

Walden University

Dissertation Prospectus

WALDEN UNIVERSITY
A higher degree. A higher purpose.

For internal use only.

Walden University
Academic Offices
155 Fifth Avenue South, Suite 100
Minneapolis, MN 55401

1-800-WALDENU (1-800-925-3368)

Walden University is accredited by The Higher Learning Commission and a member of the North Central Association, www.ncahlc.org; 1-312-263-0456.

© 2012 Walden University, LLC

Contents

The Prospectus	1
Completing the Prospectus	1
Submitting the Prospectus	1
An Annotated Outline	3
Quality Indicators.....	6
Sample Prospectus	8

The Prospectus

The *Dissertation Prospectus* is a brief document that provides preliminary information about your dissertation research and is used in two ways:

- It serves as an agreed-upon *plan for developing the proposal* that is evaluated to ensure a doctoral-level project.
- It serves as a step to finalize the *structure of your dissertation supervisory committee*, who will work with you on completing the dissertation.

Completing the Prospectus

The *Dissertation Prospectus* consists of several small sections, which are detailed in the annotated outline. Your goal for the prospectus is to create a plan for developing your dissertation proposal. Therefore, you need to have more information for the prospectus than for your earlier documents, such as the *Dissertation Premise*, but you do not need to know all the specific details of the study that you will ultimately conduct. For example, you may identify *intelligence* as a covariate in a quantitative study, but at this point you do not yet need to identify the instrument that you plan to use to measure the covariate.

Also, because every research project is unique and because this outline is general, you may be asked to include additional information in your prospectus to help assure your committee that you are headed in the right direction. For example, *feasibility* will be one criterion for evaluating your prospectus, and if you are considering a very unique sample group, your committee may ask that you explore that aspect in more detail before moving forward.

The *Dissertation Prospectus* should follow APA sixth edition guidelines and be formatted as either a .doc, .docx, or .rtf file. As you work on the document, you may also want to review the *Litmus Test for a Doctoral-Level Research Problem* from the *Dissertation Premise* guide and your *Historical Alignment Tool* from your academic residency experience, as well as the quality indicators found in the *Dissertation Prospectus Rubric*, which is included in this guide.

Submitting the Prospectus

Depending on the academic program, some students will work with their chair in a companion course that supports prospectus development. Students in KAM-based programs will work on their prospectus in SBSF 7100 with their faculty mentor, who is now their chair. Other students may start the *Dissertation Prospectus* in a course led by a senior member of the faculty in their area, before moving into a dissertation completion course with their chair. Yet other students may directly work with their chair a dissertation course, during which they will complete the prospectus. Be sure to check your program of study to know which path you will follow.

As for the proposal and dissertation, for which you will receive feedback on working drafts, prospectus development is an iterative process. When the prospectus is completed, please follow the submission guidelines for your program. Generally, you should submit a final prospectus to your dissertation supervisory committee for review *after* completion of your core research sequence but *before* taking any advanced research course, and:

- *as required in your dissertation course*, if you are currently enrolled in this course;
- *toward the end of your time in a companion course*, following the guidance of your chair; or,
- *prior* to beginning your dissertation proposal in SBSF 7100, following the guidance of your chair.

An Annotated Outline

Title Page

The recommended title length is 12 words to include the topic, the variables and relationship between them, and the most critical keywords. Double-space the title if over one line of type and center it under the word Prospectus.

Include your name, your program of study (and specialization if applicable) and Banner ID Number, double-spaced and centered under the title.

Title

The title as it appears on the title page, double-spaced if over one line of type and centered at the top of the page. The title follows the word Prospectus and a colon.

Problem Statement

Provide a one- to two-paragraph statement that is the result of a review of research findings and current practice and that contains the following information:

1. A logical argument for the *need to address an identified gap in the research literature* that has relevance to the discipline and area of practice.
2. Preliminary evidence that provides *justification* that this problem is meaningful to the discipline or professional field. Provide three to five key citations that highlight the relevance and currency of the problem.
3. The overall *purpose or intention* of the study.
 - In quantitative studies, state *what needs be studied* by describing two or more factors (variables) and a conjectured relationship among them related to the identified gap or problem.
 - In qualitative studies, describe the *need for increased understanding about the issue* to be studied, based on the identified gap or problem.
 - In mixed-methods studies, with both quantitative and qualitative aspects, clarify *how the two approaches will be used together* to inform the study.
 - *For other approaches*, clarify why an alternative approach is needed and useful for this project.

