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Choosing a Dissertation Topic

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ingly rational formulation made it easier for the chair to hide behind the numbers. Thus, the wily appeaser can make effective tactical use of the rational approach.

The chair can also choose to hide behind tradition. A system put in place by one's predecessor already may have legitimacy and, most importantly, it shifts decision-making responsibility away from the chair. For example, one department had a tradition of awarding an across-the-board salary increase based on an equal percentage increase. In another department, some researchers who have for years been deemed to be prolific by the chair and others, consistently receive much higher salary increases and resources irrespective of annual productivity. Still another department had the tradition of awarding differential annual salary increases, yet ensured that percentage increases over a three year period would remain relatively equal. Indeed, any changes in the historical pattern for distributing salary increases or other resources can lead to dissatisfied faculty members.

Conclusion

The appeasing strategy is not an altogether appealing one. Indeed, the chairs admitted that they employed it with some embarrassment. Yet this strategy did seem to reflect the dominant operating mode of the chairs we interviewed. Since most chairs we interviewed chose not to pursue an administrative career, most of them are statesmen who

rule and eventually return to the ranks of the ruled. For this reason, we suspect that among the chairs we interviewed there were few rogues or burnouts.

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Choosing a Dissertation Topic

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A graduate career begins by consuming knowledge, and ends by producing it. Choosing one's contribution—the dissertation topic—should be guided foremost by one's intellectual interests. Yet this is a personal, somewhat arbitrary matter. There might be a good reason why one stu-

dent focuses on international trade and another on the drug trade. But, as elsewhere, there is no accounting for taste.

There are, however, several less subjective considerations that should be taken into account in deciding upon a topic. They include tractabil-

ity, resonance with organizational culture, learning a new methodology, contribution to knowledge, and assistance in a job search.

Tractability

Some dissertation topics are more likely, than others, to result in a finished product. Tractability, in turn, has three components: reach, data availability, and clarity of problem.

Reach: A good argument can be made for taking on a relatively narrow research problem. The key advantages are the speed and certainty of completion. Further, a dissertation is merely a first step in one's professional career. A small but certain step can later be followed by a more formidable contribution when professional support and salary are better.

On the other hand, a "big" dissertation has the potential for future development and publication. *Agrarian Socialism* (Lipset 1950), *States and Revolution* (Skocpol 1979), *Governing Prisons* (DiIulio 1987) and, most recently, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (Goldhagen 1996) were all based on dissertations. Lipset, Skocpol, DiIulio, and Goldhagen each succeeded in writing a big dissertation, and the gains for scholarship (most certainly) and their individual careers (most probably) were substantial.

One can easily imagine getting in over one's head. A planned five-hundred page dissertation can remain forever two-thirds done. The number of pages, though, is only one indicator of scope. Others are the complexity of the problem and the number of items on the relevant bibliography. A dissertation on the causes of the U.S. Civil War, for example, is a daunting undertaking, simply because of the volume of work on the topic. One should also keep in mind that Skocpol, for example, sought to explain no less than the causes and outcomes of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions.

Data availability: Obtaining the right data in a timely manner can make or break a dissertation. Some topics permit the researcher to rely on an existing data-set—all the better if the data-set is well-documented and stored in a data archive with a help-line.

Other topics involve a gamble. For example, a project may require the

researcher to conduct interviews and collect records within a government agency. This may be difficult, especially if the agency's work is confidential or, indeed, if the agency has something to hide. In any case, a request is more likely to be honored if stated with precision and clarity. One is confronted, however, with the problem of whether to make the initial investment needed to achieve clarity when, regardless of effort, access may be denied.

Sometimes a back-up plan can be developed. For his dissertation, Charles Kurzman (1992) had planned to interview a representative sample of Iranians about their perceptions of the Iranian state and the Revolution of 1979. Denied a visa to Iran, Kurzman conducted interviews instead in Istanbul, Turkey, where many Iranians traveled on business or vacation. The sample was not representative, as Kurzman had wanted, but the findings from the interviews, bolstered by other sources, were strong enough for subsequent publication (Kurzman, 1996).

Clarity of problem: Dissertation topics vary in the extent to which they specify and detail the research problem at hand. At one extreme, a researcher may begin a project with only a general idea about the problem he or she is trying to solve. Perhaps from a subject area alone (say, the politics of the abortion debate), he or she begins to conduct interviews, on the premise that an angle will emerge in due course. At the other extreme, a researcher might begin with a full-blown theory with a set of hypotheses. The research task is to gather the evidence that allows one to accept or reject those hypotheses.

