

Selecting the Right Dissertation Chair

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Abstract

Selecting a dissertation chair is a very important decision because you are establishing a relationship that will be very intense for a few years and will probably last for a lifetime. Some dissertation students in the social sciences choose their chair 1) by the chair's academic excellence, 2) by the chair being a subject matter expert, 3) because the chair was available, 4) by being assigned a chair, or 5) for a variety of other reasons. The author has been an adjunct faculty and dissertation chair at two universities and advises students in how to select a dissertation chair. This paper is a summary of ideas that the author has learned and shared, and was prompted by a student who admitted (late in the dissertation process) that she had chosen the author as her chair because he had the same name as her dog ... her thought was that *things happen for a reason*.

Introduction

The dissertation is a scholarly work conducted independently by the student under the direction of a faculty chairperson (or chair). Utilizing the scientific method, a specific purpose is selected and appropriate methods are proposed and implemented with 1) a clearly defined problem and rationale, 2) the conceptual support of the research through review of pertinent literature is required, and 3) an appropriate methodology to support the purpose of the research (Madjidi, 2013).

The dissertation committee structure is generally composed of three members: 1) a chair who is a full-time faculty member, 2) a second member who is a member of the university's teaching community, and 3) a third member who has an earned doctorate and has been asked to participate for a specific contribution. The third member may be from outside the university system, usually a subject matter expert, if allowed by the university.

The chair provides overall direction and committee members play a supporting role as appropriate. The committee member role usually requires a thorough reading of the proposal (Chapters 1 to 3) and a thorough reading of the final dissertation (all five chapters); providing comments to improve the document and ensure that it meets the doctoral research quality guidelines of the university. The two rules about working with your dissertation chair are:

- Rule #1. Your chair is always right.
- Rule #2. When your chair is wrong, see Rule #1.

Different names are used to describe the person who is in charge of your dissertation committee: chair, chairman, chairwoman, chairperson, mentor, advisor, and occasionally professor. He has made corrections and has tried to universally use the term: CHAIR. The quotations from students may use different terms.

This introductory section was, in part, built upon the first few slides of a presentation by Madjidi (2013). The first step in the dissertation process is to select a topic and an approach. The second step is to find a chair who will work with you and your topic. This second step is the topic of this paper and various ways to select a chair are shared below.

Academic Excellence

If you plan to go into teaching, you may want to pick a chair who is a good teacher. This is usually someone you've had as a professor and in other ways have had a chance to observe their teaching style. In typical doctoral programs, you will be exposed to 10 to 12 professors, you will have familiarity with their teaching methods, and you may develop a chemistry with a particular professor. Academic excellence is a great trait to develop with your chair and starting with good chemistry is a plus. Below are two quotes supporting academic excellence.

I chose Dr. [X] for my chair because I learned a lot from his classes, I had a good rapport with him, and I knew that he'd hold me to a high standard – same reasons I selected [Y] and [Z] for my committee. (S. Andrews, personal communication, August 27, 2013)

I chose my dissertation chair, Dr. [X], for a variety of reasons. He taught courses in our doctoral program so I had the opportunity to get to know him. Dr. [X] wants to see his students succeed. I shared my timeline of how I wanted to complete my dissertation in a timely manner, and he was supportive and encouraged me to meet my goal. I also chose him because of his academic excellence and availability. (M. Galloway, personal communication, August 26, 2013)

Note that the names of chairs have been removed from all quotations in this paper. The above quotes support selecting a chair based on academic excellence. They both indicate a need to establish a positive *chemistry* with the chair. Positive chemistry in this sense is defined as the connection that is made between student and chair where they intuitively feel like they would work well together as a team. This involves mutual trust and open communications or rapport. The next section will discuss subject matter experts as your chair.

