Working with Your Committee

Your committee will play a major part in helping you complete your dissertation within a reasonable amount of time. When forming your thesis or dissertation committee, keep the following considerations in mind:

1. Choose committee members who know your work well and whose feedback has benefited you in the past. You’ll want someone supportive, but you’ll also want someone who challenges you, who makes you think of your work in new ways and encourages you to defend your opinions. Although it is hard to hear criticism, think of criticism from your advisor as practice in academic debates; convince your advisor of the validity of your vision. You’ll need this practice when you get “out there.”

2. Make sure that the majority of the committee members--especially the chair--have tenure. This may protect you from having to replace members if they leave the university. Similarly, think about who will be on sabbatical and whether they will be available during this time.

3. Consider whether potential committee members will have strong methodological and/or theoretical conflicts with each other or with you.

4. Talk to other students who have worked with your potential committee members to get an idea of professors’ expectations and work styles.

5. Consider a visitor examiner if it is appropriate. Many departments allow you to have a third or fourth reader from another institution.

6. Establish the role each person on the committee will play. Some committee members may want to see every chapter, while others only want to see a completed draft and others will want to respond informally to your work-in-progress. Ask committee members what their expectations are and tell them what you would find helpful.

7. Take special care when choosing the chair of your committee. Some chairs will set regular deadlines for you while others will encourage you to work independently. Additionally, some chairs will serve as the "final word" when committee members offer conflicting comments. Others will expect the writer to resolve these differences. You may wish to read S. Joseph Levine’s comments on this issue in “The Thesis/Dissertation Defense: Don’t Circulate Chapters” for an alternative perspective.

8. Pay attention to your outside reader (if your department requires you to have one), making sure to include him or her in the process of feedback and approval.

9. Analyze your committee's comments before revising your work. Consider whether the comments take your research in a valid direction.