

## **Voices from the Field: Qualities and Weaknesses of a Dissertation Chair and/or Committee Member**

In preparation for this Instructional Module for faculty encountering the new position as dissertation Chair and/or Committee Member, I felt that doctoral students in progress would have important information and a grounding knowledge base to help us with our understanding of the Chair and Member positions. The doc student responses below were collected and recorded in July 2019. For confidentiality and professional purposes, I have excluded names or any identification of the individual responses.

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### **Question #1**

**As a present doctoral candidate, what do you see as the most critical *qualities* of a dissertation Chair? Be very specific and itemize a couple of qualities.**

#### *Doc Candidate #1*

The most critical qualities of a chair would have to be approachability and communication skills. Other characteristics would include the ability to demonstrate instructor immediacy, commitment, responsibility, and innovation.

It is important the chair is dedicated to student success and works diligently to guide the doctoral candidate to complete the process.

#### *Doc Candidate #2*

In-depth understanding of the specific methodology being implemented in the candidate's doctoral research study.

In-depth understanding of the institution's current IRB process and what the IRB is looking for (and not looking for) in order to obtain IRB approval.

Taking the time to read the candidate's research proposal and provide meaningful and substantial feedback. The feedback should be in alignment with what the IRB is looking for in order to obtain approval down the road. Each chapter should be torn apart as it is submitted so by the time it reaches the IRB with very few changes need to be made.

Timely and thorough communication of both the dissertation process and chapter feedback.

#### *Doc Candidate #3*

In my opinion, the most critical quality is availability to answer questions and provide feedback. Often my questions are simple or I just need a clarification or even support and

reassurance that I'm doing the right thing. Offering specific advice on corrections and not assuming that the candidate knows what the chair is expecting. Having knowledge in the area of the type of research the candidate is working on is helpful as well.

*Doc Candidate #4*

I believe that a Chair is very influential in the success of a doctoral candidate even when a lot is really dependent on one's own work. Being a student and working on a dissertation is very stressful because a student may be very successful in one's own right but the dissertation is a different and new endeavor for the student. What makes the doctoral process more challenging is the fact that life goes on while one is in this journey. During my first year, I developed lower back injuries due to working long hours after work while using the cheapest chair...in an effort to complete my degree in the shortest possible time. During my third year, my husband was hospitalized and in that same year, I had a car accident. All those times, my previous Chair did not even ask me if I was OK.

My full-time job is a consulting teacher and I have undergone numerous training on coaching. I believe a Chair should be able to coach adequately (first). Coaching entails developing rapport and respect with their clients. I know Chairs are so busy but there should be some element of personal touch in their professionalism.

I believe Chairs should be tactful. All students are professionals and respected in their own fields. If a student makes a mistake, I don't think it was done intentionally.

If a Chair is doing something, it should be because it is the right thing to do and not because he or she is only thinking of his one reputation.

*Doc Candidate #5*

In-depth understanding of the specific methodology being implemented in the candidate's doctoral research study.

In-depth understanding of the institutions current IRB process and what the IRB is looking for (and not looking for) in order to obtain IRB approval.

Taking the time to read the candidate's research proposal and provide meaningful and substantial feedback. The feedback should be in alignment with what the IRB is looking for in order to obtain approval down the road. Each chapter should be torn apart as it is submitted so by the time it reaches the DRR very few changes need to be made.

Timely and thorough communication of both the dissertation process and chapter feedback.

*Doc Candidate #6*

Willing to take time to speak with and guide the candidate  
Knowledgeable about research procedures  
Knowledgeable about writing/reporting/APA etc.  
Committed to candidate success

*Doc Candidate #7*

A dissertation chair should be a subject matter expert on the topic. For doctoral candidates in online modalities, it is incumbent on the student to **find** a dissertation Chair at the institution and **inform** the selecting committee of your preference. The doctoral student should do her homework and be aware of the time constraints/teaching load/number of doctoral candidates with the dissertation Chair. Relying on fate or fortune could have negative results in the dissertation process.

*Doc Candidate #8*

The most critical qualities of a Dissertation Chair are:  
Possess and share essential content for each chapter of the dissertation  
Be knowledgeable of APA requirements  
Be a good communicator

**Question #2**

**As a present doctoral candidate, what do you see as the most critical *weaknesses* of a dissertation Chair? Be very specific and itemize three or four qualities.**

*Doc Candidate #1*

I would have to say the most prevalent weakness would be a lack of communication. A doctoral candidate needs to know each step of the process and feel the chair is keeping them informed as each step progresses to the next. I find this the most frustrating! I have e-mailed my chair to find out where we are in the process only to be told the ball was dropped and time has been wasted.

*Doc Candidate #2*

Being too lenient in the chapter approval process. The chair should be tearing apart each chapter as they are submitted to provide constructive feedback that will lead to a proposal that is ready for IRB approval once it is time to compile the chapters together.

Communication of the institution's timeline of events required to complete the IRB process. For example, the validation of the data collection instrument needs to be completed before a student can obtain IRB approval.

*Doc Candidate #3*

I think the number one weakness is when the candidate feels that their questions are trivial or that the chair is inconvenienced by being asked questions. Not having times set up where the candidates can speak, at least on the phone with the chair sometimes it is difficult to articulate a specific question in an E-mail and when talking the answers may elicit more questions or deeper questions as the conversation progresses. Another weakness would be not providing feedback in a timely manner. Most of our assignments are on schedule and when corrections are needed there has to be adequate time to submit and resubmit.

*Doc Candidate #4*

Not knowing their students (often due to large case-loads). There is absolutely nothing more disheartening to a student than calling their chair for a scheduled meeting only to have their chair call them by the wrong name, cite the wrong dissertation, and spend the majority of the precious meeting time skimming and misunderstanding the actual research.

*Doc Candidate #5*

Communication of the institution's timeline of events required to complete the IRB process. For example, the validation of the data collection instrument needs to be completed before a student can obtain IRB approval. The student should complete the validation process before they start the "finalizing the dissertation proposal" course to ensure they can obtain IRB approval within the 10-week course. Knowing this ahead of time will allow the candidate to manage their time more effectively and complete the IRB application process within the institution's timeframe and reduce the chances of a student getting behind in the process.

*Doc Candidate #6*

Clear communication lines is very critical. Also, the Chair should at least be familiar with the topic of the candidate. Several times, my Chair would say, "Oh, I cannot remember your paper".

I have been delayed for several terms because instead of motivating me, my Chair demoralized me.

*Doc Candidate #7*

1) fatigue, 2) procrastination, 3) indifferent to candidate's timelines, 4) poor communication (based anecdotally, I picked a solid Chair)

*Doc Candidate #8*

Lacking knowledge of the school's expectations for the dissertation (length of chapter, etc.)  
Lacking knowledge of IRB requirements and expectations  
Have good communication with the school in which they are associated