SYMPOSIUM ON ADVISORS AND THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Introduction: Advisors and the Dissertation Proposal

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In the interest of providing graduate students with information and advice concerning their graduate careers, APSA has begun a series of efforts to identify "good practices" or "best practices" with respect to a number of aspects of graduate education. The thought is that faculty, junior and senior, may serve as sources of useful information that supplements what departments provide to their own students. At a minimum, from these efforts, students would be able to learn of a variety of perspectives, some of which might be different from those to which they had already been exposed by their own advisors and other faculty with whom they have studied.

One area of particular importance and interest is the preparation of dissertation proposals. The dissertation follows the dissertation proposal and is dependent on it in important ways. Thus we thought that it would be useful to seek the views of several members of the profession on the role of dissertation advisors with respect to development of the dissertation proposal. Among topics to be included were selection of the dissertation topic itself and other related matters the authors thought salient and important to share.

This mini-symposium is the result. We offer it for doctoral students at any stage of their programs, not only those who are actually beginning to write the proposal or who are well along in developing it but also those who are just commencing their studies. I believe these articles may also be read with benefit by those who sighed with relief on completing the proposal and dissertation, as they compare their own experiences with those of others. They, too, will be able to use the articles to understand the process better and to use it more effectively for their own students. And we hope these articles will be of use to any faculty instructors of doctoral students, to provide a set of ideas against which they may compare their own sense of the process and what they do.

Although thoughts on the topic at hand have not often been fully laid out—hence this mini- symposium—they are not in short supply. Many people shared thoughts on the subject during the consultative process by which the contributors to the symposium were chosen. One professor discussed the need for advisors to help in "shaping" a topic. Said another, a good dissertation advisor keeps a student on track and is a source of wisdom about methods such as interviewing and about writing. Related to this is the idea that an advisor "lets you do your own thing, but is quick to bring you back into focus if he thinks you are leaving 'your own thing.'" These advisors were perhaps somewhat "interventionist," but one also heard comments reflecting a less activist role: A good advisor's style can be reactive, a colleague told me; the advisor responds when the student asks, "What do *you* think?" And a longtime dissertation advisor, calling himself "very laissez-faire about prospectuses," said that an advisor needs to tell students "that best-laid plans are often disappointed," and "In any event, a good dissertation is a finished dissertation."

Important as are those isolated observations, more systematically developed thoughts are necessary. Toward that end, six different members of the profession present their views here. Two of the authors—Kristi Andersen and Peter May—are established members of the profession with extensive experience in serving on dissertation committees and acting as dissertation advisors; Professor Andersen teaches a course on proposal development. The other four authors—Sara Benesh, Kevin den Dulk, Victoria Farrar-Myers, and Richard Fox—are assistant professors with varying lengths of time since receiving their doctoral degrees—one as recently as Spring 2001—and they reflect on aspects of the proposal and dissertation experience.

While all the authors offer advice, each brings something different to the table. In the first article in this collection, Peter May, drawing an analogy to developing plans for construction of a house, discusses the stages of preparation of a proposal. Victoria Farrar-Myers follows by examining several common myths about the proposal and the process of developing it. Kristi Andersen identifies a number of roles faculty play in proposal development and necessary information that faculty in those roles can and should convey. The other three contributors to the mini-symposium discuss the advantages and pitfalls of having either a dissertation committee that allows the doctoral student a relatively free rein, or an advisor who is more involved and directive. Kevin den Dulk and Richard Fox each had committees that allowed them considerable freedom in topic selection and proposal development. Fox emphasizes several matters his committee thought essential within this hands-off regime, while den Dulk speaks particularly of places where a student in that situation may obtain ideas and test his or her own notions. Sara Benesh's advisor was more directive, and she emphasizes the significant advantages she found in that arrangement.

Despite their differences, these authors have some views in common,

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and it is important to emphasize those elements. The first goes to the spirit of this mini-symposium: that one should learn about and understand the process by talking to others and asking questions. Perhaps the most important idea is that one should *start early* to identify and shape a topic for one's dissertation rather than waiting until completion of course work and examinations. A third, taking us beyond the proposal itself, is that development of the proposal, the research for the dissertation, and writing the dissertation itself are *not separate matters* but are *continuous and dependent* upon each other.

I close this brief introduction by thanking Sheilah Mann for giving me the opportunity to engage in this activity. In developing this mini-symposium, it has been a pleasure to work with these colleagues—some of whom I did not know, some of whom I did but about whom I got to see another dimension. I think graduate students and professors would do well to heed what they say here.

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