

GRADUATE STUDENT WORKSHOP

Selecting a Thesis or Dissertation topic and Setting up a Committee

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RS Pollenz, PhD
Interim Associate Dean

ROADMAP

1.

**Determine your thesis/dissertation
advisor**

***(time frame, 1-2 semesters from the beginning of your
program)***

ROADMAP

2.

**Discuss the process with your thesis/
dissertation advisor**

***(time frame, as soon as you have a commitment from
the advisor)***

ROADMAP

3.

Find a topic

(time frame, up to few months?)

ROADMAP

4.

Carry out extensive research on the topic to refine the direction and scope of the project

*(**time frame**, this may require up to 1 year of effort)*

ROADMAP

5.

Develop a comprehensive plan of work (proposal) that maps hypotheses, objectives, outcomes and time lines

(time frame, this can typically be written in 1 semester)

ROADMAP

6.

Set up the Advisory Committee

(time frame, this can typically be written in 1 semester)

1. Choosing an Advisor

The choice of your thesis/dissertation advisor

IS THE MOST IMPORTANT

aspect of your graduate career

1. Choosing an Advisor

You must **honestly consider** what **YOUR** expectations and needs are as a student

NEVER

Choose an advisor solely based on their reputation as a researcher or on their research project

1. Choosing an Advisor

KEY POINT

Your faculty advisor should become an inseparable part of your graduate career and will be person you will be linked with for your entire life (in publication)

2-8 years

1. Choosing an Advisor

KEY POINT

Just because a faculty member has a sterling research record and National reputation, does not mean they know anything about mentoring

1. Choosing an Advisor

CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOU

1. **What type of oversight do you need?**
2. **Do you like to be independent, or collaborative?**
3. **Do you work well when there are many other students?**
4. **Can you take direct research criticism?**
5. **What is your work ethic?**
6. **What is your long range goal for your career?**

1. Choosing an Advisor

CONSIDERATIONS IN YOUR SEARCH

1. **What is their current commitment to other students?**
2. **What is their management style?**
3. **How long have they been a faculty member?**
4. **What is their funding record?**
5. **How is their publication/creative works record?**
6. **What is their specific area of research?**
7. **How many students have they graduated?**

1. Choosing an Advisor

DO YOUR HOMEWORK!!

Talk to other students

Search the web (pubs, funding)

Talk to other faculty

Talk to the Program Director

1. Choosing an Advisor

MISTAKES HAPPEN!

If its not working, GET OUT!

Talk to the Program Director and clearly understand policy on what can happen

1. Choosing an Advisor

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION

2. Process of Choosing a Topic

EACH DISCIPLINE IS DIFFERENT!

It is essential to have a discussion with your advisor or potential advisor prior to embarking on your search for a project

2. Process of Choosing a Topic

WHY?

Advisor may already be funded to work on a specific project (STEM)

Advisor may be able to provide some key areas for you to investigate

2. Process of Choosing a Topic

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION

3. Finding a Topic

1. TOPICS FROM THE ADVISOR

The advisor may have a “topics list” that you can work from to chose a topic

This may be the norm for a Professor who has long range funding and now needs to proposed work to be carried out

3. Finding a Topic

1. TOPICS FROM THE ADVISOR

Advantages:

Much of the research legwork has been done

The project is clearly fundable

Your Advisor is actively engaged

Continuity with other students research projects

Disadvantages:

Student creativity may be questioned

Reduced understanding of the project in the beginning

3. Finding a Topic

2. BIG PROBLEMS THAT ARE OBVIOUS

Advantages:

If you can solve it you will be a star!

Possibility of funding (innovative, topical)

Disadvantages:

Big problems are big problems for a reason

Reduced possibility of funding (too ambitious)

Inability to fully understand the scope of the problem

Outside the scope of the advisors comfort zone

3. Finding a Topic

3. INVENT YOUR OWN PROBLEM

Advantages:

Highly engaged in project development
Possibility of funding (innovative, topical)

Disadvantages:

Probability of failure and publication
Inability to fully understand the scope of the problem
Outside the scope of the advisors comfort zone

3. Finding a Topic

4. SEARCH FUNDED PROJECTS

Advantages:

High level of understanding of what is being done

Identification of “key” players

Disadvantages:

Ability to determine what to do next

Inability to fully understand the scope of the problem

Outside the scope of the advisors comfort zone

3. Finding a Topic

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION

4. Pre-Decision Research

Carry out extensive research on the topic to refine the direction and scope of the project

4. Pre-Decision Research

YOUR CONSIDERATIONS

1.

