**HOD 3870: Thesis Development Seminar**

**0-3 credits, Spring, 2010, Wed. 11:00-1:00, Payne 008**

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**Course Description:** The purpose of this course is to help graduate students conceptualize and operationalize a Master’s thesis, Doctoral dissertation, or major paper or project topic and prepare and write a thesis/project proposal. We will start with the identification and development of a tentative topic or area of study (note: this is likely to evolve). The rest of the semester will be devoted to developing a draft thesis/project proposal, including a presentation of the problem, a critical literature review, research questions, and draft methods and approach to data analysis sections (assuming it is an empirical thesis, which is the norm). You will also be introduced to grant proposal writing, especially dissertation and other graduate student grants and fellowships.

The class meets for only 2 hours/week and has limited joint readings because students are expected to spend substantial time outside class developing their topic and proposal, attending research colloquia, talking to individual faculty members about research topics and opportunities, and reading and critiquing each other’s assignments and draft sections.

**Graded Requirements:** The assignments and proposal sections turned in for this class are geared toward helping students learn how to identify a topic and develop each section that will eventually become the proposal and, later, the thesis. These draft sections and even the topic, in all likelihood, will not be exactly what the final proposal looks like. But students will have learned *how* to develop a proposal and can use the draft to show prospective committee chairs and members. Weights toward the final grade are listed below. In addition, 20% of your final grade will be based on comments you make on classmates’ sections on the course website and in class. **Students will post their sections and assignments to the online course Discussions by MONDAY of the week they will be discussed in class.** Everyone in the class is expected to read and respond to those on Blackboard the same week, either before or after class, and raise your main questions or comments in class.

**Readings (in bookstore):** Davis, Gordon B. & Parker, Clyde A. (1997). *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation: A Systematic Approach* (2nd ed.). Hauppauge, NY: Barron’s Educational Series.

**Recommended**:

Cooper, Harris (1998). *Synthesizing research: A guide for literature reviews* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Galvan, J.L. (2004). *Writing literature reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavioral sciences*. Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Publishing.

New, Cheryl C., & Quick, James A. (2003). *How to Write a Grant Proposal*. NY: Wiley.

**Thesis/Empirical Paper/Dissertation Project and Report**  
  
Your thesis/empirical paper project should be original research addressing a specific practical or theoretical problem on any aspect of community psychology, community development, community health/mental health/prevention, organizational change, or ethics of community research and action. The data can be either primary (i.e., collected by you) or secondary (already collected by someone else).  
  
You should have at least a preliminary idea for a topic by the start of the course. Topics may grow out of ongoing work with a faculty member (often an excellent way of doing a professional project with limited resources in a short period of time) or may be your own independent ideas. In the latter case, you will need to identify the faculty member(s) with the most expertise in that field (or a closely related one). Go and talk to that professor about the topic and find out (a) whether it makes sense, (b) how to narrow the topic to a very specific problem or issue, (c) what are some of the key references or authors to read on the topic, and, once the topic becomes more definite, (d) whether that professor would be willing to serve as your advisor. Thesis topics often evolve or change completely, so you may have to repeat that meeting with the same or other professors before your topic is well defined. Nevertheless, you should aim to identify an advisor by spring break.  
  
If the project involves data from a community or government agency, you and your advisor are responsible for obtaining permission from that agency. If you are collecting your own data using human subjects, you must FIRST get approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Research with Human Subjects. They must approve that your planned methods of procedure protect the rights of subjects (e.g., anonymity or confidentiality), that you obtain informed consent for participation, and that any possible benefits of the research are greater than the risks involved.  
  
The eventual thesis will generally include the following sections:  
  
**Abstract**(1 paragraph: 100-300 words): Summarize the entire report (e.g., 1 or 2 sentences highlighting each of the following substantive sections). See examples of social science abstracts in the library's reference section or at the beginning of most academic journal articles.  
  
**Introduction:** Briefly describe the topic or issue, why it is important, and summarize the basic rationale, or approach, behind the project and the goals of the project. This section will appear before the lit review. But because your topic may be changing while you search, read and review the literature, it usually makes more sense to write that section after the lit review.  
  
**Literature Review**: Synthesize (compare, contrast, summarize, critique) the existing body of empirical research relevant to your topic. Concentrate especially on any theoretical gaps or methodological weaknesses in the literature that your study will fill or overcome. Do not simply compile a sequential list of article summaries' tell the story of what is known and not known about the topic. The literature review is not everything you ever wanted to know about a topic. It is a succinct argument for the importance of your study.  
  
