

Starting and Managing a Dissertation Support Group

Writing a dissertation is a difficult and challenging endeavor; there's choosing a topic, conducting research, writing grant applications, perhaps spending a semester or even years in a different institution or country, and then actually sitting down and writing. But then consider the stress that is added by mandatory teaching, grading, non-dissertation related research, or other departmental responsibilities, isolation and disconnect with peers and friends, long-distance family and romantic relationships, bills and student loans, and perhaps even conflicts with an advisor or dissertation committee. It is no wonder that of the 200,000 doctoral students enrolled in 2001 only 44,744 were awarded degrees after averaging approximately 8 years of enrollment.¹ Many students who leave their institution without a degree do so after finishing their coursework when they begin (or are in the middle of) researching and writing their dissertation.

Since 2012 I have managed a dissertation support group for my peers and colleagues in the Classics Department at Florida State University. This began as a monthly get-together at a local restaurant with a few PhD candidates in my department but expanded to include over 15 students from 6 departments (including English and Art History) by 2014. Together we have created a small community built around a common goal and dedicated to supporting and challenging each other.

This dissertation support group, however, is not an unstructured meeting where candidates complain about their advisor, their writing, and their research. While complaints are welcome, I push the group to maintain a positive and enthusiastic environment. These are constructive meetings focused on a single, monthly topic (such as time management and goal

¹ Ogden, Evelyn Hunt. 2007. *Complete Your Dissertation or Thesis in Two Semesters or Less*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Page 1.

setting or fighting isolation and promoting self-care) in order to facilitate discussions about writing techniques and provide helpful advice.

In this presentation I discuss the benefits of a dissertation support group, the structure that I have used to organize each meeting, and helpful activities and traditions that have emerged from our monthly gatherings. I provide information on how to organize a similar group at your own institution and share valuable resources that have influenced my attitude toward approaching the dissertation process, as well as the attitudes of the members of my dissertation support group. From this experience the PhD candidates in our group have gained insights into efficient study habits; they have learned from each other's mistakes or successes; they have received constructive criticism to improve their writing; and (perhaps most importantly) all of the members in this group have found an emotionally supportive environment that helps them realize that they aren't alone in this difficult journey.