



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

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The book, *Prepare to Chair*, written by Gretchen Oltman, Jeanne L Surface, and Kay Keiser, is a rare and incisive examination of the process for dissertation and thesis research, which should bind academic faculty at graduate degree granting universities in a common quest for education excellence. The authors explicate without delivery of a good/bad binary the underlying and overt obligations the chair of a research committee has to students as novice researchers, the committee, the field of study, and to the chair's own academic and professional reputation. With authority and clarity, the authors fittingly treat the topic of graduate student dissertation and thesis research as areas of teaching and leadership to be studied and honed by graduate teaching faculty.

The authors' treatment of the topic is in sharp contrast to what appears to be a frequently held, problematic view by some faculty: that serving as the chair is a professional service activity that can be blindly undertaken, as though this particular area of educational expertise is somehow instinctively known or naturally acquired. The authors



present beneficial, authentic case-in-point examples of taking on the first committee assignment, identifying committee members, setting up the committee, managing the writing process, which sometimes includes harsh feedback from faculty to students, and more. They incorporate social science theories and models often used in their fields of educational and organizational leadership as they urge readers to expand their thinking and develop practices for enabling graduate students to become respected, advanced, and polished persons who design, conduct, present, and publish scientific research.

Although research-based findings about the nature of adult learners or learning is not a focal point, the book aptly concentrates on students as adult scholars. The authors hold firm to a basic, recurring premise that above all else in higher education, students are most important. The authors seem to know that much of what they are communicating to university graduate faculty is what many dissertation or thesis students have over the years likely thought, believed, and often said. However, student issues often are not heard or acknowledged because faculty are perhaps too sensitive to listen to comments that imply a need for better responses from faculty to students' diverse learning needs.

The subject of this book is the chair, unlike several recently published books about the student's journey to completed research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Joyner et al., 2018; Kornuta & Germaine, 2019; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; White, 2017). At long last, set of authors identify for faculty the many circumstances and challenges particularly taxing for students who are engaged in dissertation or thesis research. Then, the authors instruct present, or potential, chairs of graduate students' research committees how best to

- communicate with students; schedule and be prepared for regular meetings with students;

- involve members of students' committees in presenting feedback to students;
- be aware of signs of depression or other mental or physical health issues students may experience;
- help students to balance needs of family, health, and their degree program;
- encourage scholarly reading and writing; and
- strengthen students' intellect through talking through important concepts.

Academics from all disciplines can benefit from the authors' guidance when accepting or rejecting the chair position and its responsibilities. The authors join the front ranks of university faculty with a clarion call to the chair and committee members to become excellent teachers. They stress that in a program of study, excellent teaching is central to students' achievement of knowledge and skills necessary to function at a new, higher level of academic rigor and ultimate achievement of success in the research writing and defense process. The authors' appeal, for example, is for graduate faculty to not simply to tell students that they must improve their research writing, but to teach students to do research writing. They answer their own good question, "How can we help students move beyond the ominous feeling they get when looking at a blank page with sometimes hundreds more remaining to write?" (p. 68).

The authors emphasize that some excellent graduate students from various backgrounds struggle painfully to do research writing. They make clear that faculty must teach research writing skills, including the common issues in following rules and mechanics of formal writing styles. The authors explain common research writing issues and provide a step-by-step list for helping students to get started writing and stay focused while anticipating the next step and a

preproposal (prospectus) form. Specific pedagogical guidance is offered about

- knowing and using online tools;
- tightening up writing; using professional voice;
- avoiding plagiarism;
- the dangers of hiring a ghostwriter;
- how to synthesize data and information published in trustworthy sources of authoritative research to justify the study proposal;
- rereading and revising a draft; and
- teaching students about rejuvenation that comes from taking a writing break.

Through highlighting potential problems, delays, misunderstanding, and missteps and providing a review of published case law from past years to inform best practices of dissertation or thesis chairs, the authors emphasize that chair-student relationships are crucial. The authors assert that to manage the relationship, the chair must model professional behavior; always communicate in a timely manner; choose words wisely when critiquing a student's work; and, document interactions with students. These considerations highlight the importance of the chair following clearly written policies that address application requirements and admission decisions, setting expectations for student learning at the course and comprehensive exam decision points and timelines for completion of required courses, qualifying exams, proposal approval, and defense, and handling grievance procedures.

Missing from discussions of this process are direct indications that students engaged in dissertation or thesis research are enrolled university students. As such, dissertation and thesis students pay tuition and earn course credits. As with other university course-for-credit, enrolled student status requires that the student is assigned an official faculty teacher, typically the chair, and has a published course

syllabus for each course (e.g., directed readings; proposal writing; dissertation/thesis, and the like) and that each semester students are enrolled in the research process. As faculty of record, the chair of a dissertation or thesis is held to the same high university standards for teaching and student evaluations of faculty. Without this level of detail, the book's guidance for preparing to chair leaves readers to ponder whether or not the chair is a voluntary, unofficial faculty service position rather than a formal part of a faculty member's teaching load, as chairing student research is typically mandated at most universities.

The authors also call attention to the unfortunate 57% rate of U.S. doctoral program completers. According to the National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineer Statistics (2018), the number of doctorate degrees awarded by U.S. institutions in 2016 was 54,909 (Who earns a doctorate? para 1). Based on most recent U.S. Census Bureau (2018) data, the estimated U.S. population is 327,167,434. The percentage of persons in the U.S. 25 years or older with bachelor's degrees or higher was 30.9% (2013-2017). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) estimated that between 2000 and 2017, total postbaccalaureate enrollment, which includes master's and doctoral programs, "increased by 39 percent from 2.2 million to 3.0 million students" (Postbaccalaureate Enrollment, para. 1). These data reinforce the authors' observation that doctoral program completers are a very small percentage of the total U.S. population. To continue on an upward U.S. postbaccalaureate enrollment trajectory, graduate students must know that their personal and financial investments will be in solid graduate programs with outstanding graduate faculty who are prepared to provide content and research process instruction and leadership at very high and effective levels.

Why are these national statistics important to consider in light of the

importance of this book focused on preparing to chair? The successful defense of a dissertation is required for most doctoral program completion. Successful completion of a dissertation or thesis, is an indicator of human capacity for knowledge creation and innovation in diverse fields. Dissertation and thesis research prepares individuals for careers in Pre-K-12 schools, universities, business, and industry. As pointed out by the NSF (2018), researchers and scholars are needed to lead new ways of thinking and create new products and services that “contribute to a nation’s economic growth, cultural development, and a rising standard of living” (Why is it important? para. 4).

This book should be required reading for all graduate faculty who serve, or plan to serve, as the chair of a dissertation or thesis committee. Given the unfortunate, relatively low number of U.S. doctoral program

completers, it seems worthwhile to also recommend that this book be read by novice graduate student researchers, particularly doctoral students. The brevity of the book, precisely 11 chapters with subsections, and concise points for consideration at the end of chapters, offers readers a great deal of insight in a justifiable amount of time. The book exposes what may seem as hidden truths about the formal research process, sometimes unfortunately held close *to the chest* of some faculty. It makes clear that academic research is not only for an elite few who somehow deserve to hold disproportionate amounts of privilege and power in society. Most importantly, the book makes transparent many relevant factors and socially just education practices pertaining to the dissertation and thesis process, which academic graduate faculty need to know in order to chair more constructively – what all graduate students will expect from us.

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