Subject Matter Expert

If you have plans to go into research, you may want to find a chair who is a known authority in the field, a subject matter expert (SME), or has a funded study group (see next section). Many universities have a list of faculty who may be available as dissertation chairs. The first step is to review the list and then locate their biographies, résumé, or curriculum vita (CV) online and learn more about them. Many professors have an online website with the university that has their CV and list of books and publications. Those who don't have a university website, may have a LinkedIn or Facebook account. In the case of new or adjunct faculty, you may have to contact the professor or the department administrator to get a CV. When you are reading, you will find that a long list of publications is not a guarantee that the professor is a SME, but its absence is certainly a negative indicator. Below are three quotes supporting the selection of a chair based on their subject matter expertise.

I chose my chair using the faculty search tool provided by [the University] and the initial interaction with the person selected. My search selection criteria was first to find a chair (and committee members) who had both the experience in my general field of study (engineering) AND had a strong understanding of the research method chosen, which in my case was quantitative. (A. Moore, personal communication, August 26, 2013)

I picked my dissertation chair as being the SME in statisticsDr. [X] came to our class and just chatted with us while we waited for our professor to show up and class to begin. He seemed to be a good social butterfly – going around and making us all feel good. That I remember. He looked at us all as equals, not a student-professor relationship. (C. Cooper, personal communication, August 26, 2013)

I chose my dissertation chair after a careful review of the academic and work experiences of those on the [University's] list of available mentors. The objective was to choose an individual whose academic and work experiences would best align with my dissertation topic.... Very few of the faculty had the type of background and experience that I required. (W. Miles, personal communication, October 4, 2013)

Another student states “I chose my first mentor mainly because of his decades working as a professor. I think there is a correlation between experience as a faculty member and knowledge of the dissertation process” (P. Langshaw, personal communication, August 27, 2013). The author's personal story falls primarily into this category. The Associate Dean was a good professor, although the author never had him for a class. The Associate Dean was an adept administrator and was not necessarily available for dissertation students – it took several months to get him to agree to chair the author's dissertation research. The Associate Dean was primarily a statistician by training and the author's dissertation (Malette, 2006) was highly quantitative. The author's approaches to contacting his future chair included email with a one-page proposal, meeting in the halls, phone calls, and asking the department administrator to intercede. Some of the above vignettes also indicate that chemistry is an important part of selecting a chair. Expertise and chemistry are important, but the professor must be available to chair your dissertation. Two graduated doctoral students added:

Although having a SME on the committee is important, the potential SME selected should not be imposing any unnecessary high technical hurdle for the doctoral candidate. (R. Wu, personal communication, January 27, 2014)

My opinion on choosing a subject matter expert: that can be a double-edged sword. SMEs come with a wealth of knowledge, but they also come with highly sophisticated paradigms developed over several years of their own research. If you are breaking new ground in your research, make sure that the SME is not standing where you are going to put the shovel, or is at least willing to step aside so can you dig where you need to. Additionally, if the SME is your chair and your research suggests a possible shift in their paradigm, make sure they are willing to consider that shift. (D. McCall, personal communication, April 6, 2014).

Availability

Obviously, the professor has to be available to chair dissertations, but in some cases, if none of the above methods work for you, then you may have to resort to anyone who is available. This may often be the case because professors who teach classes (because they have been exposed to the students) and the subject matter experts (because they are well known in their field) are all in very high demand. You may find excellent dissertation chairs among the adjunct faculty members who haven't taught a class for several years, but are working and are extremely knowledgeable in the methodology you plan to use. One student noted that their university...

has a chair/committee member search tool which allows you to filter by research method and by the individual's background. Since my dissertation is on project management, I started there. I also started with the letter M since my last name also starts with M. (S. Mullins, personal communication, August 26, 2013)

Another student wrote "I chose my chair by reading the biographical pages of each of the professors at [the University]. Each professor gives a bio of interests and publications. When I found three that peaked my interest I emailed each of them..." (V. Glover, personal communication, August 26, 2013). Another student based her decision on professors who were available and what they had written in their profile.