**Theoretical Model (&/or Hypotheses):** This section may be titled Hypotheses, Purpose of the Study, Research Questions, or Theoretical Model or Framework, or some combination of these. Summarize how the literature review leads to your particular theoretical framework, hypotheses and/or research questions. Frequently this section includes a figure summarizing the relationships among the key variables in your study, or such a figure may go earlier, as a way of organizing the literature review.

**Methods of Procedure:** Explain IN DETAIL all the methodological information that applies to your project (e.g., the context within which your study will take place, how you will select participants, how many you anticipate (with a power analysis to suggest this number is adequate), how you will collect data, what measures you will use, with a justification for their adequacy, for example, based on their psychometric properties when used with similar samples in the past. If you are using secondary data, you should describe the sample’s characteristics and investigate the distributions of variables and the psychometric (measurement properties) of the measures. Put a copy of all instruments in the appendix.

**Approach to Data Analysis:** This section need not be long, but must clearly explain, step by step, how data will be analyzed. It should relate directly back to research questions or hypotheses and methods. (E.G., exploratory questions may suggest qualitative methods and analysis; group comparisons suggest some form of experimental design and analysis of variance; variable relationships across a whole sample or within groups suggest continuous measures and correlation/regression analyses.) Be as specific as possible, including what analytical procedures will be used, how missing data will be handled, what order will variables be considered (again, this should be consistent with the theoretical model), whether and what variable interactions will be tested, etc.  
  
The next 2 sections are important for the thesis, but will not be in the proposal.  
  
**Results** (including any tables or figures): Start with a brief rationale for how data were tabulated and analyzed. Explain any tables (e.g., frequency distributions) or figures (e.g., graphs, barcharts, scattergrams) and summarize the main findings. Tables and figures can be on separate pages at the end and should be clearly labeled, complete and self-explanatory.   
  
**Discussion:** Include both your basic conclusions and a general discussion of the implications of your project. What are the strengths and especially the weaknesses of your project? What are the limits to how much your findings can be generalized to other settings or populations? Tie your results to the literature: Have you answered any new questions or supported or contradicted any old findings? What are the implications for future research and for policy or practice?  
  
**References:** List complete information for all sources cited. You will probably need to use APA referencing style, but check with your committee chair, depending on the place you hope to publish your work. References must agree exactly with citations (nothing cited but unreferenced and nothing referenced that is not cited).  
  
**Appendices:** Include full text of informed consent forms, any measures used and other documentation (e.g., maps, etc.).

**Length.** A masters’ thesis, exclusive of appendices, should be article length, or about 25-40 DS pages. This means that a proposal, which does not include results or discussion, should be 10-15 pages shorter. The chances of your thesis being published, rather than gathering dust, go up as the length goes down.

**Course Schedule with Readings, Assignments, and Class Activities**

**1/13 Session 1 Overview; Introductions**

## Class Activities

Go over syllabus

Introductions: what is your thesis situation, what is your topic?

Discussion: advantages and disadvantages of:

1. Apprenticeship model
2. Using existing data

# **Assignments**

1. Post the following info re you & your tentative topic to Discussion Board by 1/18:
   1. Your Program
   2. Are you using this class to develop a Master’s thesis or something else [Masters project, Major Area Paper, Dissertation, Other? [If you are doing something other than a master’s thesis, please make an appointment to meet with me in the next week to talk about appropriate assignments for you.]
   3. Describe your topic or whatever possible topics or area you have in mind. (Be as specific as you can be at this point about your research questions.)
   4. Do you have a sponsor [faculty advisor or organization partner]? If yes, who?
   5. How involved is your sponsor in the project? Are you essentially working in apprenticeship mode as part of a larger project initiated by your sponsor? Have you talked a sponsor into working with you on an idea that is unrelated to his or her own work, or something in between?
   6. Have you identified a source of data? Will you use pre-existing data or collect new data? How secure is your access to the data you will use?
   7. Do you already have IRB (Vanderbilt human subjects cmte.) approval for your project?
2. Review all other students’ posted topics and bring to next class a rank ordering of them based on how familiar you are with each to help form feedback groups in next class

# **1/20 Session 2 Getting Organized, Selecting an Advisor and Committee**

Readings: Davis & Parker Preface, Chapters 1-4

Prilleltensky, I. Guidelines for planning and writing a thesis or dissertation (see online course outlines)

Student Handbook for your program: Requirements or guidelines for theses (or other focal project)

## Assignment

1. Think about questions for discussion below.
2. Be prepared to describe the thesis requirements for your program, and to ask any questions about expectations.

## Class Activities

Students will report on requirements for thesis in your program

Form groups for peer feedback

Discussion of readings

How do Davis & Parker’s and Prilleltensky’s guidelines apply to masters’ theses and MAPs?

What criteria are important to you in selecting an advisor? Why?

Are there any criteria that are less important to you? Why?

