



EXPERTS' ADVICE TO INFORMATION SYSTEMS DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the results of a panel discussion offering advice to doctoral students in advancing through their programs and getting a start on their career. The panel was held at the 2003 Annual Conference of the Southern Association for Information Systems, and panelists included senior MIS faculty members who, combined, have chaired over 80 dissertations. Topics included choosing a dissertation topic, dealing with the dissertation committee, completing the dissertation, the job hunt, marketability, building a publication record, and advice for new faculty.

Keywords: graduate education, doctoral education, academic profession

I. INTRODUCTION

On March 8, 2003, five experienced senior information systems faculty took part in a panel discussion at the Southern Association for Information Systems (SAIS) annual conference. Among them, the panelists were chairs of more than 80 dissertations and served as advisors and dissertation committee members for countless other doctoral students. Participants in the SAIS Ph.D. Student Mini-Consortium received the unique opportunity to hear the panelists' opinions on a variety of issues ranging from choosing a dissertation to making the transition from student to faculty member. This paper summarizes the key points from the panel discussion. Professors

Experts' Advice to Information Systems Doctoral Students by C. Van Slyke with R. Bostrom, J. Courtney, E. McLean, C. Snyder, and R. Watson

Bostrom, Courtney, McLean, Snyder and Watson served as panelists, and Professor Van Slyke was the panel organizer. This paper is organized around the main topics of interest to the panel audience.

To capture the spirit of the discussion, the report is written primarily in the second person.

II. THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation process is the cause of considerable stress for many doctoral students and represents a significant hurdle to earning the degree, as evidenced by the all too numerous ABDs.

The panelists presented their thoughts on a variety of dissertation-related issues, including choosing a topic, selecting a chair and committee members, and seeing the dissertation through to completion.

CHOOSING A DISSERTATION TOPIC

Successfully picking a dissertation topic requires a balancing act. On the one hand, you should pick a well-bounded topic. As one panelist put it:

"... when choosing a dissertation topic, don't make it your life's work. The idea is to have a bounded topic, one that you can finish in a reasonable time."

While the dissertation should make a contribution to scholarship, it does not need to be Nobel-prize material. It is easy for you to get so caught up in answering every possible question related to your topic that you never finish.

On the other hand, because the dissertation serves as the starting point for producing publications, ideally the topic should be the starting point for a substantial research stream. This consideration leads to another criterion for choosing a topic: make sure it is something in which you are interested. For most people, the dissertation is the largest research project they will ever do. Therefore, ensure that the topic matches your long term interests and abilities.

Your interest is even more important when considering how long you are likely to be working on the topic. For almost everyone it is much longer than you think. Not only does it take considerable time and effort to complete the dissertation, but hopefully, you will be crafting articles based on the dissertation for some time.

It is a good idea to start thinking of tenure and promotion while a doctoral student. When selecting a topic, you should think long term, not simply of completing the degree. In research-oriented schools, promotion to associate professor in information systems with tenure is based largely on journal articles published or accepted for publication. Ideally your dissertation should provide the basis for a continuing stream of papers in the general topic area. Once you studied the literature and developed the background necessary to conduct research in that area, you can leverage your knowledge by continuing to work in that area. Continuity also allows you to build a reputation with other scholars in the field who may later act as external reviewers when you go up for promotion.

One way to identify potential topics is to keep a list of interesting topics as you go through your doctoral program and do the readings for the various seminars. This list will also help you develop other research streams after you graduate. If you are lucky enough to settle on a general topic early on, you can start building your base of knowledge as you progress through the program. It may be possible to complete the bulk of your literature review before you formally start the dissertation.

DEALING WITH THE COMMITTEE

At many schools, selecting dissertation committee members is the first step in the dissertation process. In some cases, students are assigned a committee chair. Assuming this is not the case, choosing the chair is the first stage in putting a committee together. Many doctoral students need a chair who is a good facilitator. In any case, the chair must be familiar with the dissertation topic area. Once you select the chair, look for faculty who are comfortable working with the chair. Be sure to consider the chemistry among potential committee members, since they must be able to work together. In-fighting, which fortunately is quite rare on committees, can be a serious impediment to completing the dissertation! When selecting a committee, keep in mind that you need members who can contribute in three key areas:

- content,
- methodology, and
- facilitation of the dissertation process.