Significance

Provide one to two paragraphs, informed by the topic in the problem statement, which describe(s):

1. How this study will contribute to filling the gap identified in the problem statement—What *original contribution* will this study make?
2. How this research will support professional practice or allow practical application—Answer the *So what?* question.
3. How the claim aligns with the problem statement to reflect the potential relevance of this study to society—How might the potential findings lead to *positive social change*?

Background

Provide a representative list of scholarship and findings that *support the main assertions* in the problem statement, highlighting their relationship to the topic (e.g., “This variable was studied with a similar sample by Smith (2010) and Johnson (2008),” or “Jones’s (2011) examination of industry leaders showed similar trends in the same key segments.”).

Framework

In one paragraph, describe the theoretical base or conceptual framework in the scholarly literature that will ground the study. Base this description on the problem, purpose, and background of your study. This theory or framework informs, and is informed by, the research question(s) and helps to identify research design decisions, such as the method of inquiry and data collection and analysis.

Research Question(s)

List the question or a series of related questions that are informed by the study purpose, which will lead to the development of *what needs to be done* in this study and *how it will be accomplished*. A research question informs the research design by providing a foundation for:

- Generation of hypotheses in quantitative studies,
- Questions necessary to build the design structure for qualitative studies, and a
- Process by which different methods will work together in mixed studies.

Nature of the Study

Using one of the following terms as a subheading, provide a concise paragraph that discusses the approach that will be used to address the research question(s) and how this approach aligns with the problem statement. The subheadings and examples of study design are:

- **Quantitative**—for experimental, quasiexperimental, or nonexperimental designs; treatment-control; repeated measures; causal-comparative; single-subject; or predictive studies.
- **Qualitative**—for ethnography, case study, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, phenomenological research, or policy analysis.
- **Mixed Methods, primarily quantitative**—for sequential, concurrent, or transformative studies, with the main focus on quantitative methods.

- **Mixed Methods, primarily qualitative**—for sequential, concurrent, or transformative studies, with the main focus on qualitative methods.
- **Other**—for other designs, to be specified with a justification provided for its use.

Possible Types and Sources of Information or Data

Provide a list of *possible* types and sources of information or data for this study, such as test scores from college students, employee surveys, observations of children, interviews with practitioners, historical documents from state records, deidentified medical records, or information from a federal database.

Possible Analytical Strategies (Optional)

Provide some *possible* ways to organize and analyze the results obtained by the research strategies detailed previously. A few examples of possible analytical strategies include multiple regression, content analysis, and meta-analysis.

Other Information (Optional)

Provide any other relevant information, such as challenges or barriers that may need to be addressed when conducting this study.

References

Include references formatted in the correct style (APA sixth edition, modeled at the end of this guide) for all citations within the *Dissertation Prospectus*.

Quality Indicators

Nine key indicators have been identified to assure the overall quality of the dissertation project at this point in its development. Supervisory committee members will use these indicators to give ongoing feedback and as a means to document their final approval of the *Dissertation Prospectus*. Students should use these rubric items to guide development of prospectus.

A *Dissertation Prospectus* shows the potential of leading to a doctoral-quality dissertation *only* if the answer to *all* of the following standards is “Met.”

1. Complete?

Does the prospectus contain all the required elements? Refer to the annotated outline to see the required parts of the *Dissertation Prospectus* document.

2. Meaningful?

Has a meaningful problem or gap in the research literature been identified? In other words, is addressing this problem the logical next step, given the previous exploratory and confirmatory research (or lack thereof) on this topic? It is not acceptable to simply replicate previous research for a Ph.D. degree.

