

Supporting Graduate Students

Crafting the Dissertation

Through Open Educational Resources
and Strategic AI Integration

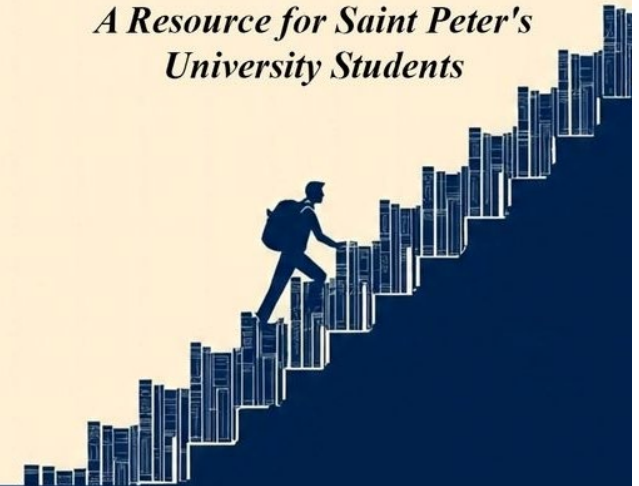
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Caulfield School of Education
Saint Peter's University

 saintpeters.pressbooks.pub/dissertationguide/

CRAFTING THE DISSERTATION

*A Resource for Saint Peter's
University Students*



DRS. MARTIN AND NICHOLE LAGROW

Saint Peter's University & Dissertation Seminar I

The Program Environment



Caulfield School of Education

Dissertation Seminar I is the pivotal launching point for doctoral candidates, setting the trajectory for their research.



Our Students

Many are first-generation college students and working professionals. They bring rich experience but often need explicit academic scaffolding.



Critical Need

Concise, task-aligned guidance directly mapped to the dissertation guide, rather than abstract theory.



DIVERSE RESEARCH TOPICS

Our cohort includes K-16 educators, administrators, and leaders investigating a wide range of systemic issues. One-size-fits-all textbooks rarely address their specific contexts.

The Problem We Identified



Overwhelming Resources

Students felt paralyzed by a dense, 700-page research text that lacked clear direction or connection to their specific tasks.



Limited Feedback Loops

Delayed or sparse instructor feedback in the seminar course created anxiety and stalled momentum during critical drafting phases.



Need for Scaffolding

First-generation and less experienced scholars often lack the "hidden curriculum" knowledge needed to navigate dissertation milestones.



Access & Equity Barriers

High-cost commercial materials create financial burdens, often without delivering proportional value or relevance to the specific program.

RESULT: Stalled progress, inconsistent quality, and reduced student confidence.

Graduate students often struggled with limited instructor feedback and overwhelming information in a process that should be iterative and recursive.

The Reality

Why Generic Resources Fell Short

❌ Previous Approach

The "Standard" Textbook Model

Dense & Unused

A 700-page generic research tome with **no assigned readings** or clear use-cases for the actual dissertation tasks.

Misaligned

Disconnected from our program's specific milestones, rubrics, and the critical Chapter 1 & 2 requirements.

High Cost, Low Value

Created financial barriers while offering minimal impact on actual student progress or confidence.



✅ What Students Needed

The Tailored OER Solution

Milestone-Aligned

Direct guidance specifically mapping to **Introduction & Literature Review** chapters required in Seminar I.

