



Navigating the Dissertation: Strategies for New Doctoral Advising Faculty and Their Advisees

Di Pierro, Marianne
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Book Review

Tags: dissertation | doctoral advising | graduate students

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The high attrition rate of doctoral candidates remains a major problem for higher education in the United States. Drawing upon her experience as the manager of graduate research and retention at Western Michigan University, Di Pierro offers an engaging text aimed at new faculty who are advising candidates and their advisees. Di Pierro argues that “despite abundant research and often-echoed affirmations that something must be done to quell doctoral attrition, progress is essentially hampered by a reluctance to recognize that advising faculty cannot continue to work with doctoral advisees by replicating models that are passé” (1). She believes that faculty and candidates need to be aware that models have changed “and are moving in the direction of collaborative, integrative, and interdisciplinary styles” (10). Furthermore, faculty need formal advising training before directing dissertations or serving on committees.

Di Pierro makes dissertation committee work a reoccurring subject throughout this book. She begins by addressing communication within committees and with the advisee. She covers expectations, roles, duties, expertise, and responsibilities not by offering a model but by outlining the areas the advisor needs to establish to ensure healthy and helpful communication on the committees. She also explores topics such as vetting a committee by the candidate, dealing with toxic committees, and considerations for faculty members to consider before accepting a role on a committee.

Another major subject of Di Pierro’s work is the actual writing of the dissertation. She explores subjects including finding a dissertation topic, the role of literature reviews, concept papers, maintaining draft files, combating the writing blues, responding to plagiarism, and working with human subject review boards. Building on the theme of communication, some of Di

Pierro's strongest chapters cover expectations for editing both from the perspectives of the advisors and the advisee. She explains line-by-line editing versus conceptual editing, explores using technology to give editorial feedback, and engages the problem of when editorial feedback is not working.

In her final chapters, Di Pierro offers a number of ideas including developing a "Student's Bill of Rights" and a "Dissertation Advisor's Bill of Rights" (173-174) and dealing with the post-dissertation blues. In her closing, she presents her views on the future of doctoral education by calling for the establishment of dissertation wellness checks and envisioning the creation of Graduate Centers for Scholarship, where candidates will find writing experts, statisticians, qualitative and quantitative methodological experts, and digital technology experts all in one place.

Di Pierro's work is very reader-friendly with take-away lists, end-of-chapter biographies, and checklists, but the overall organization of the chapters seems out-of-sync. The author jumps around quickly from topic to topic and back again frequently. That said, the content of the chapters is valuable for its intended audience. Chapter 25, which provides an outline of each chapter, is a useful tool for navigating the book itself.

For schools of theology and seminaries, dissertation completion and dissertation quality are important subjects for both PhD and Doctor of Ministry programs. With limited resources for faculty training, Di Pierro's book offers a valuable discussion starter for faculty and administrators and could serve as a planning tool for overhauling program handbooks. This title is strongly recommended for academic libraries with PhD and Doctor of Ministry programs, veteran faculty who want to improve their advising for candidates, as well as the book's target audience of new doctoral advising faculty and their graduate students.

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