ODI Dissertation Boot Camp: From ABD to PhD

Receiving a doctoral degree from The Ohio State University is the culmination of many years of time and effort. At Ohio State, the path to the PhD includes coursework, a candidacy examination, a dissertation, and a final oral examination. For some students, finishing their dissertation can become a daunting task. But for the 35 students who attended the first Office of Diversity and Inclusion Dissertation Boot Camp, writing (and finishing) their dissertation just got a little bit easier. The Boot Camp's aim was to provide PhD candidates from underrepresented groups with the space to work on their dissertations alongside other Ohio State students and faculty, helping those students kick-start their dissertations or continue writing chapters to complete their doctoral work.

The format for the three-day event, held at Deer Creek Lodge and Conference Center in Mt. Sterling, Ohio, consisted of time set aside to write, as well as time to ask questions of the ten Boot Camp Instructors who provided feedback and guidance. The instructor's disciplines included Biomedical Engineering, History, Political Science, and Education.

Narrowing down a topic and explaining jargon to readers can be the first stumbling block to writing the dissertation. At the Boot Camp, students were able to sit down with faculty to help sort out and organize their ideas. Natasha Woods, a PhD candidate in Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology remarked, “My Dissertation Boot Camp instructor, Dr. Gooch, helped me to go from scattered thoughts (some on paper, some still in my head) to an outline, and from an outline to a rough draft of my first manuscript! I feel more motivated and more hopeful about my dissertation than I have before.”

Even with an outline in place, just finding – or making – the time to write can be overwhelming. The quiet location of Deer Creek, along with set times for writing, provided participants the impetus for making significant headway on their work. “I was able to make such progress because the ODI Boot Camp provided me everything I needed: critical feedback from faculty in different fields, time and space to write without worries about anything, and a network of peers who were encouraging, supportive and invested in each other's success,” said Nicole Leach, who is working on a doctorate in Educational Psychology. Another student commented, “I appreciated the structure of the weekend. It was nice to know that all I had to worry about was my writing and nothing else.”

One participant stated how just having uninterrupted writing time scheduled was so beneficial: “I came with goals of brainstorming a new framework for my dissertation study and re-writing the literature review in my prospectus. I ended up completing that goal. In fact, I was so focused that I completed additional work I didn't intend on getting to, such as writing my Methods section and nearly completing my IRB application. I was able to do this because the ODI Boot Camp provided me everything I needed in terms of critical feedback from faculty in different fields, time
and space to write without worries about anything, and providing a network of peers who were encouraging, supportive and invested in each other’s success.”

Last, but not least, students who attended the Dissertation Boot Camp appreciated the support they received from their peers, leaving them with the understanding that they are not alone in this process. Natasha Woods remarked, “It was such a supportive and encouraging atmosphere. If I ever feel alone again in this process I will just remember the beautiful Saturday morning where so many students of color were sitting with their laptops writing their dissertations! It was a powerful image that will remain with me.”

ODI’s own Robert Bennett III, who just graduated in Spring 2013 with a PhD in History, stated, “It was good to see many of my peers overcome the psychological barriers to writing a dissertation. It is not an easy process, but the Boot Camp provides the needed support for all who seek to get done and move on to the next phase of their lives.” Another attendee said, “It was wonderful to connect with others who are sharing a similar experience. I left feeling like I was part of something bigger than myself—motivating!”

Valerie Lee, vice provost for Diversity and Inclusion, remarked about the Boot Camp, “Based on the large number of positive comments I have received, ODI’s first Dissertation Boot Camp was a huge success. I am glad that my office could provide a mentoring atmosphere that gave students the time to take a seed of an idea, nurture it with their curiosity, and watch that idea grow in ways they had never imagined or anticipated.”

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion plans to hold its Dissertation Boot Camp annually.