

Mentoring Through the Dissertation Process: Traveling Together from Contemplation to Completion

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Introduction

This paper describes two concurrent parallel processes: development of a mentoring relationship between doctoral student and dissertation chair, and movement of the student's topic from loosely linked ideas to dissertation proposal. The following discussion is based on practical knowledge of dissertation requirements, and the authors' personal experiences navigating the roles of mentor and/or mentee. We are three women—two European Americans and one bi-ethnic woman of color—at different developmental levels; dissertation chair (first author), doctoral candidate approaching final defense (second author), and second year doctoral student (third author).

Mentoring is important for the success of doctoral students. However, the mentoring literature strongly suggests faculty tend to mentor those who are similar to them in terms of gender, social class, and ethnic and racial background (Brinson & Kottler, 1993). Consequently, those who most differ from the White, male, middle-class norm that characterizes academia are least likely to be mentored (Burgess, 1997), and may be those who most need mentoring. For White women, women and men of color, and students from working-class or poor backgrounds, the mentoring relationship provides the means for gaining a sense of place in academia and learning the written

and unwritten rules of the academic “game,” essential ingredients for success (Salazar, 1999). The dissertation phase provides fertile ground for this relationship to develop.

The dissertation chair/doctoral candidate relationship serves a dual purpose: Moving the mentee from student to emerging researcher, practitioner and educator, *and* producing the culminating document—the dissertation. This relationship requires a balance of flexibility and structure: Ongoing negotiation of multiple and changing roles, clearly communicated expectations, and a framework for turning the student’s ideas into their final form. Students may approach this relationship and the dissertation process with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, optimism and fear, due to lack of familiarity with the written and unwritten rules and roles. As junior faculty begin chairing dissertations they typically rely upon guidance from senior faculty—which may or may not be forthcoming. Their own doctoral experience may also provide a guide for what to aspire to, or in some instances what to avoid.

The authors have found certain ingredients helpful and perhaps necessary to initiate and develop a strong working relationship between doctoral candidate and dissertation chair, and successfully move through the dissertation process. Our purpose is to share our experiences and knowledge with others who are embarking on this journey.

Our Experiences

Hersey and Blanchard’s (1993) situational leadership model provides a theoretical framework for our experiences. According to the model, successful mentoring requires a balance between attention to the task, in this case the dissertation, and attention to the relationship; and the ability of the mentor to shift the balance according to the mentee’s developmental level in relation to the task.

Third author: “Have you decided on a dissertation topic?” What? I just got here! I knew writing a dissertation would be the culminating endeavor in the pursuit of my long-held dream, but I had little hint of

what would be involved other than it would be a long, arduous task. What *exactly* is a dissertation anyway? These questions haunt me daily. In every assignment I undertake, paper I write, and article I read I look for a possible hypothesis, some “suggested further research” I can bend and weave into a “question.” I am learning to ask lots of questions: Will this research add to the body of knowledge? Is it “doable” within the next two to three years? Am I personally interested in this topic? Can this study advance my professional standing? What research methods will I use? Exactly how do I do all this? As of now, I don’t have the answers. Thankfully I will have a mentor to help me navigate this obstacle course. My desire, commitment, and determination will help me complete the work, however, the mentoring I will receive will fashion the heart and essence of the process and will give meaning and direction to my dissertation experience—a personal journey in itself.

First author: My own experience as a bi-ethnic woman of color entering academia in mid-life illustrates how critical mentoring is for women. More than once during my doctoral program I might have slipped through the cracks or given up from discouragement had it not been for the two women who mentored me. They showed me, with grace and style, what women in academe can do. They modeled what it means to be a teacher, scholar and mentor, and helped me discover the teacher, scholar and mentor within myself. From them I learned that to give back what was given to me I must reach behind me as I climb the ladder and help someone else.

As an assistant professor serving as a dissertation chair, I’ve drawn upon lessons learned from these women, and from the knowledge and expertise shared by a female colleague in my department. The primary lesson I’ve learned is the need for flexibility: to successfully mentor a student through her dissertation, I must provide structure, challenge, support and nurturing. Attention to task alone is not enough, nor is attention to relationship alone.

Tools for establishing structure provide an essential foundation: Clearly articulated expectations (e.g., deadlines, turn around time for reading manuscript drafts), commitment to weekly meetings until

proposal defense, and the dissertation prospectus. The prospectus starts the process, focusing chair and student on the task as they build their relationship, and provides the framework for concretizing the student's thoughts and constructing the dissertation proposal. The chair and other committee members can provide feedback and suggestions at an early stage, affirming the student's direction or sending her "back to the drawing board." The prospectus, in two or three pages, answers the questions: Why, what and how? It includes: 1) a working title, 2) introductory paragraphs that draw in the literature and identify the gap the dissertation will address (*Why?*), 3) a brief methodology section (*What* are the questions, and *how* will you answer them?), and contributions to the profession.