Are you the “ideal candidate”?

**1/27 Session 3 Selecting a Topic**

Readings: Davis & Parker Chapters 5-6

Recommended: Galvan Chapter 2, including activities

## Assignments

1. Post your refined topic to the OAK Discussion Board by 1/25. This should be one detailed paragraph with research questions or hypotheses that are as specific as possible.
2. Post comments on topic statements for your group.

## Class Activities

Discuss topic statements and comments on them.

Go over learning contracts as criteria for selecting a topic and site/data opportunity—See Files on OAK

2/3 Session 4 Literature Searches

Readings: Davis & Parker Chapter 7 & Appendix, 

Recommended: Galvan Chapter 3, Appendix A

Perkins, D. Reliability and Validity power point.

### Assignment

1. (Graded Assignment: 5%): Please do a literature search using at least 2 different library scholarly databases [eg, PsychInfo, Sociological Abstracts, Proquest, etc.] and multiple search terms in different combinations. Outline your search process, including commenting on the combination of search terms in which database you think worked best for your purposes. Save a file with the complete references & abstracts and either in that file or separately highlight which are the most important sources and note why.  
     
   To make it manageable and useful to you, aim for keeping the most relevant 20-30 hits from your search. A broad topic and search may yield hundreds of hits, so try to narrow the search or only keep the ones that are most important for your topic. A narrow or obscure topic may have few to no hits, in which case you should broaden the topic and expand your search until you get at least 10 or so hits. Post your results to the Discussion Board BEFORE CLASS. (Unlike other written assignments, this can be posted the morning of class.)  
     
   Note: You will be choosing one of those EMPIRICAL articles or chapters to review and critique in depth for your next assignment

## Class Activities

Discuss search assignments

Endnotes demo

If time and need, discuss reliability and validity power point

2/10 Session 5 Critical Reviews of Articles

Readings:

Recommended: Galvan Chapters 1 & 5 and activity 2 in Chapter 1

Perkins, D. Important writing tips. (The second part of this will be more relevant later)

### Assignment

### (Graded Assignment 10%). Pick one of the empirical articles from last week’s search and write a *critical* review of the article, following the critical review assignment posted in assignments. Post the critique and a pdf of the article to the Discussion Board by Monday before class.

## Class Activities

Discuss Galvan Chapter 1 activity 2

Discuss assignments

Reminder of differences between literature review for a thesis and for a stand-alone review

Revisit thesis topics

**2/17 Session 6 Synthesizing Literature I**

Readings: Davis & Parker Chapter 8

Recommended: Galvan Chapters 4, 6, 7, including activities

### Assignments

1. Review instructions for the lit review outline and examples of lit review matrices. Post a first draft of your lit review matrix (with topics and a sample article or two filled in) and your lit review outline on the discussion board by 2/15.
2. Post comments on matrices and outlines of others in your group.
3. Prepare to discuss your thesis topic in terms of Davis & Parker’s topic analysis

## Class Activities

Discuss outlines and matrices.

Review Davis & Parker Chapter 8 in light of (possibly revised) topics:

A. Identify & discuss for each student's topic: importance of topic, research gaps, theoretical frameworks or models, possible research questions & hypotheses, possible research methods, potential outcomes & implications of each for making a contribution to the literature.

B. Probability of successful completion: make 2 lists for your topic:

1. list expected chapters (dissertation) or sections (thesis)

2. list major activities & estimated time required

C. Probability of acceptance of thesis:

1. probability that each possible outcome will make a contribution to knowledge  
2. probability that committee will accept each result as a contribution

D. Review sections of proposal. Note: list (pp 89-92) omits Plan for Data Analysis

E. Review sections on narrowing, clarifying, feasibility of research and checklist

**2/24 Session 7 Synthesizing Literature II**

Readings:

Recommended: Galvan Chapters 8 - 9, including activities

### Assignments

1. (Graded Assignment 10 %) Review instructions for the lit review outline and examples of lit review matrices from last week. Revise and fill in your matrix. (This may or may not involve the same articles you used in your literature search – see additional instructions below.) Revise your lit review outline in light of any refinement of your topic or new understandings resulting from completion of matrix. Post final drafts of both by 2/22.
2. Post comments on matrices and outlines of others in your group.
3. Continue to think about your topic and research questions.

## Class Activities

Discuss how reading the literature has led you to modify or refine research questions.

Discuss the narrative structure of your literature review, and how it will serve as an argument or justification for your questions.

Draw a model that reflects your underlying theory.