Finally, choose members who will be supportive and will help move the dissertation forward and assist with resulting publications.

During the dissertation process, keep committee members informed. Dissertation committees do not like surprises. One of the biggest disasters you can face is turning in a finished dissertation to a committee whose members have no idea about what you've been doing. When members are kept informed throughout the process, objections can be handled in a timely manner rather than having them voiced when the dissertation is "complete."

If you are stuck on a problem during the proposal development or in executing the dissertation, ask your advisor and other members of your committee for help. Don't ponder a problem for days or weeks, thinking you must solve it yourself before going to the committee. You are wasting valuable time. An experienced faculty member may quickly see a way around the problem or be able to suggest various ways for you to deal with it. Communicate with your committee, especially when you are having problems!

Finally, it is also helpful to determine publication expectations early on. Most students should expect to co-author one or more papers with their chair. Being clear about these expectations at the onset avoids misunderstandings later.

THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Selecting a dissertation topic is only one step in the process, of course. Once the topic is selected, the project must be conducted and the thesis must be written. At most schools, the first major milestone is completing the dissertation proposal. While the length and structure of the proposal varies considerably across schools, the proposal should provide a roadmap for completing the dissertation. It should describe what you plan to do, how you plan to proceed, and what you expect to find. In effect, the proposal represents a contract between you and the committee. Having a well thought out, clear proposal provides a solid base of understanding between the committee and you. The accepted proposal can help avoid many misunderstandings that may otherwise crop up during the dissertation process. You especially want to avoid the situation in which you think the dissertation is done, but the committee does not. If you spell out the expectations clearly, it gives you some protection in saying that you have satisfied the terms of the agreement as specified in the proposal and thus that you completed the requirements for the dissertation. You might want to point out in the proposal that non-statistically significant results may constitute a contribution to knowledge!

COMPLETING THE DISSERTATION

Take the time to design the research properly. Finding serious flaws in the research design late in the dissertation process often spells disaster. In many cases, such flaws require backing up and redoing large portions of the project.

Many students find writing the actual thesis to be an overwhelming task. Staying on track when writing the thesis requires discipline. Setting and sticking to a regular schedule of writing is helpful. As one panelist put it,

“How do you write a dissertation? Two hours a day, every day until it’s finished.”

Faithfully writing and revising for two hours a day allows you to make steady progress. You should actually *write* for the allotted time. Do not count coffee breaks, phone interruptions, and the like.

Both short- and long-term interruptions are costly. Work sessions require a certain start-up time, and every interruption requires re-focusing on the project. While re-focusing applies to minor, short-term interruptions, long-term interruptions are even more costly. Such interruptions are one reason that most advisers caution students not to accept a faculty position at another institution before finishing the dissertation.

Relocating and starting a new life as a faculty member requires considerable effort. Even mundane matters associated with relocating take time and attention away from the dissertation. New professional responsibilities are even more time consuming. New teaching and service responsibilities are only part of the picture. Integrating with the new community also takes considerable time. New faculty members are typically expected to integrate themselves with their fellow faculty. Failing to do so may create a less than favorable reputation for you. It is easy to get caught up in the new environment and its demands. Moving before finishing is one reason for the many horror stories of ABD faculty failing to complete their dissertations and, as a consequence, losing their faculty jobs or being demoted to non-tenure track positions.

III. THE JOB HUNT

Another area of great concern for many doctoral students is the job search. This concern is heightened by the current contraction in the market for new Ph.D.s.

Broadly speaking, criteria for assessing a potential position can be broken down into three categories: economics, geography, and chemistry.

