Learning goals: Dissertation

Students completing their dissertation will:

1. demonstrate mastery of the research literature (including critical reading & thinking) in one or more areas of specialization from one or more areas of the program: Speech, Language, or Hearing Sciences;

2. demonstrate competence in research design and statistics;

3. demonstrate knowledge of research ethics;

4. demonstrate an understanding of instrumentation and software for research and implement specific instrumentation tools in their research;

5. demonstrate basic professional writing skills that include the ability to write an original, synthesized and critical review of the literature in a given area of scholarship.

Assessment

Our assessment process took place between February, 2014 –February, 2015. During Spring, 2014, we had several discussions in the Curriculum and Examination Committee about the dissertation process and the assessment procedures. Faculty and students agreed that the overall feedback about the dissertation process is typically very good. Most students pass their dissertation defense with minor changes, only a few of them need to make major changes, and almost all of our students show excellent job placement following dissertation defense (see data below). By the time of graduation, many students have published papers in peer-reviewed journals or edited books. Based on these discussions and on students’ input, areas where improvement is needed are timing and communication between students and dissertation committee members. These topics were in the focus of our survey.

An ad hoc committee including students and faculty created two online questionnaires. One questionnaire was created for current level 3 students and another one was sent to alumni. Both questionnaires consisted of open-ended questions.

We asked all level 3 students (Spring, 2014 – Spring, 2015; N=31) to participate in the survey and 15 (48%) of them filled out the online questionnaire. We also
contacted our alumni who graduated in the past 10 years (N=38) and 7 (18%) filled out the questionnaire.

**Summary of data:**

*Data from current level 3 students:*

Number of hours/week that students spent regularly with their advisors discussing their dissertation ranged between less than 1 and 3 (less than 1 hour: 5 students; 1-1.5 hours: 8 students; 2-3 hours: 2 students).

Number of hours/month that students spent with dissertation committee members (other than the chair of the committee): ranged between less than 1 and 3 (less than 1 hour: 3 students (20%); 1-1.5 hours: 6 students (40%); 2-3 hours: 5 students (33%), no response: 1). About half of the students were satisfied with the amount of advisement they received, the other half would have appreciated more time with the committee members. Thirteen students answered the question about the usefulness of dissertation seminar: 8 (62%) students thought it was useful, 4 (31%) responded that it was somewhat useful, and 1 (7%) person thought that it was not useful. The suggestions from students for improving the effectiveness of dissertation seminar included more consistent expectations from faculty members about students’ presentations and more peer mentoring by other students. When we asked about the most challenging part of the dissertation process, students’ responses showed great variations with references to every stage of the process. Some students found generating a well-focused idea very difficult, others had problems with using different equipment, several students had problems with recruiting appropriate participants, and a few students found the writing process the most challenging one. Despite of these challenges, most students felt that they received adequate support from faculty (10 out of 13 /77%/).

*Data from graduates (past 10 years):*

Number of hours/week that students spent regularly with their advisors discussing their dissertation ranged between 1 and 3 hours (1 hour or somewhat less: 2 students; 2-3 hours: 2 students; as many hours as needed: 3 students).

Number of hours/month that students spent with dissertation committee members (other than the chair of the committee): ranged between 2 and 6 (2: 3 students; 4-6 hours: 1 student; as many hours as needed: 3). All students were satisfied with the amount of advisement they received. Six students answered the question about the usefulness of dissertation seminar: 3 students thought it was useful, 2 responded that it was somewhat useful, and 1 person thought that it was not useful. When we asked about the most challenging part of the dissertation process, similarly to the responses of the current students, responses varied greatly. Despite the challenges, all students felt that they received adequate support (100%). All students reported that questions at the defense were similar to what they expected.
Employment data for graduates from the past ten years (N=37):

The data regarding employment show that our students are very successful and sought after on the job market.

Assistant professor: 21
Associate professor: 3
Post-doc./research scientist: 4
Clinic director/clinical supervisor within a university setting: 2
Full-time position outside academia: 7
Deceased: 1

Summary and proposed changes

The initial input from faculty and students suggested that the learning goals work well.

The data from the survey that focused specifically on issues identified by faculty and students during our preliminary discussions showed very similar outcomes for our current level 3 students and our alumni.

Based on these data, the Curriculum and Examination Committee agreed to the following changes:

- We will reserve more time for student-initiated discussions in dissertation seminar.
- Each student is required to give 2 oral presentations in dissertation seminar (2x15 minutes presentation + 15 minutes Q & A). Once they completed this requirement, they are free to decide whether they would like to attend future meetings. Previously, students were required to attend dissertation seminar until their proposal was approved by the members of their dissertation committee.
- The revised student handbook will have more details about the expectations in dissertation seminar.

The next steps

- In Spring, 2016, we will ask faculty and students who are attending dissertation seminar whether the implemented changes facilitated the dissertation process.
• We will also ask students whether the more detailed description of the dissertation process in the student handbook helped them to have a clearer picture about the requirements at this stage.
• If there are still some issues with regards to the process, we will provide students with a Practical Guide. This guide will then be available on our website.