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In Search of a Dissertation Committee:Using a Qualitative Research Approach to Study a Lived Experience

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Abstract

This paper tells a personal story of one student's experience. I am a doctoral candidate and qualitative researcher in a Family Therapy program located in South Florida. In this project, I discuss how I took a qualitative research posture toward the making of an important decision in my life, and in my academic career: Choosing a dissertation committee. The paper is a narrative of how I went about using qualitative research methods and sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991) to "study" my way through the process of this unique experience.

Keywords

qualitative research

In Search of a Dissertation Committee: Using a Qualitative Research Approach to Study a Lived Experience

by

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This paper tells a personal story of one student's experience. I am a doctoral candidate and qualitative researcher in a Family Therapy program located in South Florida. In this project, I discuss how I took a qualitative research posture toward the making of an important decision in my life, and in my academic career: Choosing a dissertation committee. The paper is a narrative of how I went about using qualitative research methods and sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991) to "study" my way through the process of this unique experience.

Ellis and Bochner (1992, p. 79) stated that the act of telling a personal story "is a way of giving voice to experiences that are often private." Sandelowski (1991) has discussed how, in qualitative research, narrative stories can be understood as an effort to render significance to someone's personal experiences in a plausible way. This paper is a personal narrative which will give the reader an idea of my experience as I took on the role of "researcher" to better understand a phenomenon I knew little about. The paper, through the voice of the researcher/author, also tells a story of the people involved: the faculty members who were "participants" in my "study". Their involvement in this project, particularly their willingness to answer my queries, address my curiosities, and share their experiences, is what made this story possible to tell. Their subsequent reviewing of this manuscript permitted me the freedom to tell it.

The paper is not intended as a formal qualitative study. Rather, it is an introspective examination (Ellis, 1991) of my experience with the use of qualitative research methods. Examples of this utilization are present throughout the paper. For example, there is a particular problem which is studied, and there is also a grand-tour question (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972) organizing the data gathering process. The "problem" was the requirement of choosing a dissertation committee. The "grand-tour question" was "What are the most important qualities to have in a dissertation committee?" This question was studied through the use of qualitative research methods such as open-ended interviewing and participant observation, as well as the method of sociological introspection. In the paper I share some of the information I gathered, as well as notes about my ongoing experience.

Taking a Research Posture

In the summer of 1995, at the end of my second year in the Ph.D. program at Nova Southeastern University, I officially became a Doctoral Candidate when I passed my qualifying exam. This allowed me to begin the dissertation process formally. It was time to choose a chairperson and a

committee. In our program, there is a minimum of three faculty members on each dissertation committee. The choice is up to the student, although members must agree to be on the committee.

Although I had been trained in quantitative methods as an undergraduate as well as in my Master's program, qualitative research is what is stressed in my doctoral program. These faculty members are primarily from qualitative approaches; they chair dissertation committees which are qualitatively-based and they are well-versed in this perspective. Given this, I knew I would not have to contend with any potential paradigm or methodological clashes between future committee members; I did not have to base any choice I might make on either "qualitative" or"quantitative" faculty members. It simply was not an issue; my dissertation would be a qualitative project, my committee would support this, and virtually any faculty person could participate.

I was excited to have passed my qualifying exam and begin this choosing process, but since I had never seriously considered who I would choose, I did not feel prepared to make a decision. This surprised me; I had expected the choosing to be an easy process. It wasn't. I realized I had no idea how to get started on the process. I was not sure what it meant to work with a committee and a chairperson on a dissertation, and I was confused and overwhelmed with all of it.

Since I felt that I had a good relationship with most of the faculty in my program, but did not feel committed to anyone in particular, it wasn't clear to me who should be on the committee. For instance, I had never really focused my attention on working with just one faculty person. In fact, I had collaborated with several faculty members on projects such as academic papers, conference workshops, or class lectures. Each experience and relationship was different and rewarding; I didn't know which experience was most well-suited for the process of doing a dissertation. It was confusing to me; I had lots of questions.

Fortunately, I had just completed my first qualitative research project a few weeks earlier, and I had really enjoyed the chance to be curious about something which was new and interesting to me. I thought that this kind of research process might be a good way to figure out who I would put on my committee. It made sense to go "out in the field" and openly explore some of my questions. I decided to begin by interviewing some of the faculty I was considering for the committee.

