SYMPOSIUM ON ADVISORS AND THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Constructing the Prospectus

Peter J. May, *University of Washington*

I am struck by how similar the process of constructing a prospectus is to developing plans for a new house. One starts with a desired plot of land and an uncertain vision of an eventual home. The plot of land is terrain to exploit. The vision is of something to be comfortable with and, ideally, something of which to be proud. Getting there, however, is a very bewildering process. An architectural plan and specifications serve as the blueprint—the prospectus—that provides the basis for approval for moving ahead. The chief concerns on the part of the permit reviewers is whether "it will stand up" and whether it meets appropriate planning and construction criteria. The chief concerns of the prospective owner are: "How much will it cost?" "Can it be built within a reasonable amount of time?" and, "Will it look good enough when done?"

Individuals building new homes, like doctoral students constructing prospectuses, differ in the extent to which they seek assistance at various stages in the process. Often it is unclear to whom to turn for advice. In some instances, good sources of advice are hard to find. When advice is available, issues arise concerning the validity of the information that is provided. Advisors' roles differ considerably depending on the stage in the process.

Picking the Terrain

The first rule of real estate is "location, location, location." The location for a dissertation topic is the subfield in which it falls or the subfields that it attempts to straddle. As with plots of land, the terrain for dissertation topics is subject to market forces that define hot locations and potential payback. It requires considerable understanding of the area to see how what appears to be a thicket of overgrown bramble can be transformed into a suitable location.

Just as prospective homeowners spend Sundays scouting out various sites, doctoral students are often on their own at this stage. Friends and advisors may suggest potential locations of interest, but the burden typically falls on the shoulders of those who are looking. Sometimes this process is very drawn out, or involves changes in location. At other times, an advisor may have a particular location to sell as part of a larger portfolio (i.e., project). This, of course, is attractive but the maxim "buyer beware" should apply here as well. My advice for advisors at this stage is not to prejudge a particular location until the student has conducted feasibility testing about whether it is a worthwhile site.

The obvious potential conflict at this stage is a mismatch between the expertise of an advisor—a committee chair or other advisors—and a student's desired location. One does not go to a specialist in waterfront property in hopes of building a horse farm. The obvious advice for students when deciding upon whom to rely for location advice is to be exceedingly conscious of the expertise of potential advisors. At this stage, students sometimes change advisors or seek new terrain to explore.

Crafting a Vision

Finding the plot of land is, of course, a long ways from completing the final product. A sense of how to exploit the terrain—crafting a vision—is essential for guiding subsequent design and development. The parallel to the architect's question, "What lifestyle are you seeking?" is the dissertation advisor's question, "What is the purpose of the dissertation?" The key issues for either are the desired style and the scale of the undertaking. Prospective homeowners look to magazines and other new homes for ideas. Doctoral students look to debates in the field; their peers; and their advisors for ideas.

At this stage, perhaps the biggest stumbling block for prospective homeowners, as well as for doctoral students, is being traumatized by the enormity of what lies ahead. Architects approach this problem by asking open-ended questions about the use of a home, what aspects of the terrain are to be exploited or left alone, and desired features. Based on this information, concept sketches can be developed and discussed. I, too, find it useful to probe doctoral students with open-ended questions about the style of the research they seek, what research they want to emulate and why, and what they see as their comparative skills for carrying out the research. I also have found it useful to ask students to prepare a series of short synopses of dissertation directions that focus on their vision rather than reviews of relevant literature.

Just as architects sometimes come to these conversations with preestablished visions of what is the best approach for the terrain of interest, I find it tempting to tell students how I would undertake a given topic. However, this may be counterproductive. It undermines the ownership of the topic and it leads to premature closure of what might be better ideas. I have found that only when a student is truly stuck, after weeks if not months, is it more productive to jump in with a stronger hand. Stated differently, the role of an advisor at this stage is to help the student articulate the vision, and not to provide the vision for the student.

Detailing the Plan

The bulk of a dissertation prospectus is a plan for carrying out the vision. It sets forth a blueprint for the undertaking. This is akin to the detailed drawings for a house including specification of materials and timeline for construction. Unlike the prescribed components of architectural and construction drawings, the blueprint for a dissertation is more malleable. Coming to agreement about what goes into this blueprint is clearly an important part of negotiations. Committee members may differ about the substance of the project and about what constitutes an acceptable dissertation prospectus.