The problem with the pure exploratory approach is that it is a high-risk strategy. An angle might *not* emerge. Also, a lack of clear objectives at the outset can result in missed opportunities. In the writing stage, the researcher may realize he or she should have asked *this* question or collected *that* set of records, but now it is too late. Finally, some researchers (the proportion varying greatly by field and subfield) would consider this approach unscientific, and therefore unworthy.

The problem with the latter approach is that, while it is hard to argue against the notion that one should start with a testable theory, where does that theory come from? Methods textbooks suggest that one's theory should be deduced from other theories or previous research. Yet a fully-developed theory is difficult to achieve before the researcher understands the basic facts—and basic facts are often in short supply. A realistic theory may be obtained only after being immersed in the details of one's topic.

Most social science research falls somewhere between these extremes. Many projects shift theoretical focus midstream. In that case, the presumed clarity of the problem was false, although perhaps useful in getting the project underway.

Resonance with Organizational Culture

Academic departments are more than clusters of scholars pursuing individual research and teaching agendas. Rather, they develop an organizational culture, that is, their ideas about the character of good scholarship, and graduate students should become aware of their department's culture and take it into account.

The problem is that a department's culture often remains a set of implicit assumptions, imperfectly expressed, in response to direct questions. One way to get around this is to look at the dissertations previously accepted by the department. Most university libraries hold them in a special collection. At a minimum, they will help you distinguish what is acceptable.

Perhaps the best way to discern a department's culture is to pay attention, not to what faculty say, but what they do. What does their work look like? For example, is it primarily quantitative, historical, or quantitatively historical? In teaching, who do they hold up as exemplars of both high-quality and low-quality scholarship?

Normally, it is better to work within the organizational culture than outside of it. But if you do not feel comfortable with that, make

sure you have some faculty support for your project. Also, self-consciously weigh the costs and benefits of being outside the mainstream. The balance is your call.

Learning New Methodology

A student may be intrigued by a particular research strategy, even (or especially) if it seems forbiddingly difficult. How does one use an historical archives in France? or conduct field research in Nigeria? or conduct a sample survey?

The desire to learn by doing is important and should be nourished. It should also be tempered by the recognition that a method or approach not learned now can be acquired later.

Contribution to Knowledge

The dissertation is more than just an exercise to gain competence. It should be an active pursuit of new knowledge. The successful dissertation permits a ready answer to the “so what” question; it should be of interest to more than a few people; it should develop a solution to a problem that matters.

Thus, behind the choice of a dissertation topic should be a hypothesis about what new knowledge is useful. For example, a dissertation that says something new about “government legitimacy” (its causes, its measurement, its consequences) is likely to have broad significance. This is because government legitimacy plays a key role in theories of political stability, revolution, and collective action (Lipset 1959; Muller 1972). Likewise, the *crucial experiment*, whose results could come out only as predicted if the theory it tests is true, will have a much broader impact than the experiment whose results are consistent with competing theories (Stinchcombe 1968, pp. 24–28).

In short, a dissertation should have implications for what other researchers are thinking and doing. The four big dissertations mentioned above each had such an effect.

Job Search

To a large extent, the dissertation becomes your calling card in a search for a position. It speaks loudest about the sort of scholar you are and want to become.

A quantitative thesis, for example, may be the right kind of calling card for many applied positions. If an academic position is sought, the subfield in which the dissertation is written may be crucial. One can get a rough estimate of future opportunities by looking at the discipline’s most recent employment listings. While demand changes from one year to the next, the best prediction of future demand is current demand.

A matter of more touchy sensibility is whether to write on a topic that is perceived (rightly or wrongly) to be a fringe topic. This is touchy because scholarly decisions should be made on scholarly, not market, criteria. Also, the boundaries change. Rational choice models are now center stage in political science, although this was not always the case. Conversely, the theories of Talcott Parsons once powerfully shaped American sociological thinking, but are barely mentioned a generation later. Still, it is probably the case that only a small number of students (possibly the very best) can write on a “fringe” topic without putting themselves at a serious disadvantage when they look for a job. The mainstream generally favors the mainstream.

Five Criteria in Perspective

Choosing a dissertation topic is like a juggling act, in which some balls are more important to keep aloft than others. The ball of tractability must not be dropped at any expense. The unfinishable dissertation, however brilliantly conceived, is of little value. Thus, know your resources (financial, situational, and intellectual), and make sure you do not overextend yourself or, for that matter, sell yourself short.