**3/3 Session 8 Writing the Literature Review**

Readings:

Bem, D. J. (2003). Writing the empirical journal article. In J. M. Darley, M.P. Zanna, & H. L. Roediger III, (Eds) *The Compleat Academic:A Practical Guide for the Beginning Social Scientist, 2nd Edition*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <http://dbem.ws/WritingArticle.pdf>

Bem, D. J. (1995). Writing a review article for Psychological Bulletin. *Psychological Bulletin, 118,* 172-177.

Recommended: Galvan Chapter 10 - 11

### Assignments

1. Write a draft of your literature review and apply the guidelines in Chapters 9 and 10 to it. Consider Bem’s comments on how to write empirical and review articles. Post your draft to the Discussion Board by 3/1
2. Post comments on drafts of others in your group.

## Class Activities

Discuss literature reviews

Begin discussion of methods

\*\*\*\*\* Spring Break \*\*\*\*\*

**3/17 Session 9 Introduction and Theoretical Model or Hypotheses Sections**

Readings: Review Bem articles and Davis and Parker Chapter 8.

Assignments

1. Post introduction and the theoretical model or hypothesis sections of your proposal on the Discussion Board by 3/15.
2. Post comments on these sections for others in your group.
3. Think about the methodological approach you will take and discuss this with your advisor, in preparation for discussing in class.

Class Activities

Discuss Introductions and Models or Hypotheses

Discuss planned methods

**3/24 Session 10 Grants and Fellowships; Research Ethics, IRB approval**

Readings:

Davis & Parker Chapter 9

Perkins, D. Tips for grant getting

After considering the time line and possible costs of your research, search for grants and fellowships relevant to your topic. The following resources may be useful to you.

<http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/peabody/articles/guides/grants.html>  
  
<http://www.ssrc.org/fellowships/>

[http://www.grants.gov/](http://www.grants.gov/" \t "_new) including: Find grant opportunities-- All discretionary grants offered by the [26 Federal grant-making agencies](http://www.grants.gov/aboutgrants/agencies_that_provide_grants.jsp)  [Search grant opportunities now.](http://www.grants.gov/applicants/search_opportunities.jsp)   
  
[National Science Foundation](http://www.nsf.gov/)

[**Welcome to the Home of the Vanderbilt University Division of Sponsored Research**](http://search.vanderbilt.edu/cs.html?charset=iso-8859-1&url=http%3A//www.vanderbilt.edu/dsr/dsrhome.php&qt=sponsored+research&col=vudocs&n=1&la=en)

Resources compiled by other universities:

http://staff.lib.msu.edu/harris23/grants/3socsci.htm

<http://www.ors.duke.edu/find/student/grad/gradhumsoc.html>

Assignments

1. (Graded Assignment: 5%) Identify at least one very relevant funding source or multiple sources that may be more of a stretch.  Include any web links to the funding program description and discuss how the funding program fits your topic. Give an estimated grant/fellowship budget (incl. the total $ and how you would use the funds for your project, which can include stipend support if the source allows it).
2. If you have not already passed the IRB test, take the tutorial and test linked to the IRB website

Website: <http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/irb/>

Class Activities

Discuss research ethics in relationship to planned methods in each project.

Discuss grant search assignments and grant-writing and sources

**3/31 Session 11 Methods**

Readings

Any appropriate to your methodology

Assignments

1. Post a draft methods section to the Discussion Board by 3/29. This should include research participants, instruments, and procedures.
2. Post comments to colleagues in your group.
3. [IF NEEDED:] Schedule an appointment with instructor to discuss methods/data analysis

Class Activities

Discuss each student’s approach to methodology.

Discuss power analysis: How many participants do you need?

Discuss approach to data analysis (qualitative or quantitative)

**4/7 Session 12 Working with an Advisor and Committee, Managing Thesis Activities, Defense and Publishing**

Readings: Any appropriate to your data analytic strategy.

Davis & Parker, Chapters 10-12 \*\*\*CAVEAT: note misleading suggestion re "stats dept. providing analysis of data" [p. 114]-- DON'T expect anyone else to do your analyses\*\*\*

Assignments

1. Post abstract to the Discussion Board by 4/5
2. Comment on abstracts in your group.
3. Work on data analysis section and/or final draft

Class Activities

Discuss abstracts

Discuss Davis and Parker chapters

**4/14 Session 13 Data analysis sections and final proposal.**

Assignments

1. Post draft data analysis section to the Discussion Board by 4/12.

Class Activities

* 1. Discuss data analysis plans and sections and pulling the whole proposal together

**4/21 Session 14 Last class: Proposal defense presentation practice**

Assignments

1. Prepare a 10-15 minute overview of your proposal [power point optional] to present to the class as a rehearsal for the proposal defense

**4/28 Final proposals due**. See Sections above. For purposes of this class, the proposal, exclusive of references and appendices, should be 16- 24 DS pages, and in APA style unless you and your advisor have identified an alternative publication format.