

## APPENDIX III: Dissertation Proposal Guidelines

A doctoral dissertation represents the first large-scale effort at developing and executing a research project from start to finish that does, minimally, one or more of the following:

- addresses a gap in existing knowledge;
- identifies and addresses a gap in existing knowledge that we did not realize needed addressing;
- improves upon the current understanding and explanation of the issues;
- corrects errors in our explanations or understanding of the issues;
- offers another look at issues that were hitherto considered settled.

Thus, a doctoral dissertation in our school almost always finds its origins in practical problems where current approaches to addressing them are found wanting. Although description of particular public affairs concerns can often involve research, mere description is not sufficient in and of itself for a dissertation. The purpose of the dissertation proposal is to lay out a research agenda and an implementation plan for the months and – sometimes – years following the successful completion of written and oral exams.

A dissertation proposal, when successfully defended, becomes an implicit contract between the student and the dissertation committee members that stipulates that if the student does what is being proposed, to the satisfaction of the committee members, then the likelihood of a successful doctoral defense is high. An important caveat to accompany this last statement is that over the course of working on the dissertation, the student may encounter issues not foreseen in the proposal that when addressed might yield a stronger final product. Making adjustments in the light of such learning is both feasible and desirable, subject to mutual agreement between the student and the committee members.

### Proposal Content

A proposal must clearly describe the nature and scope of the public affairs issues or concerns that will be investigated. The first task is to demonstrate how this issue or concern can be converted into a researchable problem that can be adequately addressed in a reasonable length of time. Formulating that research problem includes, though is not limited to addressing questions such as

- Why is this issue or concern of interest to other scholars and practitioners?
- What is the nature of the challenge for public servants, scholars and/or other affected or interested individuals or groups of individuals?
- How is this specific problem a special instance of a more general concern or issue?

Having formulated the problem, the student must discuss the academic literature and locate the problem in that context. Although the proposal will not include a comprehensive review of the literature, it must give the reader the sense of

- The relevant literature
- The current understanding of such problems in the literature
- A critical assessment and the student's understanding of the main topics in the relevant literature
- The location of the proposed dissertation in the literature just discussed

For some students, the proposal may be first time they actually have to think about where they position themselves in the existing literature and what is their critical assessment of that literature. The discussion of the substantive literature can be provided in combination with that of theoretical literature. The discussion of different theoretical approaches to a comparable substantive problem and even of theoretical approaches to different problems can be provided.

Having formulated the problem and located it in the literature, the third element is a description of the conceptual frameworks that provide the lens through which this particular issue will be studied and is then further elaborated through a discussion of selected methods of research. In other words, the proposal should next describe how the research will be implemented. Again, this section of the proposal should include, but not be limited to the following:

- A description of the general approach to the problem
- A description of the conceptual framework that will underlie the dissertation
- A description of the evidence that will inform the claims being made in the dissertation (Although a doctoral dissertation can be philosophical document consisting entirely of arguments and claims, it is rare for a public affairs dissertation to be devoid of any data)
- A description of the methods that will be used to make sense of the evidence and draw inferences to support the claims made in the dissertation

The selection of conceptual frames and methods should always be done with an eye towards the nature of the issues. The issue, the conceptual frames, and the methods should be aligned so that they collectively enhance the likelihood of adequately addressing the issues without paying undue attention to preconceived notions of an ideal methodological approach.

It is incumbent upon the student to outline the contributions of the proposed dissertation. The contributions can be to any one or more the items addressed above. So, the contributions can be to:

- Problem formulation: How formulating the problem as proposed improves upon earlier formulations
- Conceptual framework: How the proposed framework might yield new conceptual insights
- Data: How the database you have developed or the data you plan to use are novel
- Methods: Extensions to available methods to address idiosyncrasies of the data
- Knowledge and practice: How the dissertation adds to our understanding and explanations of the underlying issues and promises potential approaches that practitioners might be able to implement

### Format

How much detail is included in the proposal depends upon the advisor. Different advisors have different levels of need for the amount of progress the student must have made in reviewing the literature, developing the conceptual framework, acquiring the data, conducting preliminary analyses of the data and so forth, before defending the proposal. There are no specific guidelines as to the gap between the proposal and the final dissertation defense. In general, it should be early enough so that the committee members may provide proper guidance before the student has made substantial progress and committed to a specific research approach and set of data. It should not be so early in the student's thinking that it lacks sufficient detail for the committee members to judge the feasibility of the proposed research.

Regardless of the level of detail, the proposal must clarify

- (1) the main research issues (which some advisors like to see in the form of testable hypotheses)
- (2) conceptual framework
- (3) data sources and availability (some advisors like to see the data in hand with some preliminary analysis and results)
- (4) the methods used to organize and make sense of the data
- (5) potential contributions to knowledge and practice.

These five points can be laid out in sufficient detail in approximately five to seven thousand words. Additional supporting materials can always be relegated to appendices (literature review, detailed data description, preliminary analyses, etc.).

The proposal should include an outline of the tentative table of contents. In the past four to five decades a rather standard template has developed: introduction; literature review and methods; empirical analysis and discussion; conclusion and suggestions for future research. Of course, such a template is neither mandatory nor necessary. Originality is welcomed.

You will note that no mention has been made of the actual structure of the dissertation, that is, will it consist of multiple essays on related topics? Will it be a seamless discussion of a single issue in book length form? The answer to those questions lies with the student and the members of the committee. If someone is proposing multiple essays, then each essay need not incorporate all the items mentioned in the template. For instance, there could be a conceptual essay that develops a framework that does not include an empirical section.

Keep in mind that there is not, cannot be, and ought not to be one preferred template for a doctoral dissertation proposal. The doctoral student is encouraged to work closely with the advisor and committee members when:

- (a) determining range and scope of the research topic (it has to be manageable and doable within a reasonable amount of time)
- (b) defining the nature of the problem
- (c) Considering different frameworks and conceptualizations
- (d) Selecting appropriate conceptualizations and methods

Criteria for any doctoral committee to consider when judging the proposal include, among other factors, the likelihood of the dissertation adding to our current explanations for and understanding of the issues, coherence and consistency of the proposed arguments, and the candidate's familiarity with the literature.

Above all else, a doctoral dissertation is a creative act and must therefore allow for originality and flexibility. Hence, the above should be construed as what they are described to be. They are guidelines.

#### Logistics

The time and date of the proposal defense must be announced at least two weeks before the day of the examination so that other students and faculty may attend. Anyone may ask questions of the candidate, at the discretion of the advisor. No one other than the members of the committee may be present during the discussion of the student's performance and the decision regarding the student's readiness to proceed with the proposed dissertation.

A copy of the proposal to be defended should be distributed at least five (5) business days before the day of the defense. The committee chair, members of the committee, and director of the doctoral program should receive a copy.

The student is responsible for ensuring that all committee members are available for the defense, scheduling the room, setting the time, and sending out the announcement in collaboration with the advisor.

The defense is to last no more than two hours. Students generally present a 20 to 30 minute overview of the proposed research. The advisor and the student should agree upon the length and format of the presentation.