In the previous research project on which I had worked, at a county medical examiner's office, I had really enjoyed doing ethnographic interviews and just being "out in the field" observing and talking with the people I met. I found it fascinating to interview participants about their experiences, watch them work, and learn about their "routine daily life" (Fetterman, 1989).

These field experiences were rewarding in themselves, but now they became very relevant to me in a different way. The research process was a way I could learn more about the "culture" of dissertation life. I was interested in generating as much data as I could about my grand-tour question. I wanted to learn more about the daily routines of doing a dissertation, of being on a committee, and how those "in the culture" went about their work. I was most interested in the dissertation process from the committee's point of view. That is, I wanted to conjecture myself

into the culture of a committee and find out from that perspective what it would be like to work with one eventually. I also wanted to learn more about faculty members' experiences of being a dissertation chair or on a dissertation committee.

The Field of a Dissertation Committee

I gathered data through various methods, including participant observation and open-ended interviewing. I took careful notes on what these experiences were like for me. In sampling for the interviews, I decided to focus on the faculty members about whom I was most curious. These were people who I suspected would play an important, but as yet unknown, role in my dissertation, and who I felt I needed to know more about before I could make a final decision.

It is important to say that there were faculty members I did not interview. I went into this research process not knowing who would be chosen, but with a clear idea about whom and what I was most inquisitive. There were several reasons why I was able to start ruling out some faculty members. In some cases, I had worked with the person intensely on another project and wanted to experience someone new. In other cases, I had not worked with the person at all, and I couldn't imagine introducing a dissertation into our relationship. In an unusual case, I had already worked with a person on a previous research project and had so enjoyed that person's involvement that I was ready to ask her to sit on the committee. I felt I did not need to interview this person.

Gathering the Data

I interviewed and observed several persons on the faculty. In a sense, they were all my participants. As I considered myself taking a research posture rather than conducting a formal research study, the faculty members were not told that they were "participants," that they were being observed, or that our interview was part of any study. I was just gathering information in order to make a decision. This was how I thought of what I was doing.

What faculty members were told was that I was interviewing people for the purpose of putting my dissertation committee together, and that I was interested in talking to them about the dissertation process. If I was considering them for the position of committee chair, I felt comfortable telling them so. This was important to do, as it allowed me the freedom to ask lots of questions about "chair-ing" issues. I had lots of questions about the roles of committee chair and committee member.

I also interviewed a faculty member who I considered as a kind of consultant to my choosing process. I knew he had worked on over twenty dissertations and had valuable information about how dissertation committees work. Although each of these different interviews provided a variety of data, the same grand tour question (What do you think are the most important qualities to have in a dissertation committee?) was asked in the beginning of all interviews and oriented each of the discussions.

I also observed my participants "in action", either while in class or in clinical practicum. I began to read and re-read their written work, and with a more discerning eye. In some cases, I read the faculty member's dissertation. When I observed them as professors, I was specifically watching

how each interacted with students. I had the following kinds of questions in mind during my observations:

- How did they address student's questions?
- How comfortable were they with tangential discussions?
- If a question seemed irrelevant or unclear, how did they respond?
- How did they express their ideas to others?
- How focused were they on the content they were discussing?
- What was interesting to me about this person's particular teaching style?
- What didn't I like about his or her style?

In my observations, I noticed that despite having very different teaching styles, each respondent was an attentive teacher. They were patient and humorous, and even entertaining. No student's question seemed irrelevant or inappropriate to them; they were all good at answering questions (I wanted people like this on my committee) and used a variety of ways to convey information. In one case, a respondent described the dissertation process to a classroom of students using a vivid metaphor about constructing a house with various rooms, all connecting in some way and built on a strong foundation. It was captivating to listen to, and it got me really interested in his ideas.

Practical Questions

In the interviews, I had various questions to ask my participants, all of which stemmed from the grand tour question but most of which were thought up during the interview process. After a while I noticed a pattern to the questions. There were practical questions I asked, such as:

- Are you available?
- Do you have time for me?
- How much time do I need with you?
    - If you are on the committee?
    - If you are the chair?
-
- How many committees do you chair?
- What do you think is a reasonable time frame for completing a dissertation?