Much can be said about the tricks of the trade in terms of dissertation design. In my experience, three key problems recur. One is an overly

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ambitious undertaking that needs to be scaled back in order to be more feasible. Second, a blueprint may be long on literature review and methods, but short in addressing the broader questions of research design (i.e., justifying case selection, nature of comparisons) and modes of analysis. A third problem is too much extraneous information, usually included in response to disparate suggestions by committee members.

To help forestall these problems, I have found it useful to show students examples of prospectuses that fit the style of envisioned dissertation. I have also found it useful to encourage feasibility testing of different aspects of dissertation research. This entails not just identifying relevant data and prospective analyses, but collecting some data and trying out relevant analyses. This works best if students are building on prior research papers as a foundation for dissertation topics. Like a homeowner's line of credit, an acclaimed student research paper that addresses a potential dissertation topic serves as a form of pre-approval for research on that topic.

Obtaining Financing

A significant variable in the construction of a home is the cost of the undertaking. The catch-22 for most prospective homeowners is that they have little idea of how much it costs to build a home. Moreover, most architects cannot predict with much precision how much the home will cost. This is also an important factor in carrying out dissertation research, especially if fieldwork or primary data collection is involved. One of a dissertation advisor's most important tasks is helping students arrange financial support for the undertaking. Sometimes funds may be carved out of faculty grants to help support dissertation fieldwork. At other times, dissertation support grants from universities or external grant or fellowship sources are appropriate. If this becomes an endless chase for funding, though, funding applications may become the tail that wags the dog. Just as homeowners tend to think about the basic and deluxe model for the new home prior to obtaining cost estimates, I encourage students to think about a basic dissertation plan and an enhanced plan to put in place if the desired funding comes through.

Securing Approval

Securing approval of a prospectus is not as cut-and-dried as approval of plans for a new house. Plan checkers for houses worry about compliance with a set of zoning and construction regulations, not what the house looks like or whether it has value in the marketplace. Members of dissertation committees worry, or at least they should worry, about both the value and the feasibility of the undertaking. A dissertation chair works with a doctoral student to help bring both the student and other committee members to consensus about the undertaking. The most troubling prospectus defense occurs when the doctoral student does not clearly demonstrate a vision of what the dissertation is about, or is unable to articulate reasons why particular choices were made in the design of the dissertation. There is a bit of selling involved at this stage, and it helps if doctoral students are upbeat about the undertaking but not to the point of being Pollyannaish about it.

Committees are much more comfortable approving proposals when they have confidence in the student and in the dissertation chair. This underscores that at the dissertation-approval stage the reputation of the dissertation advisor is also at stake. This may be a varied experience. Especially for dissertation topics that are close to my research, I find that I want to jump and explain to others the reasons for a given approach or the significance of an undertaking. Yet, here too, it is probably better to lay low and let the student respond as appropriate. Most of the dissertation defense conversation flies by the student, which is ironic given that it is supposed to help shape the dissertation directions. To compensate for this, I find it useful to take notes and to have follow-up written and face-to-face debriefing a few days after the prospectus review.

The Limits of Analogies

Like all analogies, the homebuilding analogy is an imperfect one for constructing a dissertation proposal. The latter process is far from the linear stages outlined here. A fellowship or grant opportunity may be the spark for identifying the dissertation terrain. The availability of a unique set of data may serve as a basis for working backwards to define appropriate research questions. Also lost in the translation are the multiple roles of advisors and other faculty, along with the evolution of a doctoral student's thoughts. Indeed, it may be better to think of the doctoral student as an owner-architect with the faculty serving as a design review committee.

Faculty are often a bit cavalier about how daunting the development of a dissertation prospectus is for doctoral students. After all, most faculty have been through it many times. When pressed, most would agree that no two experiences of working through a prospectus—and eventual dissertation—are the same. The experience often entails a good deal of learning for faculty dissertation committees as well as for doctoral students. In this respect, the process is at least as important as the product.

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