- Economics

How much does the position pay? Base pay is only one part of the economic dimension. Many students fail to consider the overall cost of living, for example. Housing costs, state, and local taxes and other factors may make a seemingly attractive pay rate less attractive and vice versa. Summer research support is also a consideration, not only for monetary reasons, but also the boost it can give your research, since you can work full-time on your research during the summer.

- Geography

Although many students do not prefer a particular geographic location, it is a significant factor for some. Factors other than location may also be important to you. For example, you should consider whether you prefer a rural or an urban location. Although not strictly a matter of geography, you may also want to consider the size of the student body of prospective universities. If married, make sure your spouse and kids like the location and are willing to move there.

- Chemistry

Be sure to assess how well the research areas and skills, reward system, and general culture fit with your needs and wants. Understanding what a school is looking for and how well that fits with your expectations and needs is a key job choice criterion. Those who go to an ill-fitting school often find themselves back on the job market in a year or two. This factor can turn out to be costly and unproductive in terms of your time, as searching and moving are time consuming. If you are seriously interested in research, it is advisable to go to the best research school that you can. Even if you don't get tenure, it is much easier to move from a research-oriented school to a teaching-oriented school than vice versa. Also, you will learn more about the research culture in the better research schools. You will also be more likely to hone your research skills there.

Don't judge prospective schools too quickly. Your criteria may evolve as you go through the interview process. While some doctoral students are clear on what they are looking for in a school, most find that their picture of a "good" school becomes much clearer as they go through the interview process. One panelist noted that his current institution did not fit with his original profile of a desirable position. Only by going through the interview processes did he conclude that there was a good fit.

When interviewing, project an air of confidence in your abilities. However, some students appear condescending, rather than confident. Attitude can be a major barrier to landing a desirable position. Many schools consider collegiality to be a major criterion when assessing job candidates. Hiring a faculty member involves a long-term commitment. Arrogance may alienate faculty to the point where it overcomes other factors, costing you the position you want.

MARKETABILITY

You can take a number of steps to improve your job prospects. Publications, particularly in quality journals, provide a significant boost to your job prospects. Participation in conferences is also beneficial in several ways. Conference submission deadlines force you to put your thoughts on paper. In addition, attending and presenting at conferences helps you gain exposure within the field. Finally, presenting at conferences helps hone your presentation skills and allows you to obtain feedback from reviewers and from members of the audience. This process can be invaluable in improving the conference version of the paper and preparing it for submission to a journal. Be aware that while some journals will publish papers that appeared in conference proceedings, others will publish them only if they were substantially improved, and others will not publish conference-related papers at all. You should check the policies of the conference and the journal. You may only re-publish papers in a journal if you retain the copyright. Under no circumstances should you have the same paper under review simultaneously at two different outlets, either conferences or journals.

Your teaching areas may also impact your marketability. Certain teaching areas are "hot" at various times. For example, telecommunications and networking have been in-demand teaching areas in recent years. Studying job postings *before* you are on the market may help you identify teaching areas that are in high demand. Be careful, however, to not stray too far from your areas of expertise and interest. Doing so may cause you to spend an inordinate amount of time on teaching at the expense of your research record. Also, you are unlikely to be happy teaching in an area that holds no interest to you.

Presentation skills are particularly important during the campus visit. Schools typically require job candidates to make one or more presentations when visiting. The "job talk" is a significant component of the evaluation processes. Not only is it an opportunity to present your research, it is also an indicator of your classroom skills. Because the job talk is so crucial, you should practice and fine-tune the presentation before your visit.

The campus visit is stressful for most job applicants. One factor that may increase stress is the fact that schools differ in how they treat candidates during job talks. At some schools, the faculty seem to attack your research to see how well you understand your own research and to assess your ability to handle difficult situations. Others may seem aloof and standoffish. Thinking that the visit is somehow perfunctory in this situation may be a misjudgment. Regardless of the faculty's approach, the more practiced your job talk the better you will be able to handle any situation.

