the work.

[19] For example, there might have been a poor selection of the associate editor or reviewers by the chief editor.

methods we suggest here will be best for you. The best advice is to "know thyself" and pick those tools that you think will work best for you.

Directions for the Future

We could elaborate here on the specifics of many of the points we mention in this paper. Dealing with academic politics and better or more efficient topic development come to mind as needing more discussion in the literature. Some points that we might have missed (e.g., making contacts for employment opportunities, conference presentations, setting up for the tenure decision, etc.) also cry out for more investigation. However, in the interest of brevity, we will leave these for others to discuss. Though important, these topics are beyond the scope of this paper.

It makes little sense for *students* to invest years into a Ph.D. program only to fail to be awarded the degree because they fail to complete their dissertation. Yet, this is what happens to half the students who start a doctoral program. We wanted to provide help to these students. However, by aiming our advice to dissertators, we have avoided providing advice to dissertation advisers. Advisers need advice too—perhaps as much as the students. This is especially so in areas relating to the nature of personal interactions with students and understanding the objectives and motivations of students.

The balance in the equation is that it makes little sense for *faculty members* to invest years into training potential Ph.D.s only to have them fail to be awarded the degree because they fail to complete their dissertation. Again, we remind the reader, this is what happens to half the students. Research and discussion into what *dissertation advisors* can do to get their students through the program should be the next step in the discussion of doctoral education.[20]

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Charles E. Summer passed away in the course of developing this paper. Dr. Summer was Professor emeritus at the University of Washington. He was author of numerous articles and books in the fields of policy, strategy, and management. He also served as President of the Academy of Management. Having supervised a great number of doctoral dissertations over the years, Dr. Summer contributed a faculty member's perspective for this paper. This was invaluably important for spotting those areas where students could go off-course.