PhD Program in Social Welfare
Assessment of Dissertation Learning Goals

Statement of the Learning Goals for the Assessing the Dissertation

For this review, the Ph.D. Program in Social Welfare is assessing the learning goals for the dissertation. In 2011, the learning goals for the dissertation stated:
1. Demonstrate expertise in an emerging area of inquiry through the development of knowledge having implications for emergent organizational, policy, or practice in the field.
2. Demonstrate the ability to analyze qualitative and/or quantitative data making appropriate use of advanced statistics and/or strategies for narrative analysis.
3. Demonstrate competence in the use of quantitative and/or qualitative analytic software.
4. Demonstrate a complete arc of learning from the conceptualization of a problem through the integration of existing social policy, theory, and empirical research in the completion of original research.

Following the 2012-13 External Review, the learning goals for the dissertation changed to focus on the ability the dissertation to launch graduates careers as academic scholars and organizational leaders and to examine whether the existing curriculum was sufficiently rigorous to support the goals laid out in the 2011 Statement to the Graduate Center regarding the dissertation. Specifically, the external reviewers questioned whether the research curriculum, specifically in quantitative methods, offered in the Program prepared students to be competitive in the academic and non-academic job market. Consequently, these additional goals are based on the recommendations of the external reviewers.

Data utilized to conduct the review

Faculty and student representatives on the Executive Committee conducted a survey of all Program graduates from the last ten years. We delivered an online survey by email to all fifty program graduates within that period. The questions covered four topic areas related to the dissertation: the methodology employed; the adequacy of academic preparation for conducting dissertation research; the adequacy of Program and faculty support for completion of the dissertation; and utilization of the dissertation research after graduation. The survey consisted of 32 forced choice questions. In addition, we included ample space for open-ended responses from the graduates.
Findings

Forty-four of the fifty possible graduates or 88% completed the online survey. Twenty-five of the 44 (58%) graduates who responded made comments that expanded on the forced choice questions. Regarding their dissertation research methods, seven graduates (16%) conducted quantitative dissertations (quasi-experimental design, RCT, population survey) and 28 graduates (64%) conducted qualitative dissertations (grounded theory, phenomenology, PAR). The balance utilized data mining methods or mixed methods for their dissertations (n=9, 20%). Consistent with graduates selecting qualitative as opposed to quantitative methods for their dissertations, the graduates found their qualitative courses provided somewhat more adequate preparation (65%, n=26) than their quantitative research courses (52%, n=22). The graduates were more positive about their policy course preparation (85%, n=36) than any other aspect of the curriculum. In contrast, 40% (n=17) did not find the dissertation seminar helpful in preparing them for their dissertation research. However, overall the graduates found their course work supported their dissertation research. Similarly, ratings for faculty support for their dissertation research were generally strong. Remarkably, of the 18 (46%) graduates who applied for dissertation support funds, 16 (42%) received them.

A strong majority of graduates reported using their dissertation research (73%, n=29) following graduation. Conference paper presentations (51%, n=19); publications in peer review journals (35%, n=13); conference poster presentations (27%, n=10); and chapters in edited books (13%, N=5) were ways in which graduates used their dissertations. Four graduates published their dissertations as books, and 10 (27%) used their dissertations as the basis for their research trajectory. Only seven (19%) reported they did not use their dissertations at all following graduation.

Proposed Changes

Although these findings are generally positive, the narrative comments were often negative and focused primarily on the lack of research methods and analytic preparation and the dissertation seminar. Two graduates had strong praise for their dissertation chairs by name; both of these faculty members are retired. However the support students received throughout the dissertation process itself was uneven. One problem with this method of assessing our dissertation goals is the dynamic nature of the Program. Some of these graduates completed
their degrees in four or five years, while others took more than a decade. Also, what graduates might have considered adequate preparation earlier in the history of the Program might not reflect current expectations about research competency in our field. Considering the external reviewers noted deficits in our preparation of graduates as researchers, particularly in the area of quantitative methods, these findings suggest support our current efforts to improve these areas of the curriculum.

Next Steps

In order to address the uneven support for students following the Second Examination, we are creating a timeline and summary of the expectations for students, dissertation chairs, and dissertation committee member to clarify the path to completion. Only 23 graduates reported they conducted pilot or feasibility studies. Currently, we are discussing requiring faculty mentoring students to conduct feasibility or pilot studies before they undertake their dissertations. One suggestion is to utilize the dissertation seminar for students to design and conduct pilot or feasibility studies. In general, the curriculum changes currently contemplated focus on preparation of the students to be better researchers and to link those changes to professional development activities that position students to achieve employment in more competitive graduate programs or policy research centers. In the midst of this assessment, our graduates received two of the three prestigious Society for Social Work Research Dissertation (SSWR) awards for 2013. This bodes well for future improvement, because it speaks to the quality of the students we admit. It also underscores the need for us to challenge our student’s comfort with quantitative research, since both the awardees conducted qualitative studies that made use of cross-disciplinary course work and faculty.