

# The Review

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## Dissertation, exam key to grad school success

By [Meghan O'Reilly](#)

In a small office buried in Willard Hall, Sarah Celestin, a graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. in educational leadership, waited apprehensively for the final decision. A few floors above her, five members of the dissertation committee evaluated the proposal she spent 10 months preparing.

"I was a nervous wreck," Celestin said. "She looked at me and was like, 'OK, don't worry.'"

If her proposal was approved, Celestin could continue the analysis for her final dissertation. If rejected, she would need to create a new proposal to receive her doctoral degree.

After she was summoned from the office by the dissertation chairwoman, she walked down the hallway, up the stairs and back to the presentation room that sealed her fate.

Her dissertation proposal had been approved.

"You're on your own," said Leonard Cassuto, a professor at Fordham University and former director of the English department's graduate studies, of the dissertation process. "You have an adviser, you have a committee, but you're the CEO of your own dissertation."

Cassuto wrote a series in October for the Chronicle of Higher Education about advising struggling dissertation students. A dissertation, an original treatise submitted by a student pursuing a doctoral degree, is the final step in graduate school, he said, which follows years of graduate seminars and a specialized comprehensive exam.

Having recently completing the required coursework, doctoral student Nermine Abd Elkader is preparing for the exam with extensive readings about the focus of her graduate studies, dialogic pedagogy, a teaching style that focuses on collaboration between students and teachers.

"You always question whether you'll be able to make it," Abd Elkader said. "'Am I going to finish?'"

Celestin said the amount of reading is the most difficult part of the exam process for her.

"Classes, research, literature review—it's just so much reading," she said. "You just read and read and read and read, but it helps you get an idea of what kind of information you're going to put into your dissertation."

Once a student passes the exam, he or she proposes a topic to a dissertation committee, which consists of an adviser, a committee chair and two or more members who are knowledgeable about different aspects of the candidate's research topic. If the committee accepts the proposal, the student is eligible to gather research and data for a final dissertation.

"You're always trying to get some sort of approval," Abd Elkader said. "Even after you finish your research, you need approval from a journal for publication, but the approval is what's rewarding. It's like your hard work has been paid off."

In many cases, graduate students complete service work that pertains to their field of expertise, which leaves them less time to work on their dissertations. Celestin works full time at the university's Center for Disabilities Studies, and her participation in a statewide teacher training program also consumes some of her evenings.

"It's really stressful balancing work and my dissertation," she said. "Sometimes I just want to get work done for it, and I only have so many hours to devote to it because of work. I just wish I had more time."

To avoid falling behind, Celestin allocates six to eight hours per week to work on her thesis.

Like Celestin, Abd Elkader believes in following timelines, but she said she will not allow it to dictate her course as a Ph.D. student for fear of burning out too early.

"I have a plan A, and I have a plan B," she said. "It's not just a haphazard process. You have to know when you want to be done because otherwise you'll never finish."

Celestin said she intends to keep working diligently, especially because her proposal was accepted by the committee. She knows many people who had trouble completing their dissertations, she said, because they viewed the committee's approval at the beginning of the writing process as an opportunity for a hiatus and a guarantee for a final dissertation.

"When you're the CEO, you could put your feet up if you want," Cassuto said. "No one is checking if you punched the clock."