

Prepare to Chair: Leading the Dissertation and Thesis Process by Gretchen Oltman, Jeanne L. Surface, and Kay Keiser

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Prepare to Chair: Leading the Dissertation and Thesis Process offers information profoundly important to the newly minted academic assuming their first role as Chair of a dissertation committee. The authors, all professionals in education, one of which is an attorney, share their precarious experiences, which, frankly, echo those of significant numbers of doctoral students attempting to complete that most daunting task, completion of a dissertation. It is these personal dissertation missteps in their personal research and writing journey, combined with dissertation leadership activities, that led them to author this well-constructed book. The combined experiences of the three authors inform how better to approach the doctoral student and how best to perform as the Chair of a dissertation committee. The information is so important to the new academic, I would recommend all read this very accessible book as its advice is sound in all forms of academic leadership.

The structure of each chapter builds empathy for the doctoral student and the Chair. The authors whittle down complex topics into readable chapters, culminating in action-oriented recommendations. Every chapter opens with firsthand experiences related through case studies. The chapter then presents a discussion that identifies problems posed by numerous forms of failure, culminating in point-by-point recommendations. Most importantly, each chapter identifies concrete actions to deliver student success while protecting the Chair's (new faculty member) position within the department.

Certain themes recur through several chapters. Failure to understand relevant institutional processes opens the institution to potential liability. In turn, this places the reputation of the Chair and the institution in question. A recurring theme in several chapters is that of poor communication. While it seems common sense that consistent, on-going communication is necessary to accomplish research and writing of this major document, students often find themselves left to discover their own path, often going astray. Failure to communicate inhibits students' progress to completion while building anxiety. Lack of communication interferes with building important relationships with students and other committee members. While the mention of communication presented in every context discussed in the book might appear redundant, it is imperative to success in the role of Chair. Communication cannot be stressed enough.

Several chapters address how the Chair can ease the student's burden through this mentally challenging process. Theory, ranging from situational leadership to mindfulness to behavioral theory, addresses most potential mental struggles manifested by students. An outline for both the dissertation process and dissertation proposal is an invaluable tool as it helps set a base of expectations for the student against which to plan and measure progress. The ability to organize the process related to expectations, accompanied by a timetable, can ease student concerns. These outlines are good starting reference points for the inexperienced Chair.

An area deserving greater elaboration is the precarious role assumed by the new Chair. The role inherently exposes the new faculty member to an imbalance of power and authority. The text addresses this delicate relationship by providing phrases appropriate to coaxing and cajoling difficult committee members to reframe contentious questions and comments. These are all good suggestions. However, junior faculty seeking promotion and tenure need a mastery of diplomatic skills to ally themselves to those in charge of their professional future. This is a competency not easily recognized or learned. This topic and others are so complex as to lead to a recommendation of more in-depth discussion through further publication.

Authoring a dissertation or thesis is a challenge to even the most confident and resolute of us. Leading students and faculty in this complex undertaking requires a Chair with talents beyond the typical academic. *Prepare to Chair* by Gretchen Oltman, Jeanne L. Surface, and Kay Keiser is an excellent guide to those new to this experience.

References

Oltman, G., Surface, J. L., & Keiser, K. (2019). *Prepare to chair: Leading the dissertation and thesis process*. Rowman & Littlefield.

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