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Author: Sara C. Benesh

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The Key to a Successful Prospectus: Consult an Advisor, Early and Often

Sara C. Benesh, *University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee*

Failure to develop a dissertation topic and proposal is sometimes the downfall of graduate students. The course work may go well, exams may be passed with flying colors, and the students may even successfully write and present papers at conferences. The elusive dissertation topic, though, may continue to bring them misery. One problem is that students may wait too long to develop an idea; having no concept of what a dissertation should be and not knowing how to narrow their wide-ranging interests into manageable projects, they flounder. They meet real trouble because they wait until they finish courses and exams before they even consider the topics on which to write their dissertations.

The active dissertation advisor, for whom I see an essential role, may alleviate these problems. I would argue that the advisor may facilitate the timely and successful completion of the dissertation through strong support of his or her graduate students. My advisor was active both in the formulation of my topic and my writing of the prospectus and I think that explains the relative ease with which I completed the dissertation. My advisor was integral to all aspects of my dissertation writing and to him I attribute the speed with which I finished my dissertation and the success with which I defended it. Both the speed and the success of the dissertation are a direct result of the process of writing the prospectus.

Find an Advisor and a Topic Early

Shortly after I arrived in graduate school, I met my would-be mentor. He was certainly one of those faculty members of whom graduate students are afraid. However, his reputation in my subfield (judicial politics) and his substantive interest drew me to him. I believed, as I still do, that developing a relationship with a member of the faculty early was essential.

Shortly after we became acquainted, I took a directed readings course with him to get to know him and to get to know the field in which I was interested. According to him, the sole purpose of that readings course was for students to find a dissertation topic and write a prospectus. He gave me no specifics but set in my mind the goal of settling upon a topic early. Therefore, I was only in my second semester of graduate school when a faculty member first discussed with me the need to find a dissertation topic.

In the directed readings course with my advisor and another member of my committee, I began an overview of my subfield until I came upon an article that sparked my creativity and interest. My advisor and I devised a way that I could use its basic premise as a starting point for my own dissertation. Thus, the dissertation topic was born, even though, for fear of wishful thinking, all my files on the subject were labeled "Project X."

My dissertation, I thought, would be an analysis of the relationship between the U.S. Supreme Court and the U.S. Courts of Appeals. Obviously knowing far more than I about the caseload of each court and about the subject matter of their cases, my advisor suggested an issue area (the confession cases) that would fit the sort of analysis that I wanted to do. It would have taken me months to find a suitable issue area, while it took him minutes. This expertise is exactly what we should offer our students. He also suggested a methodology and a host of other bibliographic materials for me to consult. With that, I abandoned the rest of the reading list and began work on my literature review, and the paper for the readings course became the skeleton of my prospectus.

Having my topic early was essential and my advisor's role in the early identification of a topic was vital. I then focused my studies on the completion of this long-term project.

In at least two other classes, I wrote papers that were the beginnings of two other dissertation chapters. This increased the speed with which I completed the dissertation as well as the dissertation's quality. It also helped me to form mentoring relationships with other members of the faculty who, although they were not on my committee, contributed to my thinking about those chapters in particular and the dissertation in general.

Advantages of Active Involvement

Some may argue that a directive advisor may encourage the formulation of a dissertation topic that is really not the student's "own." However, I see it quite differently. The initial interest sparked by my reading was surely my own and the topic was one not foremost in my advisor's mind. Indeed, he was not altogether interested in my topic at first, but he respected my desire to write a dissertation involving the courts of appeals. However, at that early stage in my graduate career, I could not possibly know what a feasible dissertation was, nor could I know even how to begin to conceive of an idea appropriate for such a project. The advisor, having written a dissertation and having read many others, has much more such information, and can give the direction and guidance that is exactly what the new graduate student needs. Left to his or her own devices, the perennial graduate student will be interested in everything but will focus on nothing. Many graduate students—surely bright, creative, and hard-working enough to complete a dissertation—flounder for lack of faculty interest. If only someone on the faculty had discussed ideas with the students, provided some idea of what it takes to successfully write and defend a dissertation, and worked with the student on the creation of a solid

prospectus, surely the chances of completion would have increased.

Another advantage is that because the prospectus was, in effect, a course paper, my advisor read it early and often. This avoided delays that often arise when the advisor or the committee waits until just before the defense to read the prospectus. My advisor was involved in every aspect of the formulation of the prospectus and was constantly providing revisions and suggestions. He was available to discuss matters nearly any time I asked. He read the literature review. He read the theory section. He reviewed the methodologies to be employed. He helped think about the formulation of the coding rules. He even coded some cases, first as a check on the rules I had developed and later as a test for intercoder reliability. Clearly, by the time the prospectus was ready to be seen by the other committee members, he had helped me shape it into a feasible and tight plan for my dissertation.

This prescreening role of the advisor is important in several ways. The advisor may ensure that the proposed dissertation is manageable and that it will be accepted by the

other committee members. If he does this, as he should, it obviously saves other committee members from having to deal with a half-cocked idea, and it both aids and protects the student. It aids by focusing the student's research so that minimal time is lost on tangential material. It protects by forming a contract between student and committee so that if the prospectus is carried out effectively, the student need not fear rejection of the completed dissertation. This contractual aspect is important, even with a very collegial committee, to assure uniformity of purpose among committee members, protecting the student against time, energy, and work lost.

Concluding Comments

The prospectus is a very important document to a graduate student, whom it serves in a number of ways. Problems in the proposed research are anticipated and avoided when the student first outlines them in the prospectus. The prospectus also becomes an outline, and if dissertation research and work follow directly from it, the dissertation is

stronger for it. Having this approved prospectus also creates a contract between the student and the committee, assuring that all are on the same page and all are committed to the proposed dissertation.

Work on the prospectus may also be beneficial to the faculty involved, as they may learn about something they may not have explored on their own and may develop mutually beneficial mentoring relationships with their students. In short, the process may be quite beneficial for all involved, and an active role for the advisor enhances the probability of a successful outcome.

In addition to working with the student on the prospectus, the advisor must also relay to the students the importance of other research so that they do not stagnate, never to produce a good piece of research again. An advisor may both focus new students on their projects and encourage them to explore other related and unrelated topics in order to assure productivity after the dissertation. While we focus here on the prospectus and the dissertation, surely we all know that while successful scholars might start here, they certainly must not end here.