Dissertation, Dissertation Quality, Dissertation Mentoring
Comments from Faculty Forum–Grouped by Topic

Clarifying Role of Outside Chair
Difference between proposal and the final dissertation
• Typical case: proposal—chair is appointed by the college, and that person is responsible for controlling the quality, if they say it’s not ready to go to defense, it doesn’t go
• Outside chair is responsible only for the proposal; final defense, outside chair is only the facilitator

Shared responsibility: the sharing rests with the student and the major professor—did not see that the outside chair played any function in the proposal or the final defense—is there to manage decorum
• address issue of previous distinction b/w proposal and final defense
• serves a function in that major professor doesn't have to do everything, that does help
• Outside chair having quality control, consensus that there should not be that responsibility placed on the outside chair; only if there is a major flaw in the proposal

Would like to see policy straightened out so that outside chair does NOT have the feeling that s/he is in charge of quality (there could be a conflict of interest). That is the responsibility of the major professor and the student. Would like to have outside chair be the facilitator only

How many universities use the outside chair? One example, Ohio State uses the outside chair to monitor protocol.
Is there a role in quality control? Group was in concensus that person who is outside chair wouldn’t have expertise to make quality judgements about the dissertation.
Outside chair doesn’t have a vote or evaluative function
Documents describing the role of outside chair should be reviewed and clarified.
When doctoral programs were new to USF, the purpose of the outside chair’s role was to compensate for faculty variability in terms of understanding the dissertation process. May have outgrown that need.
Outside chairs have provided mentoring before faculty are credentialed.
Associate dean used to sit in every dissertation at USF to ensure quality control.
Philosophical differences-on quality are possible. We need to avoid control oriented process
How to take into account culture –to what extent could we get concensus in the college about issues of roles.
Need to balance committee/chair autonomy with shared expectations responsibilities. Why have outside chair if they don’t have an evaluative role? Should they be able to vote? It would be difficult for non-tenured faculty to vote on dissertations in the role of outside chair.
The current guidelines call just for facilitation.
Outside chair has in past recommended that dissertations should not go forward.
Outside chair should read, be part of evaluative process.
Outside Chair – What’s the point?
- Function as umpire
- Is the structure of the committee flawed? If so, address it.
- Is the role necessary?
- Make suggestions & why don’t they vote?
- Just a formality
- Can an outside chair evaluate a study?
- What was the initial rationale for the use of an outside chair? Are the reasons still valid?

Role of Outside Chair
- Is outside chair mandated by Graduate School?
- Graduate School: Outside Chair is to be outside department, with expertise in subject area, and distinguished scholar (Note: USF Graduate Catalog states that the Outside Chair is to be a senior and distinguished scholar from outside the department); plays a balancing role between advocacy and contention
- Referee
- Release time, compensation
- Clarify role in context of university policy
- Two weeks is not sufficient time for notice
- Selection of outside chair*

Outside Chair role
- As Outside Chair, the role is to facilitate, not critique – run the meeting, isn’t it? Communicate strengths and weaknesses of the dissertation; ensure quality of the work. Some places don’t require the Outside Chair.
- Is it appropriate for an assistant professor to sit as an outside chair? The political/tenure implications are a concern.
- What factors have led USF to require the Outside Chair? It seems unusual.

Outside Chair Role
- The Outside Chair role depends on the event; Outside Chair’s role at proposal is different than role at defense
- Do we have any assistant professors who are fully credentialed to be outside chair? [Answer: yes]
- Place responsibility of credentialing with the departments [Note: already there]
- More surprise on the Outside Chair – for quality control
- Would an Outside Reader be more appropriate?
- It seems like the Outside Chair role denotes that there is something about the process not working and not to be trusted
- Is the Outside Chair requirement from the College or from Graduate School?

Dissertation Advisor Role
Issue of final chair: accountability—where is the accountability at the final defense?
- Issue that major professor makes those decisions, not any outside committee, student, etc

There are also issues with who is dissertation chair/major professor (credentialing)
IRB/Graduate School: major professor is co-major investigator
Would like to see policy straightened out so that outside chair does NOT have the feeling that s/he is in charge of quality (there could be a conflict of interest). That is the responsibility of the major professor and the student. Would like to have outside chair be the facilitator only
Major professors sometimes don’t say no to the student, wait for the committee to say no Need to balance committee/chair autonomy with shared expectations responsibilities.

