

CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY

***Tepper School of Business
Interoffice Correspondence***

TO: Tepper PhD students

FROM: Rick Green

RE: What you need to do (mechanically) to complete your dissertation

DATE: November 2007 (revised)

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To get a PhD at the Tepper School of Business there are some big things you need to do, and some little things you need to do. The big ones—coming up with a good idea for a dissertation, executing the idea, writing the papers that describe the idea and the results—that is the hard part. This memo does not concern those. It concerns the little things. They are little, but you still need to do them or you will not get your degree. I am writing this down in this memo and circulating it to you now so you will not come to us three days before commencement explaining that this is all news to you. I have also asked the members of the PhD committee to review this document; to be sure we are all on the same page.

1). **The Proposal:** The first step in completing your dissertation is to give a dissertation proposal. This is a seminar delivered to the faculty, describing what you propose to do in your dissertation. It is a formal requirement. The seminar must be open to all faculty. This means it must be held on campus, and during a spring or fall term because that is when faculty are routinely expected to be here. Holidays, weekends, vacation periods, exam periods, and the summer are out. The output of the proposal is two things.

First, a committee is formed to supervise the dissertation. The committee is appointed by the *faculty* and the Program Head, not the student, but in most cases the student's wishes about the composition of the committee are respected. You should, accordingly, ask potential members to serve, and make clear to your chairperson what your wishes are. The faculty or program head may choose to add committee members if they feel someone's expertise would be helpful to the student, or important in evaluating the dissertation.

Second, the faculty chair prepares a memorandum to the head of the doctoral program, outlining what the student needs to accomplish to successfully complete the dissertation, and listing the members of the committee.

In some areas of the school, students tend to put off the proposal until the dissertation is essentially complete. Students are understandably anxious about presenting work that is too preliminary, and thus appearing idiotic. Nevertheless, this largely defeats the purpose of obtaining feedback and guidance from the faculty at a point where it still matters. Moreover, faculty are often irritated at being asked to pass on a *fait accompli*. They will, if sufficiently

provoked or confused by the situation, suggest additional work for the student to do, just because they feel they need to suggest something. This can be counterproductive for all involved. In an attempt to reduce these problems, the Ph.D. Committee has instituted a policy mandating a gap of at least one month between proposal and defense. If you want to defend and graduate in the spring, you need to propose by the end of March.

We have several awards associated with the program. The PhD committee and I have agreed that going forward we will make these awards at the end of the fall semester, to students working on promising dissertations. A requirement for eligibility will be that they have completed their proposals or presented their papers in regular weekly seminars. We hope this will encourage students to present their work in a more timely fashion, and also make funds available when they need it, rather than at graduation when they (hopefully) already have a job lined up.

2). **The Defense:** This is a final oral examination of the candidate concerning the dissertation. It is a public event, and is viewed as a central one in the life of a research university such as ours. Along with the faculty committee appointed at the proposal, an additional outside reader must be present at the defense. This should be a faculty member from within the school but outside the candidate's primary field, or someone within the field but outside the university. Since boundaries between fields are not always clear, you should get approval of your outside reader from the head of the program before the defense.

At least 7 days before the defense you must supply the PhD program office with a copy of the completed dissertation, which is placed in the Dean's office. The defense is then publicly announced to the faculty. The purpose of this requirement is to give interested faculty, and the dissertation committee, time to read the dissertation prior to the exam. It is unreasonable to drop 60-150 pages of material on the committee at the last minute, and expect them to critically read and evaluate it.

At the defense, the candidate should explain what he or she has done, and how it meets the expectations laid out in the memorandum from the proposal. The defense must be public, open to all faculty members. If someone on the faculty thinks that what you are doing is wrong, idiotic, or looney, they have a right (and responsibility) to show up and ask you questions. For these reasons the defense must be held on campus, and not in a hotel at some conference. It must be held during the spring or fall term when classes are in session, not during the summer, holiday periods, or exam periods. At the end of the defense, students and others present are asked to leave the room. The faculty present then decide if the dissertation is enough, and if it is good enough.

After the defense, the chair of the dissertation committee should prepare a memorandum to the Program Head stating whether the student has successfully passed. The student may pass the defense conditionally, but these conditions should be limited to minor, expositional issues. They should not involve important unresolved substantive matters. Any conditions should be carefully explained in the memorandum.

If you want to graduate in May, you need to complete your defense before the last day of classes in the Spring Semester. This gives us time to get the dissertation signed, and get you on the

program for graduation. This means the completed dissertation must be in our hands seven days before the last day of classes in the Spring Semester.

We also have several awards and fellowships for the “best dissertation” in a broad area. These are given at graduation, and some of them involve reasonably large chunks of money. To be eligible for these awards, you must defend before the end of the semester, since the committees judging the awards do this well ahead of time. This is another incentive not to leave your defense until the last minute.

The cover page of the dissertation must be signed by the Dean and by the chair of the dissertation committee. The chair should not sign the cover page until any conditions set at the defense are met. Some faculty members are very particular, and will not sign until every typo is fixed.

If you miss the spring deadline, then you may defend your thesis at the start of the fall semester and graduate in December. The program head can approve a defense during the summer, but will be reluctant to do so. He would have to be persuaded, through a formal petition to the PhD committee, that the student would otherwise face onerous hardship and career threatening problems. It can't just be a matter of it being more convenient for you and your committee to have the defense in the summer. If you defend in the summer, you will graduate in December.

The University imposes a time limit on All But Dissertation (ABD) status. The policy of the Tepper School is that candidacy lapses after nine full academic years from the time you enter the program, which is normally 7.5 years after qualifying exams. The only exceptions will be for the “extraordinary circumstances” outlined in the university policy. Students whose candidacy has lapsed must apply for readmission to the program, and a condition of that readmission would be retaking qualifying exams.

Students become ABD after finishing successfully passing the two summer papers, qualifiers, and the external minor course requirement. At that point they must fill out the form and elect “on campus” or “in abstentia.” The teaching requirement must be met before a degree will be granted, but can be satisfied by teaching off campus, and therefore can, in principle, be satisfied while a candidate is “ABD in abstentia.”

3. The Other Stuff: There are other requirements for a PhD, the minor requirement, the teaching requirement, and etc. These are listed on the program web site. Unless you have met these requirements I will advise the Dean not to sign your dissertation. If you think a requirement is a stupid waste of your time, I will be happy to entertain your thoughts and opinions about whether we should change the requirements. We are a small, flexible program. CMU is a nimble university. We can change the requirements. If we change the requirements, however, we will change them for everybody. You will have quite a tough time persuading me to waive a requirement for you, just because you are, in your own opinion, a very special person.