Contribution to new knowledge is the second most important goal. The dissertation should expand the frontiers of knowledge. The step may be large or incremental, but it must be

there. Remember, the big dissertation is always the exception.

Learning a methodology and resonance with organizational culture are of lesser importance. Sometimes these balls can be dropped altogether without major costs. The advantages of using an existing data set may outweigh learning a new methodology. Organizational culture notwithstanding, faculty often see value in work that they themselves would not do.

Finally, your dissertation topic will certainly be important in your search for a job. How much weight you want to give this consideration—if and when it dictates a course other than the one you would otherwise take—is a personal decision.

Dissertation Prospectus: The Contract with the Department

Those eager to begin may dismiss the dissertation prospectus as an artificial obstacle. This is a mistake. The obstacle is not artificial. In fact, it is similar to what professional researchers often do. They apply for research funds, and their grant applications look like a dissertation prospectus. A grant proposal will identify a problem, specify a method, and promise a product.

The dissertation prospectus also becomes a contract between you and your dissertation committee. You commit yourself to a specific research agenda; committee members commit themselves to approving your dissertation once you have fulfilled that agenda. Your advisors become allies in achieving an agreed upon goal.

Most importantly, a prospectus will give you the opportunity to think through your problem and research strategy. Plans are clarified, problems are identified, and innovative ideas spring forth. You will increasingly know what you are doing. Efficiency and confidence follow.

Finally, much of the prospectus may be incorporated directly into the dissertation. One component of the prospectus often thought to be a useless exercise is the review of the literature. This should not be the case. Its purpose is not to demonstrate your “command” of the litera-

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ture for its own sake. Rather, it is to set the intellectual stage for your work, clarifying what is known about a particular topic and what new (or different) can be discovered. While thoroughness in the literature review is a virtue, a more important one is developing a structured, coherent argument.

It is useful in the early stages to find a book on which to model the structure of your dissertation. The model will provide you with guide posts. After having written the dissertation's first chapter, for instance, you can get a sense of where to go next. The stronger the analogues between dissertation and book (in methodology, tone, and substantive focus), the more useful the guideposts.

Conclusion

The right dissertation topic may propel a career forward. A cleanly executed dissertation with significant findings bodes well for the future,

and prospective employers know that. The wrong topic can cost months of wasted effort, or never get done, derailing an otherwise promising career.

There is only a little bit of truth to the adage that you should love your dissertation topic at the outset because you will hate it by the time you are done. Actually, the dissertation should be the high point of your graduate career. It permits you to move from being a consumer of knowledge to a producer of it.

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Gender and Student Evaluations of Teaching

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In 1992, *PS* published a report by APSA's Committee on the Status of Women regarding the current status of women in the discipline, including recommendations for improvement in recruitment and hiring, tenure and promotion procedures, faculty development, and graduate programs. Here we raise a subject which was not considered in the previous report but which has generated a good deal of concern among women scholars: the potentially damaging effects of gender bias in student evaluations of teaching, specifically with regard to student expectations.

Many teaching colleges have long used quality of teaching as the primary qualification for tenure, and recently many research universities have begun to pay more systematic attention to teaching in evaluating faculty members for promotion and

tenure. How to evaluate teaching for either "formative" or "summative" purposes is subject to quite a bit of contention (see, e.g., Marsh 1984); in particular, the use of closed-ended student evaluations of teaching, or SETs, have generated controversy.

A number of female political scientists, like their colleagues in other disciplines, have expressed concerns about possible bias in the kinds of questions used in standard SET forms, and about their departments' interpretation of the responses to these questions. A few anecdotes can be used to illustrate the basis for this concern:

At a large private research university, her department discusses an Asian-American woman's tenure case. Some of her teaching evaluation scores are low. In her teaching statement the professor says that she believes this is due to gender and racial

bias: that, in particular, some white male students are uncomfortable with her classroom authority. A senior white male faculty member dismisses this, saying "I read over the open-ended responses, and they don't say anything about her being Asian or a woman."

A female faculty member at a liberal arts college is denied tenure. Though her colleagues say her research is strong, some tell her they voted against her tenure because her teaching style "just didn't seem to fit with the rest of the department."

A community college uses a hard and fast cut-off, based on average SET scores, to determine qualification for tenure: if a faculty members' scores are below 4.0 on a 5 point scale, he or she simply cannot be considered for tenure.