Most everyone stated they were available and able to meet, but in one case, a respondent had applied for a sabbatical leave which would take place at some point during my dissertation. We discussed this indepth in the interview, as it was obviously a big concern of mine. We talked about what would happen during the sabbatical, such as what kind of contact we might have, and how we would continue a dissertation relationship once the sabbatical ended. We also discussed how the faculty member was preparing current dissertation students for the sabbatical.

Athough there were no definite answers to my questions, I left the interview feeling comfortable that the sabbatical would not necessarily mean a rude interruption to my dissertation. Obviously it was something to deal with, but the participant managed to communicate to me with some certainty that it didn't have to be a sabbatical for me as well. This was very helpful and

reassuring. If I had somehow heard otherwise, either directly or indirectly, I would have had to rule this person out as a potential chair of the committee.

Questions about Roles

I asked participants how they saw the different roles of chair and committee members. I asked how they expected a student to work with a committee during the dissertation process. Would they mind if I met with my committee often? If they were the chair, would they expect me to work with them exclusively and not involve the committee until the proposal defense? These questions helped me learn more about how the person might work with others on a committee. I was able to peek into how flexible and collaborative they might be with other members. I also began to sense how the relationship with my chair would be necessarily different (and likely more intense) than my relationship with committee members. This was useful information because I really didn't know what to expect from these different relationships, and now I had some idea of what it would be like.

Content Questions

Athough I didn't know exactly what I was going to study for my dissertation, I definitely had some ideas. Some of the faculty knew of these ideas, but others did not. I told each respondent a little about my research interests and also what I thought I might end up studying. Then I asked their general opinion of the content area I was interested in. Since I expected to do a study on a topic area outside of traditional family therapy, answers to these content questions were very important to me.

I asked one respondent about this in a different way. I asked about the importance of the committee chair being well-read in the field to be studied by the student. My respondent commented that this was important, but it could be handled in different ways, such as other committee members being considered the expert in the content area. He also suggested that the chair be generally familiar with the topic area or at least be the methodology expert. This was new information. I did not consider any of the participants an expert in my likely content area, but I thought all were generally familiar with it, and all seemed to be well-read in qualitative research methodologies. My respondent's comments helped me know I was on the right track, but again, I wasn't any closer to making a decision.

Questions about the Faculty Member's Dissertation

In some cases the interviews gave me an opportunity to form more relevant and more specific questions. For example, I asked one respondent if he thought it was possible to work well with a chair who had a different therapy orientation than that of the student. He was silent for a moment and said yes, he thought it was, but that it was important that both chair and student shared the same idea of what made a good research project. This was something I had not thought about and was useful information which influenced my research efforts.

For example, I did not really know what each respondent thought was a good research project. I had never asked this directly. The faculty member's answer made me curious about each

respondent's previous research efforts, including their own dissertations. Besides asking about the content and history of their past projects, I also found myself asking what the dissertation process was like for them as students. These were some of the questions I asked:

- Can you tell me about some of the research projects you have worked on?
- How did you go about picking your chair?
- How did you go about picking your committee?
- What was it like for you to do your dissertation?
- What kind of influence did your chair/committee have on you during the process?
- After the dissertation process?
- How long did it take you to do your dissertation?
- Was your mentor also your dissertation chair?

These kinds of questions brought very interesting responses. I gleaned much from my participants about their style of working on a big project, how they learned from their mentors, and what kinds of research interests they had. I was very impressed with their stories. I have to say I did not expect this! Each of them articulated very well to me how their dissertation was a process of personal and professional growth for them. In a very unique way, their stories helped me to see into the future of my dissertation experience. It also helped me get an idea of how they might work with me and what stories I would eventually tell about my own dissertation. For example, one participant told me that he had done much of his actual writing during a period in which he had also ignored most other aspects of his life. He was on a roll and he went with it, writing all day and most nights, stopping once in a while for a bite to eat or a little sleep. It was during this period when the bulk of his writing was done. I liked this story. Given my long-time interest in the content area I planned to study, I suspected that my final writing process might take on a similar bent.

