

Recently due to something about to happen at the college I have been thinking a lot about my doctoral program and my dissertation. Not so much the subject matter of the dissertation (which would put most people to sleep) but rather the ordeal one goes through in writing a dissertation. Only about 2% of the country has a doctorate. The graduation rate of those who try to get that DR is only about 56%. The average time to completion is 7.6 years by some accounting. So it is rare and hard to get. Why?

In most programs if you want to hold a doctorate you have to complete a large group of classes, in my case 16 classes. Then you have to take both oral and written comprehensive examinations over the material in those 16 classes. Keep in mind years may have gone by since you took those first classes and now you are being tested on the material again. Written “comps”, as we called them, were two days of 3-4 hours of testing per day.

Oral comps were 60 minutes of questions from a group of faculty on the various topics of the classes and your discipline. You answer those questions orally off the top of your head right in front of them. No pressure or anything.

All of that sounds hard, right? Well, it was, but it was nothing compared to the final ordeal you must go through if you want to have those letters after your name – the dissertation.

The dissertation is usually an original piece of research, written in a standard five-chapter format, that explores a particular problem and asks a question such as “Why is this?” or “What would happen if we changed something?” Each part of the dissertation must be approved as you complete the chapters by your advisor. When you finish chapters 1-3 your full committee of professors must approve the study you are about to conduct. Then when you are all done, the professors must approve the whole thing again. Then, if you are successful at all of that at the end of the meeting they declare you Dr. (insert your last name here).

The dissertation is very difficult to accomplish. We even have a nickname for people who have completed all of the coursework, and the comprehensive exams, but just couldn’t write the dissertation and get it approved – ABD. All But Dissertation. Such as, “Didn’t he finish that degree?” “No, he’s ABD.” “Oh.”

Not only is it like writing a very long book from scratch, your advisor’s name and reputation is attached to it as well, so he or she is very motivated to make it as good as it can be. I wrote 12 versions of chapter one before my advisor finally accepted it. I could see how some people might want to give up. That was quite demoralizing. He said, “I want to you AGONIZE over every sentence!” My wife, Jennifer, was helping me by typing the content while I paced back and forth speaking the words as they came to me. So to finally get each chapter approved I would dictate and Jen would type a sentence or paragraph. Then we would go back and AGONIZE over every sentence elevating the language.

Another reason why people don’t complete is context. Often they are holding down fulltime jobs and writing the dissertation on the weekends or nights. My context was a little different – I was in a race!

Jen wanted to start a family and I was not crazy about the possibility of being a new Dad while trying to complete this degree. So when I finished my comps and started my dissertation she said, “Since you’re planning on graduating in May, why don’t we start trying to have a baby?” I knew that the average wait time is about 16 months if you want to have a baby, so I said sure. Well, it didn’t take 16 months. So if I wanted to be done with the doctorate before the baby got here I had to pick up the pace! Long story

short – I won! But I only won by a few days! I defended my dissertation and later that week I got a letter confirming that my degree was complete. Two days later Abrielle was born. She was two weeks late or she would have won. In your face little baby!

I used this situation to my advantage too. Nothing is better at your oral defense of your dissertation (which are open to the public) than waddling in your 9-month pregnant wife and saying loudly so all the professors could hear, “Don’t worry, Honey. Nothing is going to be said to upset you.” Dissertation approved.

The college is writing its own dissertation right now. Once every 10 years our accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission, reviews NCCC’s compliance with all of the Federal rules and the HLC’s Criteria for Accreditation. Much like a dissertation, it involves writing a five chapter book and then defending that book in person. Nothing on the line really except our accreditation and the ability to give federal financial aid and receive grants. Yikes.

Dr. Sarah Robb is heading up this effort for the college, but truly it involves everyone. When it is done the Assurance Argument as it is called will be about 35,000 words (about 140 double-spaced pages). Each time you make a claim in this document you must link specific evidence proving that claim. So there are hundreds and hundreds of pages of evidence linked by the end of it. It is a monumental task.

In September, five HLC Peer Reviewers are coming to Chanute and Ottawa to check to see if what we wrote is true and to get a better sense of our institution than just what a written document can provide. It is possible that some in the public may be asked to meet with them.

But our college is in great shape. Unlike a dissertation, the assurance argument is us just telling our story about how we operate and how we accomplish our mission. Neosho County Community College is an excellent institution, who puts students and their learning first. We care so much about our communities and enriching them. We have gathered so much evidence of how we meet or exceed these criteria that we are currently in the process of cutting some things as it is limited to 35,000 words. (I know you find it shocking that I am long-winded, but I am a little.)

No college is perfect and we certainly have things we can improve. No doubt the peer reviewers will find a few things for us to work on, which is great! I welcome that. But no matter the outcome, I am very proud of NCCC and what we have accomplished, especially if you think about where we were 20 years ago when I arrived.

While I will always worry a bit until we get back the results in October from the peer reviewers, I don’t think we will need a nine-month pregnant wife to get through the process! The college and its employees have done a remarkable job. I hope the HLC recognizes that.

If you have any questions about this column or anything else feel free to write me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).