SYMPOSIUM ON ADVISORS AND THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Faculty Roles and Student Projects

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Students preparing dissertation proposals may benefit from many sorts of interactions with faculty members. Here I consider the different sorts of advice and support that faculty may provide in a variety of different roles and relationships to students.

Getting Started

Most departments have a director of graduate studies or a general advisor for Ph.D. students. Often this person plays the role of "advisor" until a student chooses his or her dissertation committee, and may still provide a sympathetic ear even after that point. The person in this role is generally responsible for seeing that department and university rules are followed, and typically is a repository for institutional memory. Thus he or she can give students both the "big picture" of bureaucratic politics, requirements, and deadlines, and the "department stories" of how real people have managed this process.

Obviously the graduate director can help students most by being up-to-date on the current relevant rules as well as knowledgeable about actual practice, including possible loopholes in the rules. Graduate directors need to supply themselves with whatever documents are issued by the parts of the university responsible for implementing policies regarding dissertations.[1] The department may also have written rules, and the graduate director should reiterate and explain them. These documents may be a bit scary for beginning dissertation writers to read, but knowing up front what they need to pay attention to is also comforting.

Let me put in a word for a role that is not occupied in all departments: the teacher of a course on dissertation proposal writing. Such a course, in addition to providing substantive help with students' proposal writing, may help students through what might be called the politics of committee construction. The graduate director might serve this important purpose. Even in my own department, which is highly collegial, students wonder if certain possible combinations of people on their committees will cause conflicts. Because students further wonder about problems such as the tradeoff between choosing someone who "has a big name in the field" and someone "willing to give lots of feedback," the graduate director, or someone similarly positioned, may provide advice on those elements of committee selection as well.

Choosing Advisors and Committees

Most students are extraordinarily anxious about choosing a dissertation advisor. They think, not without justification, that the choice of advisor is critical to their success in both the short term (producing a good dissertation) and the long term (getting a good job). For some, the choice is obvious; for others the decision is fraught with apprehension. One of the most valuable aspects of teaching a proposal-writing course is the instructor's ability to assuage some of these fears and provide good advice about constructing committees, and to do it efficiently—for 10 students at a time rather than one. Other faculty members—those who are not likely to be on a particular student's committee but who know them in other ways (worked with them as a TA, had them in a course, played on the department softball team with them)—may likewise offer dispassionate counsel in these matters. I think that it is important for these faculty to communicate to students that, yes, constructing a committee is an important series of choices that will help to shape your dissertation and your career, but that ultimately the quality of your own work matters most.

I must return to what I have referred to as "department stories." The graduate director, or someone in a similar advisory position, may be particularly well situated to tell these stories, which I believe are quite valuable. Students beginning the process of thinking about their research projects and writing dissertation proposals need to hear about the person who had a baby just before she started writing her proposal; the one who had to write his proposal three times before his committee accepted it; the one who surmounted difficulties with the human subjects form; and what happened when a student had to change her topic when her advisor left the university. Students beginning the process of thinking about their research projects and writing their dissertation proposals need to be told these stories and to be put in contact with older students with similar substantive interests.

Writing the Proposal

Faculty who will be members of a student's dissertation committee are often chosen for a particular purpose or to provide advice on particular aspects of the research: Students choose someone who has used a specific methodology, has done research in a given geographic area, or who is an advocate of a particular theoretical approach. The contributions of the survey research expert should not be limited to a critique of the student's survey instrument. Obviously that contribution is critically important, but at the early stages it is possible and useful for each of the committee members to take a more holistic view of the proposal and to offer more wide-ranging suggestions along with the expected narrower points. As one recent example, I served on the committee of a student whose dissertation research included the analysis of two recent surveys, conducted in an urban "development zone" in China, tapping attitudes toward government services. I was certainly able to help him think about what his survey analysis might look like (my role on the committee), but I also pushed him to do additional work around his concept of "legitimacy," which was central to the arguments he wanted to make.

One danger in the proposal stage is what I term the "push and pull" syndrome. A student begins with an

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interest in a particular topic—let's say political conflicts in nations where two languages are spoken—and some previous research experience—let's say in Canadian politics. The student speaks with various faculty members—potential committee members—and each sees something interesting in the project. However, each sees something quite different and quite particular to his or her own research agenda.

Thus Professor A, a Europeanist, tells the student that a viable dissertation necessitates a comparison of Canada with Belgium. Professor B wants the student to pursue the project by doing textual analyses of discourses about identity. Professor C says that the project is meaningless without an extensive historical analysis of Canadian politics and culture. The student feels pushed and pulled in all directions and doesn't yet have the confidence to make a stand that appears to contradict the arguments of *any* of these experts (and potential committee members). My advice to Professors A, B, and C would be simply to remember that the goal is to provide the student with the resources and advice necessary to develop the expertise and confidence to pursue the project. Thus the preference for a particular sort of research design should, if possible, be framed as a suggestion rather than, say, as a precondition for committee participation.

The advisor, as the person who will work most closely with the student, has the authority to be a bit more demanding, even a bit more controlling, in terms of the construction of the project. That said, the ultimate goal is independent research from an independent researcher. The ability to work within the specifications laid out by one's advisor does not necessarily predict good scholarship and creative thinking.

Faculty members who don't have a formal relationship to a student during the student's dissertation-writing period may also provide substantive feedback on early drafts of dissertation proposals; this is true, perhaps especially true, for faculty not in the student's field. I tell students that, in the course of their job seeking, they will eventually have to talk about their dissertation research to a variety of political scientists, and they will have to convince people not in their field to publish all or parts of their dissertations. Thus from the start, it is critical for students to be able to communicate to those not in their particular field the importance of their research questions and the appropriateness of the research design to answer these questions. From the faculty point of view, volunteering to read a five-page outline of a proposal is much less onerous than volunteering to read a draft of a dissertation, and certainly one can offer important formative advice at this stage.

The phrase "it takes a village" has been overused to the point of cliché, and I'm a bit hesitant in any case about using it as a way to discuss a department faculty's collective responsibility for producing good dissertation proposals and eventually good dissertations. But I think that the phrase reminds us that isolation in this context is damaging. Getting from idea to dissertation proposal is a difficult and challenging task, and students are greatly advantaged when they receive a range of different sorts of advice and support from many different faculty members.

Note

1. In the case of Syracuse, the graduate school produces a thick document on "thesis guidelines" (margins, footnotes, and so on) and a detailed list of the rules governing the dissertation defense.

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