

Dissertation EdD in Higher Education

Scope and questions

An EdD dissertation must seek to answer questions of interest to the student preferably related to their work. Given the variety of student interests and changing nature of the field, it is impossible to provide an *a priori* precise description of type of questions that are acceptable for dissertation work. The following seeks to provide some guidance.

A dissertation must

- Seek to answer research questions (usually there are more than one) of demonstrated significance to the student, the workplace and/or the field.
- Questions must be answerable using one or more of the research methods listed below.
- Answer questions that can be grounded in existing literature.
- Involve collection of data.
- Involve analysis and interpretation of data collected.
- Tie data analysis to existing literature to draw conclusions for workplace, institution and field.

Generally speaking, dissertations seek to do one or more of the following:

- Describe a phenomenon (e.g., attitudes and beliefs of a group of people, one or more interesting programs, a population)
- Determine if there are differences in responses or approaches based on identified concepts of interest. For example, do attitudes differ by race and ethnicity or by gender? What explains why different institutions take different approaches to student retention? Another common way of stating this is “Is there a relationship between variable X and variable Y?”
- Model or predict which variables contribute to a particular outcome.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of a particular program.

Accepted methods

An important relationship exists between the research questions and methods used to answer those questions. As you will learn, questions and methods must match. Following are some accepted methods

- Literature review. In this case, a lot of literature exists on the question of interest and you use that literature as your “data” to answer the research question(s) of interest.
- A generic interview study involving a minimum of 10-12 interviews.

- A survey using an existing (or slightly modified) questionnaire of at least 100 members of the population of interest.
- A secondary analysis of existing data. The existing data could include institutional data, national data (IPEDS), or survey data (NSSE) or document analysis (institutional policies on some topic of interest).
- A single or multiple case study of programs or particular approaches to a problem. A case study could also have an historical bent to it.
- Evaluation of an existing program (almost by definition a case study)
- A simple mixed-methods study involving both qualitative data analysis. Many case studies and program evaluations involve interviews, document analysis and even surveys.

Edd Dissertation Proposal Guide

Dissertation writing occurs in several stages:

1. Discuss general topic and study idea with advisor
2. Write 7-10 page concept paper that addresses
 - a. What: What is the proposed purpose of the study? What do you want to learn from it?
 - b. Why: Why is it important to learn the answers to your questions? That is what gap in the literature is filled by your study or what problem of practice is addressed by your study? How will your work be better or different if you do the proposed study?
 - c. How: How do you propose to answer the questions your study seeks to address?
 - d. Who: Who will you study or what data source will you use?
3. When the concept paper is approved by your core committee proceed to step 4.
4. Write a full 20-30 page proposal. The proposal consists of answers to the following questions.

Why do I have to write a 20-30 page proposal?

1. The proposal becomes the core of the first three chapters of your final dissertation.
2. The approved proposal serves as a “contract” between the student and the dissertation committee. It protects the student from future changes expected by one or more committee members.
3. The full proposal demonstrates that
 - a. the student is sufficiently familiar with the topic to conduct the study. That is, that the student knows the literature sufficiently to inform the conduct of the study to maximize the study’s usefulness.
 - b. Necessary data are available to answer the questions and that the student has a good idea how data will be collected and analyzed.
 - c. In other words, the proposal demonstrates that the student is ready to carry out the research
4. The “contract” can be modified or amended if conditions change during the course of the research as long as they are approved by the dissertation committee.

Full proposal

I. Context, Problem, Questions, Rationale

The answers to the following questions are sometimes called a problem statement. Identify the general topic you intend to study, e.g., student retention, work-family balance in higher education, the effectiveness of a particular program

- a. What are some of the things we know already about this problem/topic based on the literature and practice?
- b. What are some of the things we currently don’t know that we need to know? This is what is missing from the literature or practice that seems contradictory

and problematic? This is the gap in knowledge about the topic that leads to the specific purpose of your study.

- c. Specify the purpose of your study. E.g.: “The purpose of my study is to understand how use of predictive analytics affects the model of advising used by undergraduate advisors.”
- d. What specifically do you want to know about narrowed topic? These are the specific questions your study seeks to answer.
- e. What is the significance of this study? Why should anyone care about the answers to the questions you proposed? How will your work, your institution, or your profession be informed as a result of your study?
- f. What are the main concepts or ideas that inform your study? For example, suppose you think that social class is a main influence in your study of retention at your institution. Social class is a critical concept that affects your study.

II. The Literature Informing the Study

- a. Ideally, this is your initial literature review that
 - i. Uses the main pieces of scholarly literature informing your study to tell the reader what we know about the question being studied and the main concepts informing the study’s central ideas, etc. These pieces of literature can include books, articles, institutional reports, technical reports, news articles.
 - ii. A summary of what you learn from the literature about your topic, how the literature informs your study, and your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the studies.

III. Research Methods

- a. Design—what is the overall design of the study—quantitative, qualitative? Why is this the appropriate design to answer your questions? If you are doing an evaluation, what kind of evaluation?
- b. Who will you study? What is your sample? Where and how will you find people to interview or survey? If you are proposing to analyze existing documents or data, what documents, what data?
- c. How will you collect data? What instrument(s) will you use (interviews, questionnaires)? How will you identify and collect literature?
- d. How will you manage the data collected: Will you audiotape interviews? Will you transcribe them? Do you have to do anything with quantitative data to make it usable?
- e. How will you analyze the data? Descriptive statistics? Multiple regression?
- f. What steps will you take to insure validity, reliability or trustworthiness of your data and findings?
- g. If doing a qualitative study, describe how you are related to the topic and any preconceived ideas you may have about the problem, people being studied or the study findings. That is, how does who you are potentially affect the study? What steps will you take to ensure readers that you are not simply confirming

any existing beliefs you may have? What, if any, ethical issues does your proposed study entail?

- h. Will you do a pilot study? Tell us about the pilot study if relevant.
- i. If you are conducting the study in a language other than English, you must describe your plans for translation.
- j. IRB? Have you completed the Human Subjects tutorial. If not, what are your plans for completing the tutorial and submitting your work for approval?
- k. What is your plan of action and timeline?