

Ideas to Facilitate Students' Success in the Doctoral Program

These are some ideas gathered about the ways in which information about the dissertation process could be imparted to students, including some options for incorporating into the Doctoral program additional techniques designed to prepare students for writing the dissertation.

For the POSI Proposal Development Course (the final course)

Require students to develop a timeline (on paper) for their research project. Have each student talk through their timeline in class so that the student can benefit from the professor and fellow students' feedback on how realistic the timeline is, what delays seem likely, contingency plans, etc. Then, even if the students exit the class with an incomplete, they will have a timeline in hand to help them stay on course (even in the absence of formal course work). Based on my own experience, and that of several others, constructing a timeline is one of the most useful steps to take.

Since most of the students have never done anything like a dissertation, it would be helpful to expand on the concept of having recent graduates and current dissertation candidates speak to the class. In addition to discussing particular research topics, a portion of each week's class (or every other week) could be devoted to "process" material. A team teaching model could even be utilized to impart knowledge and equip the students with sufficient information, confidence, and material to embark on this unique, solitary journey. Specifically, the "team" could consist of the professor and a weekly guest student who is in or near the end of the dissertation phase, or a recent graduate. There should be a new guest every two weeks or so, so that different perspectives are shared on the many important considerations, steps, tips, and techniques that students should know before leaving the structure of the classroom. This final class is an excellent opportunity to discuss issues such as when and how to formulate the committee, rights and responsibilities of the student and of the committee, how to approach the proposal defense, dangers and pitfalls, how to remain organized and motivated, what alternative support systems exist, and other details in every phase of the process.

Providing process-related material throughout the semester would be a good investment and allocation of time. It would avoid overloading the class with input and stark realities about the process all in one or two sessions. It will enable students to absorb the information more gradually and systematically, and to ask questions each week. Continuous, orderly exposure to what the process entails may even instill a necessary shift in habits and mindset needed for the dissertation development phase. Most importantly, it can greatly reduce fear, uncertainty, and barriers associated with figuring out many things for themselves or making unnecessary mistakes.

Provide the students with a checklist of tangible items needed, arrangements to be made, time management practices to adopt, etc. Ensure that, to the extent possible, the students have this starter package in place by the time they complete the class. In addition to the practical benefit of having these things arranged/in place, there is a psychological benefit in doing this. When students have made an investment in materials, set up their work space, discussed important resource and time issues with family members, and so on, they may be much more likely to proceed diligently with dissertation work once they leave the class.

Other Low-Resource Intensive Ideas

Encourage students to find a coach/mentor who is ahead of them in the process (perhaps from among the guest presenters). The role of the coach can be negotiated, but there could be general guidelines and expectations drafted for such an arrangement. There are a range of options for a coaching program: it could be completely informal, leaving the student to locate his or her own mentor/coach. At other end of the continuum, it could evolve into a formalized network, containing volunteer students who are advanced in their dissertation progress, or recent graduates. Some students may do this informally, but it would be much more accessible if a cadre of current and former students willing to coach was in place.

Perhaps as part of the mentoring process, have recent graduates write letters to be sent to the class periodically after the class ends. The letters can be encouraging, in addition to asking them what and how they are doing on the proposal/dissertation. This might also be an opportunity to ask if the student needs any help or support.

In addition to the proposal development class, a mandatory seminar could be provided to students when they are about two-thirds through their course work. The seminar can be two or three hours, and consist of a panel of professors and recent graduates. The panel can provide practical advice and information about what they should expect when they begin the dissertation writing phases, urge the students to begin crafting ideas early (now), and invite questions about the process. Holding such a session prior to the very end of course work will start the students thinking about what they need to do and may assist in mentally preparing them for the post-course work stage of their academic careers.