In another case, one participant had written his dissertation in an area of family therapy which I knew little about. We had shared many intellectually stimulating conversations together about our ideas of therapy, despite our theoretical differences. It occurred to me that I wanted to read his dissertation, and he graciously lent me his copy. This was a way to gather more data from him and "triangulate" what I already knew. Triangulation has been described in literature as the combination of several different data sources (Denzin, as cited in Kimchi, Polivka, & Stevenson, 1991, p. 364).

Reading the dissertation turned out to be a good move. Though I wasn't familiar with some of the language used in the study, I found I was interested in spite of myself. I read it in one sitting. The topic was original and the writing was clear. It was obviously a well-done project. I especially appreciated the concluding remarks, which were forthright, but in a careful way. There was no attempt to interpret or generalize too much from the data. I liked this very much. I had been certain that I would not like the study because of my assumptions about the content, and that I would then be able to make a decision. This was not the case; after reading the study, I had a clear sense that this participant and I shared the same idea of what made a good research project.

Questions about Our Dissertation Relationship

I wanted to know how participants saw the dissertation process with our previous working relationship in mind. I asked their impressions about the work we had done as faculty and student, and how a dissertation may or may not resemble that. This part of the interview took the form of a reflective discussion, in which the respondent and I talked about what our experience together had been like in the program so far. We talked about what we each enjoyed and appreciated about the other, and in some cases, what areas of difficulty or tension we had experienced in our relationship, and how we viewed that now.

These were very rewarding discussions, and I felt that they were the start of a different kind of relationship between us. In having these discussions it seemed I was placing myself more in the role of a future peer of theirs, and less in the role of student. It was a different kind of conversation than what I was used to having with them. These discussions were one of the most rewarding parts of my research, as well as a tangible way to recognize I was taking an important step in my educational development.

Introspective Questions

At this point in the project, several weeks had passed. I was still "soaking up" information like crazy. I was learning so much, and yet it didn't seem like making a choice was getting any easier. Instead, it seemed to be getting harder! I had plenty of information, but I still was unsure who would make up the final committee. Feeling overwhelmed with data, I e-mailed my consultant and asked my grand tour question of him for the first time. His response started the process of my self-investigation, and it occurred to me that the "data bits" I had collected so far would not dictate my final decision. The information itself was not going to provide an answer. I had to make sense of the data in some coherent way. For that, my consultant suggested, I had to be more "overt" about what it is that I needed in a relationship with a dissertation committee and with a chairperson. My consultant said I should closely consider my own situation and personal needs.

Thus, my initial grand tour question of "What do you think are the most important qualities to have in a dissertation committee?" was refined, and ended up being more specific and personal: "What are the most important qualities for *me* to have in *my* dissertation committee?" Here are a few of his comments, taken from a hard copy of our e-mail exchange:

"The dissertation is only a part of the picture albeit a major feature. Your chair can also be your mentor, someone who can help you take the next few steps in your career. . . . The dissertation process can be a very intense one so you want to be able to feel comfortable with your chair. Of course there will be times when both sides feel stressed out with the process. . . . If you know a faculty person now and feel like you can talk to that person, then you have a good sense that the relationship part of chairing is there."

My consultant also suggested the kind of relationship I might want with my chair, academically as well as personally:

"You want the chair to bring experiences and expertise which will add to yours and at the same time, you want to have some simpatico with the person too."

He also asked the following questions of me, which started my process of self-investigation:

- What are my needs?
- What sorts of things do I need in a relationship?
    - Space?
    - Support?
    - Guidance?
    - Freedom?
    - Security?
- What is my timeline for completing the dissertation?
- What do I want to do after my dissertation?
    - Academia?
    - Private Practice?
    - A combination?

These were excellent questions because they forced me to be clear about what I needed in the dissertation experience, and what my expectations were during a dissertation as well as after graduation. I had learned enough about "committee life" to begin acknowledging my part in the committee process and think more openly about my tacit knowledge.

This kind of personal investigation and self-introspection (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992) contributed to my ability to "apprehend and adjust to the phenomena-in-context, also enabling the emergence of theory which can not be otherwise articulated" (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p. 208). At this point in the study, my lived experience and ideas became part of the inquiry and necessary for a more complete analysis. My research question was thus refined; in my inquiry of how to pick a committee, I couldn't ignore what I would be bringing to the dissertation process. I couldn't ignore my personal and professional experiences. I had to be my own respondent.