3. Justified?

Is evidence presented that this problem is significant to the discipline and/or professional field? The prospectus should provide relevant statistics and evidence, documentable discrepancies, and other scholarly facts that point to the significance and urgency of the problem. The problem must be an authentic “puzzle” that needs solving, not merely a topic that the researcher finds interesting.

4. Grounded?

Is the problem framed to enable the researcher to either build on or counter the previously published findings on the topic? For most fields, grounding involves articulating the problem within the context of a theoretical base or conceptual framework. Although many approaches can ground a study in the scientific literature, the essential requirement is that the problem is framed such that the new findings will have implications for the previous findings.

5. Original?

Does this project have potential to make an original contribution? Addressing the problem should result in an original contribution to the field or discipline.

6. Impact?

Does this project have potential to affect positive social change? As described in the Significance section (see annotated outline), the anticipated findings should have potential to support the mission of Walden University to promote positive social change.

7. Feasible?

Can a systematic method of inquiry be used to address the problem? The tentative methodology demonstrates that the researcher has considered the options for inquiry and has selected an approach that has potential to address the problem.

8. Aligned?

Do the various aspects of the prospectus align overall? The nature of the study should align with the problem, research questions, and tentative approaches to inquiry.

9. Objective?

Is the topic approached in an objective manner? The framing of the problem should not reveal bias or present a foregone conclusion. Even if the researcher has a strong opinion on the expected findings, the researcher must maximize scholarly objectivity by framing the problem in the context of a systematic inquiry that permits multiple possible conclusions.

Sample Prospectus

Updated May 30, 2012.

Prospectus

How Online Doctoral Students Develop a Dissertation Problem Statement

Alpha B. Gamma

General Studies program – General specialization

Walden University

A00000000

Prospectus: How Online Doctoral Students Develop a Dissertation Problem Statement

Problem Statement

Conducting a supervised, independent research project is a unique feature of completing a doctoral degree (Lovitts, 2008). Contrary to the common wisdom of a 50% all-but-dissertation (ABD) rate, only approximately 20% of doctoral students are unable to complete the dissertation after finishing their coursework (Lovitts, 2008; Wendler et al., 2010). The challenge of the dissertation is not a new phenomenon in higher education, but what is new is the growing number of students who complete their academic programs online (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Although many students are ultimately successful in defining the central argument for a doctoral capstone, less research has been conducted on that process in a distributed environment.

Highlighted in a book on doctoral education by Walker, Golde, Jones, Conklin-Bueschel, and Hutchings (2009) is the need to develop more “pedagogies of research” (p. 151) to support teaching graduate students to be scholars. Although a modest body of scholarship exists on research training in traditional programs, emerging research suggests that the online environment offers some unique challenges and opportunities for doctoral students (Baltes, Hoffman-Kipp, Lynn, & Weltzer-Ward, 2010; Lim, Dannels, & Watkins, 2008). Of the many aspects of a research project, development of the problem statement is arguably a key step because it provides the rationale for the entire dissertation. Hence, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the process by which doctoral students in online programs arrive at a viable problem statement for their dissertations.

Significance

This project is unique because it addresses an underresearched area of higher education with a population that has increased over the past decade (Bell, 2011). The results of this study will provide much-needed insights into the processes by which increasing numbers of new scholars work through the beginning phase of their research. Insights from this study should aid doctoral committees in helping students to succeed in their final projects, thus supporting eventual degree attainment. Education has long been a force for social change by addressing inequities in society. Because a broad range of students attends online institutions, supporting their successful attainment of a terminal degree allows for increased diversity in the types of individuals in key academic and scholarly leadership positions.

Background

Selected articles relating to doctoral education and the process of learning to be a researcher are described here:

1. Baltes et al. (2010) and Bieschke (2006) provided information on research self-efficacy, which has been shown as a key predictor of the future research of doctoral students.
2. Gelso (2006) and Kim and Karau (2009) provided different views of strategies to support the development of scholar practitioners.
3. Holmes (2009) focused specifically on the dissertation stage.
4. Ivankova and Stick (2006) offered a model that aligns well with the possible methodologies used in this study and that involved online students.

