DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 319 HE 027 357

AUTHOR	Woodbury, Jacqueline
TITLE	A Love/Hate Relationship: Dissertation Topic to Doctoral Committee.
PUB DATE	12 Nov 93
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, November 12, 1993).
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Advising; *Advisory Committees; *Doctoral Dissertations; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Mentors; *Selection; *Student Research

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the steps involved in developing a dissertation topic and selecting a Dissertation Committee. It suggests that students assess their personal interest in the topic and their technical competence to complete the research required. A checklist of topic feasibility and appropriateness, developed by J. Mauch and J. Birch, is presented. Guidelines for choosing members of the Dissertation Committee are discussed, emphasizing the importance of selecting professors who have prior school experience, exemplary doctoral training, the respect of their colleagues, and recently completed scholarly research. The value of developing a mentor relationship with the major professor is stressed. (Contains 11 references.) (JDD)

A Love/Hate Relationship:

Dissertation Topic to Doctoral Committee

Jacqueline Woodbury

University of Tennessee

Presented at the Annual Convention of the

Mid-South Educational Research Association

New Orleans, Louisiana

November 12, 1993

A Love/Hate Relationship:
Dissertation to Doctoral Committee

The distance in time and space between A.B.D. and Ph.D. is seen by many graduate students as a journey penned by Dante's sadistic twin which catapults them into their own personal academic "Inferno". For many the dread actually precipitates into a self-fulfilling prophecy that extends and exacerbates the process.

The successful graduate researcher will take one day at a time--one step at a time. This paper is dedicated to all graduate students who are just beginning this journey.

Choosing a Dissertation Topic

The choice of the dissertation topic is the first decision that should be made by the graduate student. (Gay, 1992) The student should eye this process remembering that he/she must ultimately prepare a "proposal so convincing, so well thought through, so clear in intent that it will be unnecessary to submit a

series of drafts , or to abandon the project entirely." (Castetter & Heisler, 1988, p. 1)

Mauch and Birch (1989) make the following suggestions when first deciding on a dissertation topic:

The Student's Personal Inventory

1. Are you interested in this topic?
2. Do you have an adequate background in this subject?
3. Do you have the technical competence to complete the research required?
4. Are the results of the research important to you?
5. Are the size and scope or the project feasible?

Not only should the student consider the personal dedication that he/she brings to the proposed topic, but the student will save "time in searching out potential topics if they first determine whether they face any restrictions on what types of research or investigative methodology the faculty may approve." (Mauch & Birch, 1989, p.44)

The following is an abbreviated version of the "Checklist of Topic Feasibility and Appropriateness" designed by Mauch and Birch (1989).

General Topic Feasibility and Appropriateness.

1. Is there current interest in this topic in your field?

2. Is there a gap in knowledge that work on this topic could help to fill?

3. Is it possible to focus on a small enough segment of this particular topic to make it manageable?

4. Can you envision a way to study the topic that will allow conclusions to be drawn with substantial objectivity?

5. Is the data collection (i.e., test, questionnaire, interview) acceptable in your school?

6. Is there a body of literature relevant to the topic?

7. Is a search of the topic manageable?

8. Are there large problems to be surmounted in working in this topic? Can you handle them? Do you want to handle them?

9. Are the needed data easily accessible? Will you have control of the data?

10. Do you have a clear statement of the purpose, scope, objectives, procedures, and limitations of the study?

The graduate student would be wise to consult with experienced professors to help in their topic selection. This professorial advise would not only save countless hours of library research, but would also give the student a preview of the professor as a prospective dissertation committee member.

Choosing the Committee

The graduate student is certainly the best judge of who should be on the Dissertation Committee. No one knows the intricate subtleties of the research topic better that the the creator him/herself. And as Cennamo, Nielsen, and Box (1992) so eloquently stated "Your mamma can't help you now!" (p. 18) There are, however, some guidelines that can aid the student researcher in making informed choices.

According to a study conducted by Denton. Tsai, and Chevrette (1987) doctoral candidates do not understand the function and responsibility of their advisory committees. The greatest problem areas were the initial proposal meeting, and communication with committee members. It is, therefore, very important to select the committee with extreme care and forethought.

The Council of Graduate Schools in the United States (1981) recommends that:

> ...the instruction and examination of graduate students and the supervision and evaluation of theses and dissertations should be reserved for those faculty members trained and experienced in their appropriate functions. (p. 4)

These "Ideal Professors" (Wisniewski, 1986) should possess the following: 1) Prior school experience, 2)

Exemplary doctoral training, and 3) The respect of their colleagues.

In addition, the future committee member should have recently completed some scholarly research of his/her own. This is an important consideration if one considers the Carnegie Foundation study which reports that "thirty-two percent of all professors have not published in professional journals." (Wisniewski, 1986, p. 290)

In addition to scholarly accomplishments it is also important to for the student researcher to choose those professors who want to supervise him/her, and who will provide guidance through the dissertation process (Cennamo et. al., 1992). The professor should be available for regular interaction and should work well with other committee members. The professor should also be committed to the graduate student and his/her research task. (Valadez & Duran, 1991)

The major professor should be the member of the committee who most closely fits the specific requirement template of the graduate student. It is extremely desirable (though not imperative) if the major professor and the student develop a mentor/protégé relationship.

The word "mentor" has been loosely batted about

during the last decade, but the definition is actually limited. Tentoni, McCrea, Thomas, and Shukik (1992) define the word by first giving its derivation:

> ...the word "mentor", has its origin in Homer's epic, The Odyssey. In this poem Odysseus has been off fighting the Trojan War and has entrusted his son, Telemachus, to his friend and advisor, Mentor. Mentor had advised and served as guardian to the entire royal household, and accompanied Telemachus on the journey in search of his father and for a new and fuller identity. (p. 5)

To be a "Mentor" then is to intentionally nurture the growth and development of someone younger into maturity. It is a supportive and protective process which, through insight, allows for the transference of wisdom without the rebellion of the protégé (Tentoni, et. al., 1992). The mentoring process is dynamic and most importantly *spontaneous*. It cannot be artificially contrived (Healy, & Welchert, 1990).

No matter what the relationship with the major professor (Mentor, Advisor, or Supervisor) the graduate student should try to interact with the professor as a colleague, rather than as a professor and student. At the very least have coffee or lunch together. It "is important to establish a strong humanistic relationship prior to entering a phase where conflict with your major

professor in inevitable." (Cennamo, et. al., 1992) This camaraderie is especially important for these graduate students who commute and have never held a graduate assistanceship (Denton, 1987).

With the first two hurdles behind them, the graduate student is well on his/her way to beginning the actual writing process that will eventually end with a finished dissertation. And as Gene Fowler so aptly phrased it:

> Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead. (Bryne, 1982, #216)

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