SYMPOSIUM ON ADVISORS AND THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

The "Rights" of Passage

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You are feeling relief that your coursework is drawing to a close. You have become somewhat competent at going to class, discussing materials, and passing tests. However, you have a sense of dread that keeps creeping up on you every time you try to think of "the topic" for your dissertation. You look to the senior graduate students and even ask them questions about how they found their topic. Divine revelation seems to have hit them and you wonder when your turn will come. But they seem to be all-knowing, more like budding faculty now than one of you. So you try to fight the notions of self-doubt about whether you can actually find a topic and start the quest of finding someone to help you. You naturally turn to the professor whom you "know the best." Is this the right choice? No one seems to know; you just have this sense that you want to complete the process as painlessly as possible. As questions swirl inside your head—from how to choose an advisor to what might be the right way to pick a dissertation topic—you may ask yourself what the process of writing your dissertation proposal will really be like.

The proposal-writing process is a "rite of passage," but one shrouded in myth. You know it must involve growth; change; and, yes, a little discomfort that comes from being challenged. But the process of developing and writing a dissertation proposal should not be needlessly discomforting. Often those going through the process—certainly the student and often the student's advisor as well—succumb to its myths. Time and again these myths disrupt a scholar's development, cause unwarranted anxiety, and strain the relationship between advisor and student. Therefore, I have tried to highlight and then debunk some of the most common myths of the proposal-writing process so that graduate students facing this rite, and perhaps their advisors, will be better prepared to avoid certain pitfalls that may lie ahead of them. I offer this advice to serve as the basis for the "rights of passage"—that is, a set of guideposts that graduate students and advisors alike could follow to lead to the profession's collective growth.

MYTH #1: "I went through it, so should you."

There seems to be a common understanding, a sort of groupthink, in our community of scholars that one's own experience should dictate how to approach others' similar situations. This leads faculty members to use their own experience in proposal writing—lessons to apply or some things not to do—to dictate how they will (or will not) assist you. Simply choosing an advisor just because of a name or position might leave you vulnerable to "repeating history." A savvy graduate student should interview faculty to find out what their processes were like. Ask how their advisors treated them and how they assist their advisees in developing their proposals. Do they have a credo of assisting step-by-step in a hands-on approach, or do they leave you to find your own pathway, standing afar while making sure you do not fail? Neither approach is necessarily good or bad; either one might suit your needs, but you need to learn what to expect.

MYTH #2: "Your advisor is always your mentor—that is what the job description means, right?"

We have all heard the story of the apprentice studying at the knee of the learned scholar, learning some sort of age-old wisdom. But proposal writing is a more isolating experience than what the myth portrays. Unlike the apprentice, you are expected to craft your own vision and wares. For that, you need to seek guidance. But with whom should you confer? Do you choose by name, reputation, area of scholarship, personality, or work ethic? The answer is all of these and more. Your advisor may and perhaps should be someone to look to for mooring and guidance through the morass, but not the only one. Sometimes the advisor might be an administrator of the process, someone who facilitates communication among your committee, or even just a figurehead, while others are truly your intellectual mentors.

It is important to be proactive in deciding upon your advisor and others who will help you. Ask to be a teaching or research assistant to someone who seems interesting. Seek out dialogues with your professors as you progress in your coursework. Seek advice on papers and presentations from scholars in your department—both faculty and other grad students. Some will provide brilliance, others a functional skill you need. Build a *team* that is right for you, intellectually and emotionally. And if you find yourself "stuck" in a less-than-desirable situation, be proactive in seeking others to supplement what you are missing.

MYTH #3: "Choosing the idea is the easy part. If I just could find a 'who cares' question, I would be fine."

One of the most difficult parts of proposal writing is finding your own voice in the midst of the forest of scholarship. Sometimes you begin to know a subject so well, it becomes a labyrinth of interconnected hypotheses and ideas in which you become desperately lost, and you have trouble voicing your thoughts concisely. How do you break free and find "the question" so the trees will not gobble you up, preventing you from ever seeing the forest? Take a step back and ask yourself what you want to say something about. This will help you find the research question and related theory. Doing so is only the first step, however. From there, you build a proposal one block at a time into a structure that, if all goes well, will captivate others. Through this process, you will begin to see how others' scholarship relates to your work.

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MYTH #4: "The process is all the same."

In this myth, the process is the same for all dissertations. But like one-size-fits-all clothes, it might fit but never really look good. The basic elements in the proposal-writing process might be the same: research, literature review, question development, research design development, and analysis, all followed by the prospectus defense. But the substance is unique—unique because all individuals are different, and so are all projects. Some are historical, requiring much literature work; others may be filled with interviews and on-the-spot, participant observation. Because your project and its development are unique, stop looking for a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all process. Tailor the way you approach your project to your skills. For example, if you are a qualitatively oriented scholar, pick a project to highlight those strengths or find additional training to allow you to broaden your research skills.

Furthermore, as you write your proposal, be sure to find a work style that fits you, as this could be the difference between finishing the process and having the process finish you. Figure out, for example, whether you will write every day, in the morning or in the afternoon, and whether you will treat it like a job. Ask yourself if you are a deadline worker (need a deadline or bust) or are instead a well-disciplined self-paced person. Be sure, also, to discuss this last point with your advisor so that the two of you can develop realistic and meaningful deadlines that meet your needs.

MYTH #5: "Once the proposal is done, you can leave it behind."

Often as you draft your proposal, you will find yourself looking forward to completing your proposal defense. You long for the opportunity to celebrate and have a catharsis about surmounting a large obstacle in your life—which is fine for the first week, but then you must get back to work or "ABD" will be with you forever. Even as you develop your proposal, however, you must not think of the proposal and dissertation processes as discrete parts; they are in fact parts of a continuum. The proposal stage is the true test. If you write a good plan, then the actual dissertation project will be (relatively) easy. Careful planning and development also make it clear to others what you are doing, thus warding off potential naysayers in the end. You should have some flexibility worked into your plan, though, as your thinking will evolve as you write the dissertation. This is not a sign of poor planning, but an artifact of the dissertation-writing process itself.

Conclusion

Thinking about each of these myths might bring clarity to the process in which you will engage and allow you to prepare for it. It might also lead you to have a more fulfilling experience that you may use in the future to mentor your own set of students in a positive manner. Take the "good practices" revealed here for what they are: guideposts to help you chart your own course. Also take them a step further by making them lessons to aid a community of scholars in becoming more open to stretch beyond "what has always been done."

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