5. Research by Lim et al. (2008) addressed the role of research courses in an online environment.
6. Lovitts (2008) gave a view of the transition from student to researcher.

Framework

The theoretical framework for this study will be Perry's (1970) theory of epistemological development. Because this theory addresses ways of knowing in adults, Perry's theoretical work has been used extensively in all aspects of higher education, albeit more frequently with undergraduates than doctoral students. The approach provides details on cognitive-structural changes that emerge as a result of development and learning. Further, subsequent research and application of Perry's theory offer guidance on ways to facilitate academic development, thus allowing for insight into the pedagogical challenge of the dissertation (Gardner, 2009).

Research Questions

RQ1–Qualitative: For students with a high-quality problem statement at the dissertation stage, what themes emerge in their reports of the process that they used to develop it?

RQ2–Quantitative: Based on objective ratings by doctoral faculty, are significant differences evident in the overall quality of problem statements as students progress through the dissertation process?

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study will be mixed-method with a qualitative focus. Qualitative research is consistent with understanding how students approach the work of creating a successful dissertation problem statement, which is the primary focus of this dissertation. Keeping the focus on how students make sense of their dissertation research should be consistent

with Perry's (1970) epistemological expectations at this point in their development (Gardner, 2009). To elucidate how a viable research problem emerges, objective ratings of student work products will be examined across time. This quantitative analysis should help pinpoint the amount of growth from the beginning to end of the project.

Possible Types and Sources of Information or Data

1. Problem statements written at four key points in a doctoral student's career: the premise, the prospectus, the proposal, and the dissertation writing stage.
2. Ratings of problem statements by an expert panel of doctoral faculty.
3. Interviews with a representative group of doctoral graduates who have successfully defended their dissertations and whose work was ranked highly by faculty.
4. A measure of epistemological development, as a possible covariate.
5. Interviews or surveys of doctoral faculty, who have helped students to succeed, as a possible source for triangulation.

References

- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2007). *Online nation: Five years of growth in online learning*. Needham, MA: Sloan-C.
- Baltes, B., Hoffman-Kipp, P., Lynn, L., & Weltzer-Ward, L. (2010). Students' research self-efficacy during online doctoral research courses. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 3(3), 51–58.
- Bell, N. (2011). *Graduate enrollment and degrees: 2000 to 2010*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.
- Bieschke, K. J. (2006). Research self-efficacy beliefs and research outcome expectations: Implications for developing scientifically minded psychologists. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 14(1), 77–91. doi:10.1177/1069072705281366
- Gardner, S. K. (2009). *The development of doctoral students: Phases of challenge and support*. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 34(6). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gelso, C. J. (2006). On the making of a scientist-practitioner: A theory of research training in professional psychology. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 5(1), 3–16. doi:10.1037/1931-3918.S.1.3
- Holmes, B. D. (2009). Re-envisioning the dissertation stage of doctoral study: Traditional mistakes with non-traditional learners. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, 6(8), 9–13.
- Ivankova, N. V., & Stick, S. L. (2006). Students' persistence in a distributed doctoral program in educational leadership in higher education: A mixed methods study. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(1), 93–135. doi:10.1007/s11162-006-9025-4

- Kim, K., & Karau, S. (2009). Working environment and the research productivity of doctoral students in management. *Journal of Education for Business*, 85(2), 101–106.
doi:10.1080/08832320903258535
- Lim, J. H., Dannels, S. A., & Watkins, R. (2008). Qualitative investigation of doctoral students' learning experiences in online research methods courses. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 9(704), 223–236.
- Lovitts, B. (2008). The transition to independent research: Who makes it, who doesn't, and why. *Journal of Higher Education*, 79(3), 296–325. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0006
- Perry, W. G., Jr. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Walker, G. E., Golde, C. M., Jones, L., Conklin-Bueschel, A., & Hutchings, P. (2009). *The formation of scholars: Rethinking doctoral education for the twenty-first century*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wendler, C., Bridgeman, B., Cline, F., Millett, C., Rock, J., Bell, N., & McAllister, P. (2010). *The path forward: The future of graduate education in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.