My process was influenced by the bio/qualifications each available faculty member posted. I figured if they did not take the time to post an informative, thorough text on which students would make a decision, then I could not count on them to take the time to assist me in an informative, thorough manner. Lucky for me, [Dr. X's] bio was very content-rich. Once I had my list shortened to two candidates, I shared them with my two closest friends (husband and mentor) I have leaned on during this doctoral program. Their input heavily influenced my final decision. (N. Morrison-Jones, personal communication, August 24, 2013)

Another student chose her "dissertation chair because I've developed a relationship with her that was both professional and felt she would be able to set excellent guidelines yet give me the freedom to research and write" (T. Hong, personal communication, September 24, 2013). The above vignettes indicate that the chair's biography is important to students and writing a good biography is a step in creating positive chemistry with future dissertation students. Chair availability is important and professors may be recommended or assigned as described in the next section.

By Assignment

Your department director will know the strengths of the faculty: full time, adjunct, former, emeritus, and those in affiliated departments. This may be your best choice as little known adjunct faculty may work in your exact field of study or be adept in a particular research method that is perfect for your topic. For example, two professors "were recommended to me by

the department chair” (D. McCall, personal communication, August 25, 2013) and he chose one of them.

A student had been working on her dissertation unofficially with a professor who was full and couldn't take more students. One of her future committee members knew of her work and suggested someone from the adjunct faculty who would be perfect for her research topic. The faculty member was unknown to the student but they spoke and found that the faculty member was available to take one more student. The student found that it was a great working relationship and she graduated a couple years later. (M. Brahme, personal communication, September 24, 2013).

Other Reasons

There are many other reasons that you might choose a dissertation chair. Some of these boil down to chemistry. The chosen professor may have a particular trait that you like – it could be ethnicity, gender, race, class, religion, sexual preference, geography, “personality, work style, or flexibility in terms of degrees of freedom for shaping your dissertation” (J. DellaNeve, personal communication, August 24, 2013). You might like how they dress; for example, they may always look professional and business-like, or always looked relaxed and approachable. Here are some of the other reasons that students have used to select a dissertation chair.

Trait. One student partially based his decision on sharing a common profession.

I chose Dr. [X] for several reasons: 1) he was clear up front about his expectations; 2) we're both engineers so I was fairly certain that we would communicate well; 3) he was enthusiastic about my topic; 4) he was clear up front that he would *give it to me straight*. (D. McCall, personal communication, August 25, 2013)

Another student used traits and picked an adviser “because of his cool job and background, and because it seemed to me he enjoyed learning, and loved life. Basically, when I spoke to [X] on the phone, ... [and he was] not a wet blanket” (C. Bell, personal communication, August 24, 2013). A third student searched for a chair with the last name that started with “the letter M since my last name also starts with M” (S. Mullins, personal communication, August 26, 2013). A fourth student chose her chair based on his transparency and feedback traits.

I chose my second mentor because he is transparent. He told me what to expect or not to expect of him. What impressed me most about my current mentor is that he motivates me and can be brutal with feedback. (P. Langshaw, personal communication, August 27, 2013)

Accessibility. Accessibility is another attribute that may be important to you in these days of online classes. You may want a chair who lives nearby, has office hours, and can occasionally meet with you in-person. One student had several qualities in mind for her chair and virtual accessibility was her first condition:

My dissertation chair selection was based on my chair's accessibility, personality, and knowledge/passion for my topic. For accessibility, my potential chair's geographic location, work schedule, and willingness to meet virtually were key factors.

Compatibility with my chairs' personality was significant; as I view this partnership as an essential relationship that needs to be healthy and cultivated throughout the dissertation process. Lastly, I believe my chairs' knowledge and passion for my dissertation topic is vital in providing the right guidance, focus and momentum. (M. Spain, October 3, 2013)

Familiarity. Familiarity is important in days of online communication and when you know you will be establishing a relationship for a couple years. You may be researching professors and find one whose last name starts with the same letter as yours or who has the same name as your favorite aunt. The author found (for some odd reason) that he shared the same name as a dog – as one student shared:

I struggled a lot to find a mentor/chair and I wanted to share something sort of funny because I knew that when I read your bio and talked to you that I was eager to work with you....based on your experience and your knowledge. [Figure 1] is my 4 old mastiff.... His name is Leo! I kind of figured that there was some reason I found you in the database and that you were available, I always think *things happen for a reason*. (V. Felicetti, personal communication, August 23, 2013)

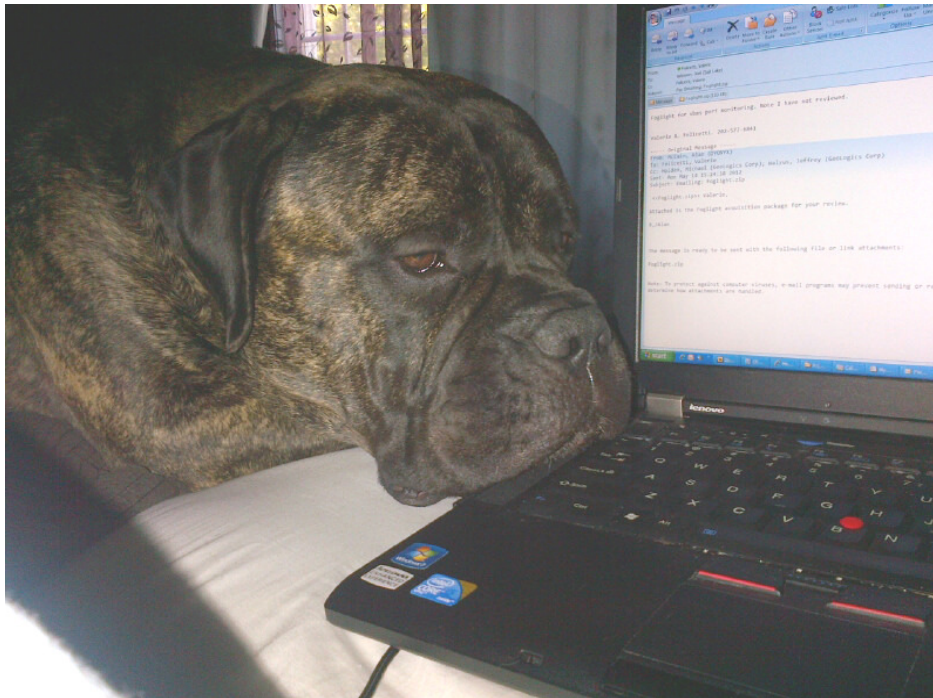


Figure 1. Leo the mastiff: 150 pounds of laptop security was the basis for selecting a chair.

Promotion. If you have a problem with your chair or if she retires, you may want or have to change chairs. Promoting one of your committee members to chair is easier than starting the search from the beginning. One student, who had a poor fit with his original chair, had a committee member who “was willing to help me set a path to completion. After a few reviews and modifications of the proposal [he] became my dissertation chair” (D. Beaty, personal

communication, September 2, 2013). Of course, you will need to fill the vacancy created by promoting the one committee member to chair.

Funded study. From a financial point of view, you many need help funding your doctoral studies and may want to work in a research lab with a particular professor. You should seriously consider doing your dissertation research based on your work in that lab.

Another method is that you may be approached by a professor who knows you or has heard about your research topic. UOP occasionally sends out an email to the dissertation faculty that lists the students who need a chair or committee member. The email includes the student's name, topic, and a paragraph-long description of their proposed research. It is then up to the professor to contact the student.

These are all good suggestions for finding a dissertation chair, but you can also make mistakes in the selection process that can be costly in money and time. The next section discusses some examples.

Mistakes

Here are some stories about mistakes that happened. You want to pick committee members that are compatible. There are very few things worse for a dissertation student than to have a committee that does not work together well. University departments are not large and politics and personality issues are part of the interaction of any group of people. The best way to select a committee is to ask your chair who would be good to add to your committee. Here are a few student comments where there were problems with their chair. In some cases the name and date have been withheld to prevent identification of the student and the chair.

One student said he picked his “dissertation chair by selecting the only faculty person on campus who would tolerate me. There has to be a better way” (Name and date withheld by request). Another student lamented “After several years of working together and changing designs, unfortunately my mentor told me the university did not accept Case Studies, and I found out this year that information was incorrect” (Name and date withheld by request). A third student discovered that his chair could not provide the needed SME guidance.

The method I used to choose my original dissertation chair was to review the [University’s] website and look for any person that had experience in quantitative research and had a focus in customer service. I emailed several potential committee chairs and after a short dialog chose the chair who I thought was the best fit for that position. Unfortunately, I made a wrong choice as the chair was not very helpful in setting a good path forward and his experience in customer service was not beneficial. (Name and date withheld by request)

A fourth student selected his/her chair without having him/her for a class and not doing sufficient research into their dissertation-chairing style. The student said “If I could do this process over again I would meet with my prospective chair and explain my goals and make sure

our goals align together. That would have saved a multitude of tears through this process” (Name and date withheld by request). One former student states:

One thing worth mentioning is to ask other students about the chairs you are considering. Word of mouth is a very effective resource, and coming from people in your shoes means you’ll get a relevant perspective. Caveat: listen to their opinions, but don’t feel compelled to follow their recommendations – what does or does not work for them may be quite different from what works (or does not work) for you. (D. McCall, personal communication, April 6, 2014).

Demands from your Chair

Once you’ve selected a dissertation chair, you will find that he or she has certain likes and dislikes. This is discussed in more detail in the section called *Working with your Chair* in Mallette (2015).

The more things you do, the more you can do.
(Lucille Ball, 1911-1989)

The above quote is part of the longer quote that has been widely attributed to actress Lucille Ball: “If you want something done, ask a busy person to do it. The more things you do, the more you can do.” This was amplified when a friend of the author commented that she knew two students that quit their job to complete their dissertation. It never happened until they went back to work. She felt that the dissertation process takes time – and time is needed to allow your thoughts to form, the implications of the Chapter 4 results to develop, and be succinctly and logically written down in your Chapter 5 discussion. (M. Brahme, personal communication, September 24, 2013). The author sometimes recommends taking a week or two, away from other activities (work, family, weekend work), to concentrate on a particularly difficult section to complete a chapter, or to make corrections requested by your chair; but don’t quit your job!

Summary

Selecting a dissertation chair is a very important decision because you are establishing a relationship that will be very intense for a few years and will probably last for a lifetime. Some dissertation students, in the social sciences, choose their chair 1) by the chair’s academic excellence, 2) by the chair being a subject matter expert, 3) because the chair was available, 4) by being assigned a chair, or 5) for a variety of other reasons. The author shared stories from current and former dissertation students. One colleague recommended selecting your chair based on good chemistry and selecting your committee members based on domain knowledge.

Disclosure

This paper was extracted, in part, from Chapter Four of Mallette (2015).

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Biography

Dr. Mallette is an adjunct faculty at Pepperdine University and the University of Phoenix's doctoral programs and was an Instructor of Engineering at the University of Central Florida. He is chair for many, and has graduated eleven, doctoral students. Dr. Mallette provides technical and programmatic support at The Aerospace Corporation. Previously, he worked in system engineering and project management of satellite systems at the Boeing Company for 30 years. He received the BS and MS degrees in electrical engineering from the University of Central Florida and the MBA and EdD (in organizational leadership, with honors) degrees from Pepperdine University. Dr. Mallette has published over 80 conference and peer-reviewed journal articles. He is the author or co-author of the books: *Dissertation Fundamentals for the Social Sciences* (2nd edition, 2015), *Writing for Conferences* (Greenwood, 2011), *The SPELIT Power Matrix* (CreateSpace, 2007), *Images of America: Rancho Mirage* (Arcadia Publishing, 2011), and the *Princess Avocado* (2012) series of children's e-books. Leo is a senior member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers and is chairman of the award selection committee for the Precise Time and Time Interval Conference. He and his wife Kathy live in Irvine and Rancho Mirage, California. They have one daughter and two granddaughters. He enjoys playing with his granddaughters, gardening projects, traveling, and writing.