IV. BUILDING A PUBLICATION RECORD

Doctoral students are, of course, concerned about getting their research published. Panelists pointed out that one reason why some people are published frequently is that they submit their research frequently. Research that is never written up nor submitted never gets published. As obvious as this statement is, many academics never seem to learn this lesson. When you conduct a piece of research, pull it together and get it published. Failing to do so in a timely manner may allow another researcher to steal your thunder.

One piece of advice offered by panelists is to avoid breaking stride after completing the dissertation. Many newly-minted Ph.D.s take a sizable break from research after finishing their dissertation. While it is certainly acceptable to take a few days off after such a major accomplishment, start quickly crafting papers from the dissertation. Not only will the topic be fresh in your mind, but you will also be able to maintain the work discipline built during the dissertation process. If you are still on campus, you will have your dissertation chair available to help you write your papers.

Panelists offered several other keys to building a successful publication record:

- Set productivity goals

Always have several papers in play. You should keep your research pipeline full. Setting goals are helpful. For example, it may be a reasonable goal to submit a paper or revision every two or three months.

- Choose projects carefully

Carefully choose research projects to pursue. This choice is especially crucial early in your career. Publishing in fringe areas may be difficult, making this choice a risky strategy for untenured faculty.

Much of the advice offered in Section II on choosing a dissertation topic applies to post-dissertation research as well. When deciding on research projects, think of long-term streams of research rather than bouncing from topic to topic. You should also evaluate projects based, in part, on the type of research and publication outlets that are valued at your school. Pursuing a project that stands little chance of being published in top-tier journals, as defined at your school, is a bad idea if only top-level publications count towards tenure.

- Conduct the research rigorously

Although quantity matters, quality is even more important to establishing a successful research record. Publishing in top-level journals requires rigorous research, hard work, dedication, and perseverance.

- Deal with reviews and reviewers professionally

One of the most significant barriers many new researchers face is dealing with criticism. Many promising researchers find that they simply cannot handle criticism and rejection, so they simply give up and stop submitting. Reviewers' criticisms are necessary parts of

the research and publishing process. Learning to deal with them professionally is a critical success factor for academic publishing.

Viewing reviewers' comments constructively does not equate to blindly accepting everything they say. If your justifications and arguments for a criticized aspect of your work are solid, you should not be afraid to disagree with the criticism. Deal with the criticism in a professional manner rather than taking it as a personal attack.

If you receive "bad" reviews, it is useful to set them aside for a few days, which gives you time to put personal feelings aside. This pause helps you address the criticisms in a way that will improve your work and increase the chance of being published. Putting personal attacks into a reply to the Editor is unlikely to help you ultimately publish the work.

When writing a response to reviewers' comments, you should be careful to address every specific criticism. This strategy provides you with a substantive reply to the Editor, and keeps you on track when crafting the revision.

- Turn revisions around quickly

When you receive a "revise-and-resubmit" decision from an Editor, be sure to work diligently on resubmitting the paper quickly. Do not allow the revision to stagnate; the paper will be fresh on your mind and on the minds of the reviewers if you get it back quickly. Timely turnaround is also an indication of your interest in and dedication to your work.

Although it is sometimes frustrating to revise a paper substantially, in most cases, you are much better off to resubmit rather than starting the whole process over at another journal. Submitting to a different journal may require refocusing the paper, which can be a considerable undertaking. Even if refocusing is not necessary, restarting the review process can be costly in terms of time, especially when the tenure clock is ticking.

V. ADVICE FOR NEW FACULTY

Making the transition from doctoral student to faculty member can be daunting. Not only are you entering a new environment, but you are also entering a new role with a new set of pressures and responsibilities.

Learn about your new peers. Who is working on similar research? Whose knowledge and skills complement yours? Who can be a mentor? Answering these and related questions requires putting considerable effort into becoming familiar with your fellow faculty. Sitting in your office with the door closed is not going to help you integrate with your new peers.