Professional Development for Chair
- Role of responsibility to be defined by chair
- Mentoring process, assumptions made

How do we address ineffective Chair?
- Are there professional development experiences that are needed?

Shared Responsibilities
Shared responsibility: the sharing rests with the student and the major professor—did not see that the outside chair played any function in the proposal or the final defense—is there to manage decorum

Quality control of dissertations
- Focus on methodology vs the Questions
- Argumentation for pursuing the Questions
- Meeting of the committee members to discuss the questions and guide students
- Proposal defense – allows changes to the research

Common understanding about:
- Role of Committee Members
- Dissertation and expectations related to it

Faculty are the bulk of the problems
- Consistencies within program
- Variation across programs

Responsibility for quality control of dissertations
- Committee assumes responsibility for quality control; sometimes chair takes on role
- Challenge of shared responsibility credentialing of committee members, departmental credentialing
- Does administrative oversight take away faculty control of process? Associate Dean had to ensure procedural correctness vs oversight of quality
- Shared responsibility equals communication, not control
- Committee determined by student and major professor
- Shared governance and Graduate School policy level
- Faculty role
- Members of committee evaluate chair of committee
- Department chair receives feedback on how chairs of committee are doing based on feedback from committee members
- Committee chair provides commentary of role of committee members

People on committee best to determine quality*
- Not consensus on roles of committee members
- Faculty driven
• Variability on how much input comes from committee; don’t always have shared philosophy
• Can we come up with agreement on writing-scholarship at departmental level?
• Expert-directed process and or student directed process without guidance
Is there shared understanding of purpose of dissertation writing
• Prepare people to be independent researchers and through dissertation demonstrate this and contribute to what we collectively know
• Is process more important than product – need both
Concern over chair and committee members not having sufficient expertise in area of dissertation
• In education the dissertation can be outside the areas of expertise of chair and committee members

Professional Development & Other Supports for Doctoral Students
• Also addresses quality control of the dissertation: In Departments there are different program areas, and each program area might do things differently, but there perhaps should be some consistency (e.g., common seminars for all doctoral students)
• There perhaps should be a course through which students could identify what their interest is, why this research would be important (perhaps could be counted as a course for the students)

Professional Development for Doctoral Students
• What is COEDU doing to help all doctoral students with writing quality? Workshops, writing center, required program/class (dept course or college-wide), etc. “Writing” would cover everything from mechanics to synthesizing information/data.
• Do a better job at “socializing” graduate students, particularly for part-timers
• One school offers a rubric for dissertations; maybe we should, too.
• Help with research methodology – what exactly does CORE do?

Professional Development for Doctoral Students
• There seems to be a lack of resources available to help with student writing as opposed to years past. A technical writing course, perhaps?
• There was also more support for students with data analysis. CORE seems a bit inconsistent.
• Maybe do an informal writing support group for dissertations stage students in the departments
• Socializing students and also structuring offerings to meet realities of students we attract (particularly part-timers)

Professional Development for Faculty
Not so much credentialing major professors, but is there a process for new faculty to go through to learn the procedures here? There isn’t a mentoring process, learning about procedures at USF [Note: see credentialing criteria for each department]
• Professional development on effective individual and group strategies for mentoring doctoral students before and during the dissertation stage
• Issue with students not finishing doctoral program; how do we get those students from an expert directed project to a self-directed project
• Not just self-directedness, but deadlines are important
• Dependent on the student, some stay expert directed until the end, and probably shouldn’t have the degree; how does one draw the line?

As a professional development issue– do we assume students must be skill-ready when they enter a doctoral program? Almost everyone passes quals. Quality control may be an admission issue. Some faculty feel they should do everything possible to get students through the program.

Are we compromised in admission process by developing partnerships w/schools that assume everyone will be accepted?

The COE’s perceived push toward online doc courses may be problematic in terms of quality control

Mentoring
• Where does one learn to mentor a doctoral student?

Professional Development for Chair
• Role of responsibility to be defined by chair
• Mentoring process, assumptions made

How do we address ineffective Chair?
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Faculty Professional Development and Concerns
• Standardizing professional development of faculty to help students in the process
• Dissertation hours are empty; what is the major professor’s obligation during those hours (required work, etc)
• Course release for chairing dissertations here?

