How and Why to Approach Particular Faculty

- You must have compelling intellectual connections with faculty before you approach them about working on your dissertation committee. The easiest way to do this is to take classes with them, talk to them at workshops and in office hours, and so forth. In addition, read their major work AND their most recent research—not just what they published thirty years ago—and have an intelligible take on the relation between your intellectual projects and theirs before you approach them.
- Be prepared with a justification about fit for the question, “Why me instead of Professor X?”
- Don’t try to convince a “reluctant,” busy, or well-known faculty member to do more than they want to do (i.e., they may be willing to be on the committee but not to chair). There needs to be a strong intellectual connection for them to add another dissertation student to their roster of students.
- You should look for faculty who will ask “hard” questions and will pay attention to your work.

Putting Together Committees

- Get advice about potential faculty committee members from your program’s director of graduate studies (DGS) or chair and get to know your program’s rules about dissertation committees. And if you are trying to stretch the rules, let the DGS know why—they might be able to suggest a strategy for you.
- Ask the DGS and peers which professors generally say they must be on the dissertation committee in order to work with students in any capacity during the research phase.
- If there are two faculty members you’d like to have on your committee but who don’t get along, it may be better to have one of them as an informal mentor. Otherwise, you may end up having a lot of difficult managerial conversations. Talk to your adviser or DGS about this.
- Only propose having co-chairs if it’s known that those faculty get along, have worked together before, and so on. Be cautious about making junior and senior faculty co-chairs.
- Make sure your dissertation committee chair supports the idea of putting together an interdisciplinary committee before you reach out to faculty from other PhD programs here or elsewhere.
- Don’t cold call or email a faculty member at another institution about being on your dissertation committee. You should, preferably, know that person from conferences or workshops or have an introduction from someone else on the committee. Make sure you know if they will write a very positive letter for you before you ask them to be on your committee. Set expectations about their role in advance.