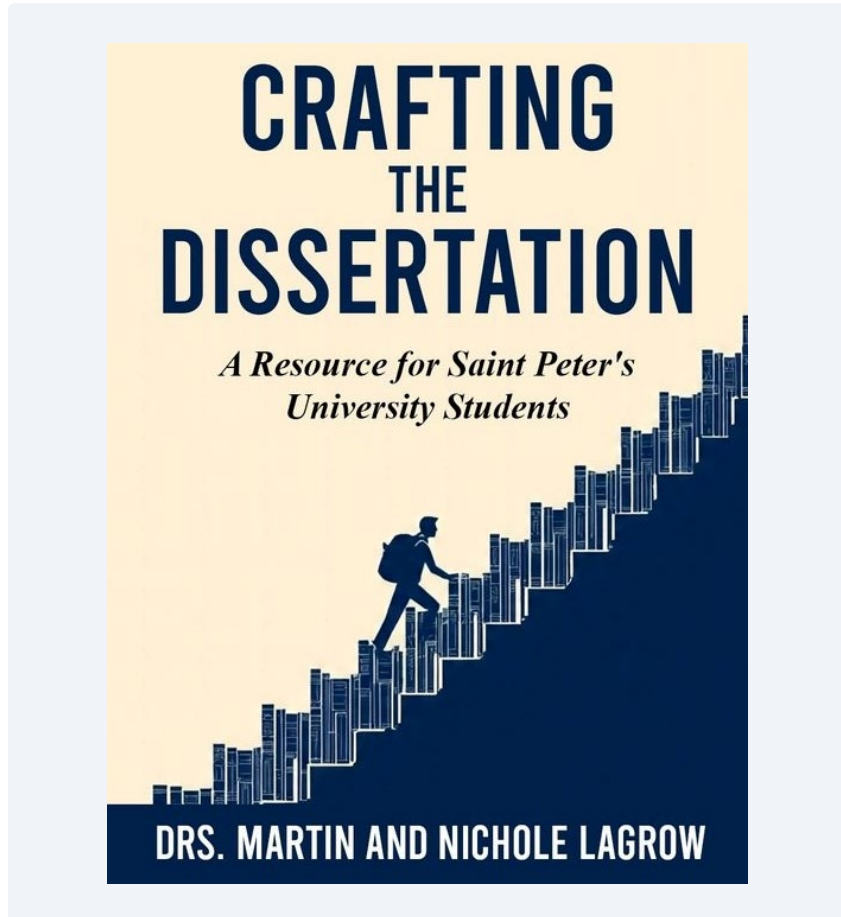
Practical Tools

Plain-language checklists, annotated exemplars, and writing prompts that demystify the "hidden curriculum."

Accessible & Right-Sized

Free, immediately accessible, and focused only on what is essential for their current stage of research.

Crafting the Dissertation: A Tailored OER



What It Is

An open, **no-cost textbook** specifically tailored to align with Saint Peter's University's dissertation guide and program milestones.



Strategic Focus

Deep-dive guidance on the critical hurdles of Seminar I: **Chapter 1 (Introduction)** and **Chapter 2 (Literature Review)**.



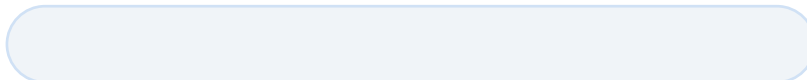
Embedded Scaffolding

Includes writing prompts, case study scenarios, strategies for research and writing, and lots of examples.



Access & Licensing

Available in web, print, and accessible formats via Pressbooks. Licensed under **CC BY-NC-SA**.



Co-Authoring From Practice, Not Theory

We built this resource by listening to our students first. Our practitioner-to-practitioner approach ensured the content addressed **authentic needs** rather than abstract concepts.

1. Gather Authentic Questions

Collecting real challenges and confusion points directly from mentees and seminar discussions.



2. Practitioner Voice Drafting

Writing with concrete tasks and plain language, intentionally defining academic jargon.



3. Pilot with Students

Testing materials in live courses and incorporating real-time student feedback loops.



4. Align & Publish

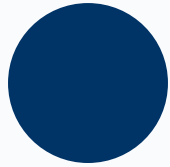
Mapping final content to the program guide and building the living document in Pressbooks.



EQUITY & CLARITY OUTCOME

By moving away from "theoretical" textbook writing to "scaffolded" support, we demystified the hidden curriculum in a way that respects our students' time and experience.

Library Partnership & Assessment



Partnership

A grant-funded project formally linking faculty creation with institutional library expertise.

Library Support Roles:

- OER Hosting & Metadata
- Accessibility Reviews
- Platform Training
- Formal Assessment Design



Assessment of Impact

IRB-Exempt Formal Surveys



Usability & Clarity

Measuring student perception of navigation and content clarity.



Time-to-Feedback

Evaluating efficiency gains in the drafting process.



Confidence

Assessing preparedness for dissertation milestones.



Cost Savings

Direct financial impact of zero-cost textbook adoption.

Impact and Benefits So Far



Clarity & Speed

Students report significantly **clearer expectations** and navigate the initial "blank page" paralysis much faster.

- ✓ **Faster starts on drafts**



Equity & Access

Eliminates high textbook costs completely, ensuring **immediate access** for every student from day one.

- ✓ **Zero financial barrier**



Enhanced Mentoring

Basic formatting questions are answered by the text, freeing faculty time for **deeper conceptual discussions**.

- ✓ **High-value contact time**



The "Living Document" Advantage

Unlike static print textbooks, we continuously update the OER as our program requirements evolve and based on new student feedback—keeping the material permanently relevant and aligned.