Supports
• Address funding for dissertation advising, especially in summers; some kind of ongoing support —to formalize that so that professors receive some sort of credit/assignment; rather than having them register for dissertation credits (some way to work FTE into this)
• There appears to be some inconsistency among departments regarding assignments for working with doctoral students
• Having every student who was working on their dissertation in the summer would have to sign up for a seminar; or have every faculty signed up for a one-credit seminar (question about the 8 student limit)

We had discussion on CORE, and the effectiveness/consistency of CORE
There are expectations of methodological faculty – support and quality control. Committees vary in level of support that faculty provide. Amount of student support provided relates to quality control. Some expect students to enter knowing how to do research independently. Variation in faculty assumptions about student support may need to be clarified by the chair pre-dissertation.
In many cases advisors prefer for student to have a methods person on the committee
Pre-defense – what’s the role?
Examples of Mentorship
• Introduce to the academy, expectations course
• Four courses (labs) – portfolios
• Discuss organization of paper
• 4-10 students
• Annual reviews of student progress
Creation of rubric for dissertation??  (Note: see http://www.coedu.usf.edu/main/gradhandbook/appendixI.html)
• Research Questions
• Methodologies
• But need to avoid standardization
Load of number of committees as chair/member*
Course release for chairing dissertations here?
Faculty Concerns
• Instead of course release for chairing, course assignment

Followup Discussion
Methodology rather than quality of the research question seems to dominate consideration of the value of the dissertation. Students decide methods before defining study.
Selection of outside chair
People on committee best to determine quality*
• Not consensus on roles of committee members
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• Can we come up with agreement on writing-scholarship at departmental level?
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Recommendations/Action Steps
• Recommendation: Guidelines, bullet points, list of what the procedures are for proposal and final defense [Note: see http://www.coedu.usf.edu/main/gradhandbook/advhandbook/Adv_Dissert_Proposal.html]
• Candidates have the onus of the responsibility for following deadlines, etc. But there is no checklist to which students can refer
• Clarify the roles of Outside Chair
• If evaluating, what resources would be available?
• Clarify roles, responsibilities, and mentoring process for Chair, members, & Outside Chair
• Process for identifying and addressing ineffective major professors

I think I’ve told you I can’t make the November 9 forum, but I’ve been thinking about the first and second bullet points, which focus on the same issue (quality control), and I think the question may
not be framed in the most productive way. … Let me suggest an alternative: we can choose to control the quality of the students’ work on a one-by-one basis, we can choose to control the quality of our work as advisors by deciding who should supervise dissertations and who shouldn't, or we can choose not to control the quality of dissertations.

That's the choice.

No matter which choice we make as a college, there are some consequences. If we choose to control the quality of students' work, then someone outside the dissertation committee needs to have the authority to block graduation, and the college needs to back that person up to the hilt. There are ways to protect various people in that process (e.g., having a blind reviewer for every dissertation draft before it's approved for defense), but that's the logical consequence of controlling the quality of dissertations. If we choose to control the quality of mentoring, then some peer group needs to have the authority to strip individual faculty of the right to advise dissertations, and that peer group needs to have the guts to do it when necessary. If we choose not to control the quality of dissertations, ... well, there are the logical consequences of that (non-)decision, too.

Personally, I think pre-defense blind reviewing is the best proactive option. Outside chair identities are public, and putting junior faculty in the position of vetoing graduation is both risky for those faculty and unfair to students who get to the defense only to find out that their advisors haven’t held them to substantive standards.

A pre-defense reviewing system would also help socialize doctoral students into one of the most important processes of academe. We could establish a "review economy" where reviewing colleagues' students' dissertations would be a continuing requirement for advisors and also a part of student work. Then dissertating students would have the advantage of having a pre-defense review including two faculty and two student reviews (as one example), then we could require that doctoral students participate in the review process twice before they finish their dissertation. I also suspect having such a system would be welcome for some advisors, who are pressured by students to approve dissertations for scheduling purposes ("I have to finish in the next month!"). If the answer is, "Well, you know that there is a three-week period when your draft is reviewed, so that's just not possible."

And a formative question on the review for faculty would alert the dean's office to dissertations that have severe problems, before the student feels that she or he has been led down a garden path.

The logistical details of such a system would be challenging, especially depending on the lumpiness of students' preferred finishing times (and draft completion). But it's at least something to think about as an ideal.