Overview of the Premise

Program Transcript

PETER ANDERSON: The premise is a document that students use at the beginning of their dissertation process.

DANIEL SALTER: I would say the doctoral study process starts pretty much the day that you enroll in the program, maybe even before. But at some point along the process, we ask you to get serious about it. And the premise is the first document that comes forward that says, I'm serious about this.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Dr. Daniel Salter is the director for strategic research initiatives in the Center for Research Quality at Walden University. Dr. Peter Anderson is a professor in Walden's college of Health Sciences. Dr. Salter and Dr. Anderson discuss the journey fulfilled by the premise.

PETER ANDERSON: An overview of the premise is that it provides the student an opportunity to present the basic idea of what they want to do for their research by establishing that there’s a gap in the literature, the specific area that they want to study, and that there's a justification for doing this research based on Walden's philosophy. And at Walden, as opposed to other universities, you have to be studying a real world problem that’s worthy of study that could lead to the potential for positive social change. So your premise helps you state that purpose of your study in such a way that you can find a faculty member who will want to mentor you through your research process.

DANIEL SALTER: When you build a house, you get all your carpenters and all these people lined up, and that's all part of the process. But at the very beginning, you've got to decide where you're going to build it. And the premise is about that. It's about where you're going to start.

So it's kind of getting you into the zip code so that we know where you are. And then we can find the builders and everybody to help you build the dissertation.

PETER ANDERSON: The questions the students should pose to a potential chair involve working style and relationships. Some students want a lot of contact with their chair, and some students don't want a lot of contact with their chair. Some students want to do everything through email in asynchronous reality, and other students want to be on the phone or Skype with their chair on a regular basis.

So it's important to work out some of those details. Then beyond that, I think it's important to know that the chair is excited about the research that you want to do so that the chair is fully invested and fully on board with your research ideas.

DANIEL SALTER: There are two questions you want to ask of your potential chair committee members. One of them is certainly about content. You want to
align with the content. You want them to have enough shared experience with your research area that you can talk about it and make some decisions about it.

The other piece is a little harder to see, and that's about process. There are a wide variety of students and how they approach their processes, equally wide variety of faculty. When I was a doctoral student, I like to have a lot of rope. I like to chase a lot of rabbits.

And my chair would let me go off and do that, and I'd come back and I'd be all done with it. Other students like to have that kind of weekly check in, smaller bites of the process. And that works for them. So you want to talk that over with your chair to make sure that everybody kind of agrees that this is how we're going to do this project.

PETER ANDERSON: Have some of your classmates or colleagues read your premise before you submit it to faculty members to ask them to be your chair so that you know that some outside reader can read this and have a clear idea of what it is you intend to study.

DANIEL SALTER: You know, faculty can smell something that's slapped together. They want to see you articulate your thoughts and that you can write. The other piece is doing your homework with the faculty person. A tactic that some students use is to send a barrage of emails at the faculty trying to find somebody and hope something falls out of the tree that'll work for them.

What you really want to do is do your homework about the faculty that you sent it to as well. We have the faculty expertise database, we have your advisors, the program people, other faculty you've met. It's got a lot of resources to find that person.

But send it to somebody who fits with you, that could work with you on your project. My research is in higher education. I mostly do research with adults. But every once in a while, someone will send me a premise that is about children.

Well, I don't know anything about children. So I have to wonder, did they not do any work here to figure out who I am as a faculty person. So do the homework on the document so that it's the best work you can do, but also that you're sending it to the right person.

PETER ANDERSON: The main shortcomings I see in student premise submissions are a lack of clear focus, a substantial clear iteration of the gap in the literature, and a fundamental, researchable idea. Students bring their passions to their premise, but they don't often bring a clear research question or idea to their premise.
DANIEL SALTER: The premises that I've looked at that have some challenges or have some work that need to be done typically have two types of problems. One of them is alignment. Alignment is about do all the parts fit together. Does this go with that?

Back to our house metaphor-- if you're telling me you want to build a house on the side of the hill so you can look out over the valley and see the mountains and everything, but then you come back and say, I want to build a one level ranch house on there, that's going to be a problem. Those two things don't align.

Same thing with your research. The beginning, the middle, and the end, and the story you want to tell, they all fit together, and the methodology aligned. So that's a big issue.

The other one is about approach to the project. A red flag, I think, for many faculty people is when a student says, I want to prove something, that I'm here to prove a point. What you want to be doing is taking a more objective view and saying,

I want to explore this point. I want to see both sides of it. Research has a way of teaching us some really hard lessons about what's really happening. And a student goes into it wanting to prove a point, that's not what research is about.

PETER ANDERSON: The important questions in developing a problem statement are what's the value and meaning of the research that I want to do, and how does that relate to Walden's mission and vision, and how can I best use this document to move myself forward in the dissertation process.

DANIEL SALTER: One of the biggest takeaways we've gotten from the prospectus process is that students don't recognize that it evolves as they go. And so the premise is just a starting place.

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