Guidance for Appropriate Use

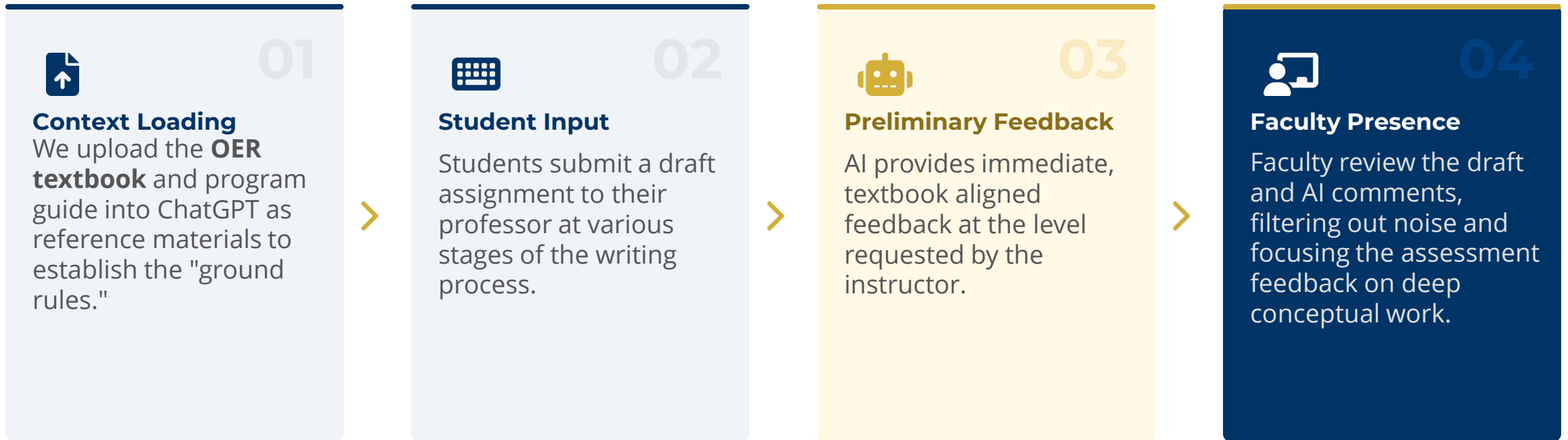
✓ DO (Allowed)

- ✓ **Brainstorm & Refine**
Use AI to sharpen problem statements, generate potential research questions, and clarify terminology.
- ✓ **Structure & Outline**
Draft logical outlines for chapters aligned specifically to the OER's recommended structure.
- ✓ **Technical Support**
Get APA 7 formatting assistance and surface-level grammar checks (always verifying output).
- ✓ **Self-Assessment**
Use rubric-aligned prompts to critique your own drafts before faculty review.

✗ DON'T (Not Allowed)

- ✗ **Generate Core Text**
Do not use AI to write original paragraphs of the dissertation or replace your scholarly voice.
- ✗ **Fabricate Data/Sources**
Never rely on AI for citations without verification—hallucinated references are academic dishonesty.
- ✗ **Bypass Ethics/IRB**
AI cannot replace ethical review processes or make determinations about human subjects research.
- ✗ **Hide Usage**
Do not conceal the use of AI tools; transparency and proper disclosure per policy are mandatory.

Feedback Workflow Using the OER



CRITICAL SAFEGUARDS



Human-in-the-Loop: AI never has the final word.



No AI Grading: Assessments remain strictly faculty-led.



Privacy First: No uploading of sensitive/confidential data.

Student Survey Results

100% OER USAGE

Students reported using the resource "often" or "very often" during the course.

90% SKIPPED PURCHASE

Students skipped buying textbooks in other courses due to cost concerns.

90% WOULD RECOMMEND

Students would recommend both the OER and future OER-based courses.

90% FOUND IT CLEAR

Reported the material was "very clear" and easy to navigate compared to traditional texts.

“ Qualitative Themes

"Clear writing style," "easy access from anywhere," "zero cost," and "perfectly organized around our dissertation chapters" were the most frequent positive themes cited in open-ended responses.

Source: LaGrow_OER Student Survey Results (n=12). Fall 2025 - Spring 2026 Dissertation Seminar I Cohorts.

Practical Takeaways & Outcomes

Implementation Checklist

- ✓ **Start Small & Focused**
Don't try to write a whole textbook at once. Author a single, guide-aligned chapter addressing a specific student pain point.
- ✓ **Adopt a Practitioner Voice**
Write peer-to-peer. Use narrative case scenarios, checklists, and direct prompts rather than abstract theory.
- ✓ **Partner for Infrastructure**
Collaborate early with librarians for hosting, platform training, metadata, and formal impact assessment.
- ✓ **Define AI Boundaries**
Provide explicit "Do/Don't" lists and curated prompt kits so students use AI as a tutor, not a writer.

Learning Outcomes

01

Implement practical strategies for **co-authoring** discipline-specific OER and establish library partnerships for formal assessment.

02

Improve graduate support through affordable, tailored resources and innovative **technology integration**.

Let's Continue the Conversation

Questions & Discussion

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Presented at the **UW-Stout Effordability Summit**
Empowering Every Learner

Access the OER

Scan to read the book for free



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