

School of Social Service Administration University of Chicago

Excerpts from the Doctoral Student Handbook regarding dissertation format

General

Students are required to complete a dissertation in their area of specialization. The dissertation is designed to afford the student an opportunity to make a contribution to social work scholarship by conducting competent research that furthers theory as well as knowledge of social problems and social interventions.

Acceptable dissertation topics

SSA dissertations are expected to pose a question or questions for study that fall broadly within the area of social work or social welfare; that has substantive, theoretical, and/or methodological significance; and that has not been satisfactorily resolved by existing knowledge. SSA recognizes that there are many different forms of contribution to knowledge, to theory, to improvement of practice, to research methods, and to new syntheses or analyses of existing knowledge. SSA prescribes no single type of investigation, methodology, or source material. It permits a wide range of qualitative or quantitative studies. It permits library, field, simulation, experimental, and survey approaches. Students sometimes collect their own data, but also sometimes rely on secondary data. A dissertation project may be one large study or several smaller studies united by a common theme. Although the University of Chicago does not have an official “three paper dissertation” policy, SSA students, with consultation from their dissertation chair have the option of submitting a dissertation that includes within it multiple pieces of empirical work, each formatted like a journal article.

For a dissertation topic to be acceptable there should be a reasonable expectation that the proposed investigation can be satisfactorily completed. This involves appraisal of the source of data, of the methods of investigation proposed, and of the student's qualifications to carry out the particular investigation. It is common for students initially to select dissertation topics that are too ambitious for the scope of a dissertation.

Content and format of the dissertation proposal

With the guidance of their committee, the student develops a proposal for review and approval. A dissertation proposal should contain a well-developed plan for the research. A substantial proportion of the document should be devoted to elucidation of the research plan. This description should be relatively free of contingencies having to do with such matters as agency cooperation and availability of data.

When scholars submit proposals requesting research funding or travel funding, they are expected to present their ideas in a succinct manner with page limits. Dissertation proposals should similarly be succinct. Although SSA does not have a page limit for dissertation

proposals, the proposal should normally be no longer than 25 pages (not counting appendices) and should include the following points:

- a) General statement of purpose – aims of the study
- b) Substantive discussion of the significance or potential importance of the study for social work and social welfare specifically.
- c) A synthesis/summary of the state of relevant knowledge including an explanation of how the study will add to and build on theory. This is not an exhaustive review of the literature.
- d) The questions to be posed, and if epistemologically appropriate, the hypotheses to be tested.
- e) The plan of research with attention given to definition of major concepts, statement of assumptions, specification of sources and nature of data, methods and techniques to be used, and a suggested plan for analysis and interpretation of data. In instances where instruments have yet to be developed, a clear plan for instrument development should be presented. The proposal should present a clear operational plan concerning data management, coding, and analysis. Appendices with instruments, pilot results, codebooks for secondary data or other relevant materials may be submitted.

The format of the dissertation proposal can be decided by the student and the dissertation chair. Some students prefer to write proposals using standard formats that they are likely to use later in their career, e.g., NIH format, or that will help them facilitate upcoming fellowship applications or IRB applications.

General structure of the dissertation

Because dissertations vary greatly in their methods and disciplinary orientation, students, in conjunction with their committee, should select a style that works for their project. Traditional dissertations include chapters formatted much like a book manuscript, with a table of contents, introductory chapter(s) addressing literature, a methods chapter, one or more results chapter, a discussion chapter, and reference list. Some universities offer student a multi-paper or three-paper dissertation alternative to this traditional model. At SSA, it is not a formal option to simply submit three papers in lieu of a traditional dissertation. However, some students prefer to format their dissertations so that chapters within it are written as stand-alone, but conceptually linked articles, each chapter including an introduction, methods, results, and discussion. This format is acceptable so long as it is approved by the committee and so long as the dissertation also includes a brief orienting chapter and a brief discussion chapter at the end. Three separate papers is usually viewed as the appropriate number for a multi-paper dissertation, but it is up to the student and committee to decide on the suitable number of papers for the particular project. In no cases should those paper chapters be articles that have already been published or submitted for publication. Before writing the dissertation, students should inform themselves about University procedures regarding formatting of dissertations, appropriate use of copyrighted material, submission of dissertations, and online publication through ProQuest. The Dissertation Office offers workshops on dissertation preparation and submission and has an informative video on their website. <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/phd/>.