Weekly meetings provide structure and opportunity for the relationship to develop. I've learned that a successful relationship requires sensitivity to the student's changing needs, as well as my own. Sometimes I am teacher—attending to task, imparting knowledge the student needs to move ahead. Other times I become counselor, attending to her fears and apprehensions before we can focus on tasks. Still other times, I am "mother." I provide hugs and cups of tea, and share with her some of my own journey, struggles and fears so she'll know she's not alone. And sometimes we simply play; perhaps a trip to the upscale resale clothing store to try out a new, more professional look and learn how to dress well on a shoestring budget. I also attend to her professional development, with offers to co-teach and present at conferences. All of it is important, and moves us closer to the destination – her emergence as a counselor educator.

Second author: At the beginning, completing my dissertation seemed an almost impossible destination. Where I began and where I am now are intertwined, yet so different. I could not have successfully navigated this process without my mentor. The dissertation itself is the document by which I will enter a new professional realm as a peer who has attained the highest academic degree in her field. It will be my trail from the old world and my key into the new.

Initially, trying to impress my mentor was a powerful motivator and, because I had to see her every week, I had to have something done. Nevertheless, she always began our time together focusing on me, not the dissertation. We often talked about family, husband, in-laws and dogs. More than once she witnessed my tears, both personal and professional. Then, and only then, did we talk dissertation. For me this process has been a struggle of identity. We had deep discussions about what it means to be a woman in this field, and how one's style of dress and presentation may change. From years of socialization I've struggled with being too "smiley." This was my concern, not my mentor's, but watching her interact with others I realized it *was* a concern. I wanted power over my choice to smile in different circumstances because of the message the smile conveyed—"I'm harmless and bubbly, so don't hurt me"—not the message I wanted to convey. We discussed my struggle and I have since learned to wield my power and become more conscious of my behaviors; this is an ongoing process of discovery.

The value of the prospectus was structure. It gave me an ordered place to connect my thoughts and subsequently allowed me to coherently present my ideas to the committee. It developed into the foundation of my dissertation proposal. Without the prospectus, the proposal itself would have been much more complicated.

As the proposal developed from the prospectus, I also felt more self-assured. Sometimes it was frustrating, as everything took three times longer than planned. The proposal defense itself was, simply put, fun! A year of dedicated work on the manuscript, a health challenge behind me, and, in my new suit, I was ready. The day before the defense my chair and I did a "mock" presentation. I laugh now, but I had 28 pages of information for a 20-minute presentation! Without the rehearsal I would not have appeared as polished or as well studied. When I entered my defense I felt strong and prepared (in our department, students defend the first three chapters of their dissertation to the entire 14-member faculty, a graduate school representative, and invited guests). My chair kept the defense itself structured. This helped me relax and concentrate. I felt her support throughout. Following the proposal defense, I entered a more

independent stage. I know my chair is there when I need her and will be in the coming months as this dissertation process peaks and ultimately ends as a new phase begins.

Recommendations: Use of the prospectus to provide initial structure and focus, and commitment to weekly meetings until the student completes the proposal defense is well worth the investment of time and energy for both student and chair. Weekly meetings maintain the momentum, give the mentoring relationship the opportunity to grow, and provide space to clarify needs and expectations and to voice concerns (e.g., fear of failure, “growing pains”) that may be blocking progress.

As the student writes the proposal, seek input from committee members as needed. A proposal defense “dress rehearsal” provides the candidate the opportunity to pace herself and showcase key elements of the proposal. By defense time she has become an expert on her topic; she is self-confident, and does not have to know the answer to *every* question posed by the faculty. The chair’s task is to keep the defense proceedings structured and provide support.

Summary

Successful mentoring of a student through the dissertation process involves alternating application of structure, nurturance, challenge, and support. The key is achieving a balance of attention to both task and relationship. Use of a prospectus structures the order of work to be done. Other strategies such as regularly scheduled meetings and the proposal defense “dress rehearsal” allow focus of ideas, clarity of communication, and increased sense of efficacy for the student early in the dissertation process. Mentoring provides support by addressing issues of confidence and development of professional identity.

Conclusion

The authors' observations as three women at different developmental levels—dissertation chair, doctoral candidate, and second year doctoral student—suggest that to successfully complete the dissertation, structure and attention to the task, while necessary, are not sufficient. A well developed, ever-evolving mentoring relationship between doctoral candidate and chair is essential. The presence or absence of a mentor, especially for women and for culturally diverse students, can be the “make or break” ingredient. The authors' experiences also suggest that further exploration of the convergences between the mentoring literature and the supervision literature will yield additional guidance on the journey through the dissertation process.

References

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