Managing Your Dissertation Committee: Best Practices

Preparing the Ground for Future Conversations with Dissertation Committee Members

- Establish clear communication from the start with (a) dissertation committee members and (b) faculty you want to write you recommendation letters.
- Even if you know the specific faculty members with whom you are going to work, talk to other faculty members about their research (this gives you a better sense of the field and gives you practice talking to faculty).
- Think about whether the work styles and work flow of the faculty with whom you want to work are compatible with yours and talk with them about this before you put them on your dissertation committee.
- Set expectations with faculty about the timing of their responses to your work and let them know about what kinds of responses work best for you personally and intellectually. Don’t worry about annoying them; more conversation on this topic is generally better!
- When preparing for candidacy: talk to faculty about your projects or exciting results/research. This will help you get used to approaching faculty and will set a tone for future discussions about your dissertation or other topics.

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- Never lose sight of the fact that you are in control of the dissertation process/product.
- Keep in mind always that the overall goal of the dissertation is going from being a student to a professional peer and being able to discuss your dissertation as a body of work that contributes to the field.
- Understand that faculty are busy and may not always respond in a manner you want, but make sure you ask or set expectations about getting work back in a timely manner.
- Have the courage to ask questions to faculty if things aren’t clear or you need guidance. Be persistent!
- Especially for science students: Once you are confident about your project (you are a good critical thinker, can communicate effectively, and have produced a significant body of work), ask your advisers about when you can or should defend.
- A problem can arrive if you want a specific professor on a committee and if that person (a) doesn’t respond adequately to your work or (b) doesn’t work well with other committee members. That person can be a resource for you but doesn’t always have to be on the committee.