There were pretty obvious things I had to admit in order to address my consultant's questions and begin a process of introspection. The interviews had provided enough information for me to better understand what a dissertation committee did and what a chairperson's responsibilities were. Now I had to think about what I needed in those relationships. What kind of dissertation student was I likely to be? What were my goals? What were my expectations? Here are some of the thoughts I remember having at the time:

I had moved from Texas to Florida to attend the Ph.D. program at Nova, and I was very eager to finish the degree and get on with my life. I needed a committee who would help me complete the process but who would not take my motivation for granted and would push me to work harder and reach farther. I needed a chair who could challenge and surprise me into doing things I never thought possible. I needed a committee who was always accessible, yet also comfortable with not hearing from me when I couldn't be bothered because things were rolling along just fine without them. I needed committee members who were experts on qualitative research but could talk to me about it in an understandable way. I needed a committee who was willing to risk exploring my ideas, and could speak authentically and legitimately about those ideas, despite their sometimes unusual nature. I knew I wanted an academic career someday; I needed people who could help me develop into a prolific writer, teacher, and researcher. I needed a committee who

had experience guiding other students through long projects. I needed to be, as my consultant said, "simpatico" with my chairperson: For instance, during a dissertation meeting, I needed to be comfortable enough to either revel in the excitement of my project or be openly miserable when I felt stuck.

Openly thinking these thoughts allowed me to experience a kind of self-aware conversation (Rambo Ronai, 1992) about my ongoing experience. I wanted to talk with someone about what I was going through, similar to a peer review and dialogue with interested associates in qualitative research (Wolcott, 1994). The peer review is a process by which the reflexiveness of the research can be achieved. It is a means of expansion of the data.

In order to do this, I had a long conversation with a close friend who has seen me complete two college degrees and knows first-hand my style of learning and working. In our talk, I examined with him some of the data gathered from my interviews, observations, and my recent self-introspection.

How the Data Made Sense

Through our conversation and my re-viewing of the data, I remarked to my friend that this process of choosing a committee was not unlike hiring someone for a position. It felt like I was hiring a committee and a chairperson to guide me through the dissertation. I needed to find the right combination of people for it to work. The data gathering process had helped me learn more about the committee I needed to have. The self-introspection process had contributed an important piece to the rest of the data collected earlier.

Analyzing all of this information helped me to theorize inductively about what I had learned, and I started to see patterns, grounded in the data I had collected in interviews, observations, and self-introspection. This is what ethnography involves; it is a search for patterns through analysis, which can evolve from a mass of collected information into a distinctive thought or idea (Fetterman, 1989).

The mass of information began to make sense in a distinct way. There were certain requirements and preferred qualities I was looking for in the committee. There were expectations that I had. A profile of the committee I thought would fit me best had developed. Later on that evening, after the talk with my friend, I came up with the following "theory" about what the data had "spoken" to me:

Wanted: Dissertation Committee

Doctorate in Family Therapy or related field required. This is approximately a two-year commitment, although positions can range from one to five years. Previous experience helpful, but not required. Expertise in systemic thinking, qualitative research, and academic writing absolutely necessary. Interest in student's content area (general now but to be refined later) extremely helpful. Sense of humor, creativity, and ability to generate visionary ideas necessary for this position. Members must be authoritative yet collaborative, patient yet assertive, and inspirational yet practical. Must be accessible in case of emergency (such as writer's block, flight

of ideas, or delusions of grandeur), yet able to "back off" and provide "space" when necessary. Benefits are not guaranteed; however, benefit potential (in admiration, gratitude, and productivity) is great.

I had collected the data not knowing exactly what I would find out. This is a tenet of qualitative research. The data helped me clarify what the "job" of my committee members would be, what qualities I needed in members, and who had the best "fit" for the position. The field data and personal information which I had gathered, assimilated, and tried to make sense of was there for me to see. A pattern was clear as I looked at my want ad and compared it with the data I had gathered. It became evident to me what my committee should look like, and who I would ask to chair it.