The topic/process must be something that motivates and interests you

The project is going to take you **years to complete!
You had better really have **intense interest** in what you are doing!**

4. Pre-Decision Research

YOUR CONSIDERATIONS

2.

What is your ultimate goal in undertaking the project?

For example:

Are you trying to **enhance knowledge** that you already have?

Or

Trying to gain a **new set** of skills/knowledge?

4. Pre-Decision Research

YOUR CONSIDERATIONS

3.

Is the project unique or novel?

Is this something that has already been done?

Are you moving the field forward?

Is this “just another study” that won’t get referenced?

4. Pre-Decision Research

YOUR CONSIDERATIONS

4.

Do you have the expertise to get it done?

Regardless of how you come up with your topic, you will ultimately be responsible for getting it done!

**Is your research environment conducive to the project
(equipment, expertise, \$\$\$)**

4. Pre-Decision Research

YOUR CONSIDERATIONS

5.

Is what you want to do reasonable?

Your question may be terrific, but if you have a 3-4 year window to get it done, is it too ambitious?

Consider resources!

4. Pre-Decision Research

DO YOUR PRE-DECISION RESEARCH

It is essential that you budget considerable time into researching all of the points that have just been presented

**Use all resources at your disposal to
REVIEW, RESEARCH, REFINE, REWRITE**

4. Pre-Decision Research

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION

4. Pre-Decision Research

REVIEW, RESEARCH, REFINE, REWRITE

REVIEW

Carry out an extensive **literature review** of the area of interest to determine:

- The leaders in the field Nationally and at USF
- Historical and recent publication database
 - The key knowledge gaps that exists
 - The ability to publish the results

5. Development of the Proposal

IMPORTANCE OF A SOLID PROPOSAL

Your project proposal will serve as your guide during the research portion of your career

- **Benchmarks of Success**
 - **Mapping Progress**
- **Defining publishable units**
- **Prelude to Thesis/Dissertation**

5. Development of the Proposal

REVIEW, **RESEARCH**, REFINE, REWRITE

RESEARCH

Develop a **RESEARCH PLAN** in the area of interest to

- Work with your **Advisor**

Produce an working **OUTLINE** of the research plan

- Central **HYPOTHESIS**
- Manageable and clear **OBJECTIVES**
 - Publishable units

5. Development of the Proposal

PUBLISHABLE UNITS

All projects should be designed based on publishable units

Each Objective may be able to stand alone as a potential publication

Design the project with this mindset

5. Development of the Proposal

REVIEW, RESEARCH, **REFINE**, REWRITE

REFINE

Evaluate the framework for what you want to do

Work with your advisor and committee

REFINE the plan based on the feasibility

Pay attention to scope and time lines

OVERAMBITION!!

5. Development of the Proposal

REVIEW, RESEARCH, REFINE, **REWRITE**

REWRITE

Based on your research and use of all resources,
REWRITE the proposal so that it is clear, concise and
in a publishable form itself

Predocctoral Funding

Funding For Research

<http://www.grad.usf.edu/opportunities-for-gradstudent.asp>

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION

6. Setting up the Committee

COMMON FALLACY

The Advisory Committee is my enemy

NO!

6. Setting up the Committee

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The advisory committee is typically selected by the student during consultation with the Major Advisor

6. Setting up the Committee

CONSIDERATIONS

1. **Select faculty that are mentoring students**
2. **Select faculty based on their expertise**
3. **Select faculty that you want to work with**
4. **Do not be afraid to select someone that is perceived as “hard”**
5. **Select faculty that will be available and that you can “drop in on”**

6. Setting up the Committee

MEET WITH EACH MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE

Never use email to request that a faculty member serve on your committee

Schedule a **face to face** meeting of at least 30-60 minutes where you can present your plan and discuss the importance of having the faculty member be on the committee

6. Setting up the Committee

USE THE COMMITTEE!!

A common error is to meet with the committee only once a year to discuss progress

This violates the true purpose of putting the members on the committee

They should be used to help guide and critique what you are doing!!

6. Setting up the Committee

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION