Ten-Step Program for Doctoral Completion
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This 10-Step program for doctoral completion is predicated on a well-known fact: many students finish the challenging course work and most students pass the feared comprehensive exams, but about one-third never complete a dissertation proposal. Note I said dissertation PROPOSAL. So you have little to fear, but the proposal itself. Nevertheless, many of the completion strategies need to be applied well before you complete your coursework.

1. Understand that good dissertation work cannot be done in sprints. It requires the preparation and pacing of a marathon runner. You should start working on it during your first year of courses.

2. Be aware that, the primary task of a dissertation is to find a gap in knowledge and then plug that gap. Note that almost all your life, schooling has conveyed the wisdom and skills developed by those who came before you. Now you have to shift gears and go where no one has yet tread! At the same time, you are expected to smartly use the knowledge of your predecessors to guide your journey.

3. Understand that you need in-depth knowledge of your research topic before preparing a good dissertation proposal, and it will usually take 200-300 hours of reading and critical thinking. Use your early coursework assignments to explore topics, research questions, conceptual frameworks, and methodology for your dissertation.

4. Select your research questions, in consultation with your advisor, at the end of about 18 credits of coursework, so that you can select your remaining courses and use them to help you build the expertise needed. Note that I said "questions," which are more specific than a "topic."

5. Realize that there are three types of dissertations. The first type is a "save the world and wreck your life" dissertation. The second type is expedient, making good use of your already acquired expertise, contacts, resources, etc. The third type is transitional, deliberately going moderately beyond your existing expertise to expand your competencies and credibility. Nobody has won a Nobel prize for their dissertation. Don't aim to scale Mt. Everest, but rather trek in it foothills.

6. Plan on approximately 90 percent of your bright ideas for a dissertation subsequently proving inadvisable either because identical studies have already been done or because the ideas are impractical due to access problems, time limitations, costs, and other constraints. Note that it is very hard to get into public schools to do research, and sometimes promised access is subsequently withdrawn. Avoid questions that require five-year longitudinal studies. Be practical when dreaming of collecting data from national samples.
7. Working students should look for dissertation questions that they can "twofer" with their jobs.

8. Take your research courses seriously, even if you don't plan to be a researcher. The Graduate School of Education and Human Development has an online doctoral student quantitative research methods self-assessment test (www.gwu.edu/~assess1) that can help you realistically evaluate your strengths and weaknesses. Also, don't sell any of your research methods course books until the day you file your approved dissertation.

9. First write a 6-8 page prospectus, specifying the problem (based on the literature), the theory or conceptual framework(s) that will inform your study, the research questions (not the broad topic area) and the methodologies to be used. Get your dissertation committee's approval on these core matters, before starting to write the proposal.

10. Erase from your mind all thoughts that you'll complete your comprehensive exam and then take a semester to relax or reorder your life before getting on with your proposal. This is highly risky behavior if you really want to finish. Between your comprehensive exams and completion of your dissertation proposal, DO NOT: a) Take on a new and challenging job, b) Buy a house, c) Have children, d) Get married or divorced, or e) Move or return to your home country.