Choosing a Research Advisor, Selecting a Thesis or Dissertation topic and Setting up a Committee

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1. Determine your thesis/dissertation advisor

(time frame, 1-2 semesters from the beginning of your program)
2. Discuss the process with your thesis/dissertation advisor

*(time frame, as soon a you have a commitment from the advisor)*
3.

Find a topic

(time frame, up to few months?)
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 within in 1 semester*
1. Choosing a Major Professor

The choice of your thesis/dissertation major professor IS THE MOST IMPORTANT aspect of your graduate career.
WHAT IS MENTORING?

Mentoring means that there is a relationship between the mentor and the mentee. There is true vestment of the mentor in the success of the mentee. This is very different from advising that is typically less personal and more related to successful academic progress.

No two students are the same in what they need in a mentoring relationship.
1. CHOOSING A MAJOR PROFESSOR

DEFINING THE MENTORING THAT YOU NEED

Mentoring in the Discipline
(explanation of the trajectory, history, literature base etc.)

“Skill” Development Mentoring
(oral skills, computer, writing, reasoning, leadership, etc)

Career Consultant Mentoring
(advice and networking on careers)

Teaching Mentoring
(advice, training, evaluation, opportunity, etc)
1. Choosing a Major Professor

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 Major Professor

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 Major Professor

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 Major Professor

**SELF TEST 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 also working with the mentor?
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 Major Professor

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 Major Professor

DO YOUR HOMEWORK!!

Talk to other students
Search the web (pubs, funding)
Talk to other faculty
Talk to the Program Director
1. Choosing an Major Professor

MISTAKES HAPPEN!

If its not working, GET OUT!

The sooner the better!

Talk to the Program Director and clearly understand policy on what can happen
1. Choosing an Major Professor

1) Faculty and/or Major Professor

2) Program Coordinator

3) Program/Departmental Chair

4) College Associate Dean

5) Graduate School
1. CHOOSING AN MAJOR PROFESSOR

GRADUATE POLICY (section 8 of Grad. Catalog)

The Major Professor serves as the student's advisor and mentor. Students should confer with the department to confirm the internal process and timeline for the selection and appointment of the Major Professor.

The student must identify a major professor and receive that person’s agreement to serve as major professor.
1. CHOOSING AN MAJOR PROFESSOR

GRADUATE POLICY (section 8 of Grad. Catalog)

The selection of the Major Professor must be approved and appointed by the department as soon as possible, but no later than the time the student has completed 50% of the program.

Students must have a major professor in order to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress.
1. CHOOSING AN MAJOR PROFESSOR

GRADUATE POLICY (section 8 of Grad. Catalog)

If a major professor cannot be identified or in the event a major professor is unable or unwilling to continue serving on the student’s committee, the student is responsible for finding another major professor.

Students who are unable to find a replacement major professor should confer with the Program Director for available options (including converting to a non-thesis program if available.)
1. CHOOSING AN MAJOR PROFESSOR

GRADUATE POLICY (section 8 of Grad. Catalog)

If no other options exist the student may be requested to voluntarily withdraw from the program or may be honorably withdrawn in good academic standing.

The student and major professor should plan a program of study which, when completed, will satisfy the degree requirements specified.

A copy of this program, signed by the student and professor, must be maintained in the student’s department file.
1. Choosing an Major Professor

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
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

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

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

Predoctoral 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 that complement what you want to do
3. Select faculty that you want to work with and may be part of your “mentoring network”
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” (they have the “personal touch”)

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