Discussion

Although there is always a general question guiding the qualitative research process, more specific questions arise after some data has been collected. In this paper, I started with the question: "What are the most important qualities to have in a dissertation committee?" This question helped me get important information, and it was a good starting place. However, a more specific question soon emerged. I realized I didn't need to know about just any dissertation committee; I needed to know the best qualities I needed in my committee. Positioning myself as a researcher was a helpful way for me to gather the data I needed to make an informed, comfortable, and very personal decision.

As an unexpected benefit, the researcher's posture helped me learn more about the faculty members I interviewed, and in a different way than I had as a student in their classes. I felt a sense of freedom to be curious as a researcher which I had not experienced in quite the same way as a student. I realized this difference when I told other students about my ongoing project. For example, I told a fellow student (who had not yet chosen a committee) about some of the different kinds of questions I was asking in the interviews. She joked that it sounded like an interrogation. I was taken aback, and wondered silently to myself if I had overstepped a boundary and perhaps gone overboard with the questioning. I knew the interviews had been intense in some ways, but I always left with a good feeling about the process. I decided to check it out. In an e-mail message in which I followed up with a respondent, I thanked him for his time and added a sly comment that I hoped he hadn't felt "too interrogated" by me. It was meant as a sort of apology, and I didn't really expect him to address it. To my surprise, he wrote back that he had not felt interrogated at all, and added that I had asked "excellent questions."

Concluding Remarks

Choosing a dissertation committee is an extremely complex and very personal decision. My experience as a qualitative researcher was an important asset in helping me approach this unique situation and make sense of my experience in the process. I understand that others may make this decision with different ideas in mind. I found that this was a useful and interesting hat to wear as I lived through the making of this important decision. I chose my committee shortly after I wrote the want ad. Although it was difficult to choose among several exceptional candidates, I feel quite settled and very comfortable with my decision even now, ten months later, as I complete

this manuscript. Back then, I was just happy to make a decision about which finally I felt good. I was lucky to have found and hired the right committee, and the right chair, and that each had accepted their position graciously. An excerpt from my journal on the day I picked my chair shows my early excitement about finally making the decision:

I am so thrilled right now. I met with Douglas today and I felt so honored and sincere, and I knew that I had made the right decision. I told him nothing at first. I just started talking about what the last few weeks had been like for me. I told him about this paper, about my interviews, and about how I had taken a researcher's hat toward the process of choosing a committee and a chair. When I did actually ask him, I said, "I would like very much if you would be my chair". . . he said, "Oh", as if I had surprised him. Suppose it is possible that he didn't expect it, since I talked about how difficult the decision was, and how much I had worked on it. He told me he was honored. I told him I was honored that he would even consider it, because I knew he didn't have to. WOW!!! I am so thrilled . . . . I can't even begin to realize it. When it was over, I asked him, So can I assume we have a done deal? He whipped out his hand, and we shook real hard. It was funny because I was planning to shake it anyway. So I am totally high right now. I have come down a little bit, but I truly feel I made the right choice. I just think that we are going to have a very good working relationship. I am really excited about doing this dissertation. I feel nervous, but in a good way. He really seems to grasp my situation . . . Well, enough excitement for now. Let me come back to this after a while, especially when I get really frustrated with him! It'll be nice to reflect on today. It's December 12, 1995.

This paper shows how taking a research posture was a useful way for me to go about choosing my dissertation committee. The methods of qualitative research allowed me to "discover" things about a culture which I was getting ready to enter but was not yet a part of. The culture included the thoughts and ideas of my future committee, as well as my own experiences and expectations as a student. I discussed how qualitative methods such as open-ended interviewing and participant observation helped me gather important information.

In this paper I also explored how the process of sociological introspection was used as a technique to explore the contribution I was making to the process. The introspection helped me be more "overt" about my situation, and thus helped me complete the research process. Both methods allowed me to thoroughly immerse myself in the culture of a dissertation committee without having to actually be immersed in the dissertation process. The research posture helped me organize my curiosity as well prepare me to work with my dissertation committee.

Author Notes

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2. The author's dissertation committee includes the following faculty members in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University, School of Social and Systemic Studies: Dr. Christopher Burnett, Dr. Ronald J. Chenail, Dr. Douglas Flemons, and Dr. Shelley Green. Dr. Flemons is the chairperson.

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