Striking a balance between focusing on research and being a team player is often difficult for a new faculty member. Of course, it is essential to be productive in terms of research, but typically certain service requirements must be met. Be accommodating with service, but don't become overloaded with it. The trick is to do enough service to be viewed as a good citizen, but not so much that it hinders research efforts. Keep in mind that service expectations are often open to negotiation when discussing a job offer. While department chairs may not be able to offer more money, they may be able to offer reduced service loads.

In terms of research, be sure to understand clearly the research expectations at your new school. Although most administrators will not give hard and fast criteria for tenure, it is usually possible to obtain a good idea of what is expected. In addition to number of publications, you should clearly understand other tenure and promotion issues. Which journals count as "A" publications? Do lower-level publications count toward tenure? How are conference proceedings viewed? For co-authored works, does the order of authorship matter? Do co-authored papers carry the same weight as single-authored papers? In addition to discussing these questions with your department

chair and other senior faculty, it may also be useful to look at the success records of faculty who recently went through the tenure process.

Deciding what activities to spend time on is another area that is often confusing for new faculty members. How should time be allocated among research, teaching, and service? One way to view various activities is to think of them in terms of internal currency. How do the results of various activities pay off? Also consider external currency. For research-oriented faculty, research is *the* external currency. If you can build a vita that would allow you to be hired for a desirable new position, you are likely to be promoted at your current institution.

When starting at a new institution, tenure may seem a long way off. Although the tenure clock is typically seven years, the tenure decision is made during the seventh year. Also, because of the long lead times to accepting papers at top journals, you should not count on work that is not completed and ready to submit after five years. While many new faculty members appreciate the need to start early on research, fewer realize the importance of becoming visible in the field. Many universities require outside review of tenure applications. Becoming active and known in the field can help when nominating external reviewers. Reviewers who are familiar with you and your work are better equipped to judge your record.

Finally, a solid publication record is your best protection in this profession. If you are not tenured at one institution, or if you just choose to leave that institution for any reason, the main factor in determining your marketability will be your publications. While teaching is clearly important and many schools will ask for copies of your teaching evaluations, especially those where teaching is of greater interest, it is increasingly difficult to change jobs without publications. Thus it is of utmost importance that you start publishing early and often.

VI. CONCLUSION

Surviving a doctoral program and starting on a faculty career is a journey filled with many bumps in the road. By paying heed to those who went before you and helped many to navigate the journey successfully, you will avoid many potential pitfalls. Hopefully, you and other doctoral students will find a smoother road to travel as a result of the advice offered by the SAIS Doctoral Consortium panelists.

In summary, these are some of the key points from the panel:

- Choose a dissertation topic that is well-bounded and that you will be able to live with for a long time.
- Think long and hard about your choices of dissertation committee chair and members. These decisions warrant serious thought.
- Keep your dissertation committee well informed as you go through the dissertation process.
- When stuck on a problem, consult your committee members.
- Set and follow a regular schedule for working on your dissertation. Avoid short and long-term interruptions.
- Consider economics, geography, and chemistry when evaluating job opportunities. Be sure not to judge prospective schools too quickly.
- Do not break stride when you complete your dissertation. Begin crafting and submitting articles to journals right away.
- Remember that articles that are never written and submitted are also never published. Put your ideas on paper!!
- Turn revisions around quickly, and be sure to carefully respond to all reviewer and editor comments.
- Publish, publish, publish!! Put another way, "publish and prosper!!"

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ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following reference list contains the address of World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their computer or are reading the paper on the Web, can gain direct access to these references. Readers are warned, however, that

1. these links existed as of the date of publication but are not guaranteed to be working thereafter.
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ISWorld Ph.D. page (<http://www.isworld.org/phd/phd.htm>).

This Web site contains links to information of value to both current and prospective doctoral students. Topics ranging from selecting a program to understanding the academic profession can be accessed from this site.

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Doctoral Student Issues, *Decision Line*.

Decision Line, the news publication of the Decision Sciences Institute, regularly contains a Doctoral Student Issues feature. Archives are available online at <http://www.decisionsciences.org/Newsletter/index.htm>

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