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## Living a Dissertation

Kim Lane Scheppele

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to learn why the advice of economists is so consistently ignored.

Wilfred Pareto

It is necessary to study economics in order to learn why the advice of all other social scientists should be consistently ignored.<sup>11</sup>

Any randomly chosen economist  
(A Wuffle)

**In Conclusion**

The only great social scientist is a dead social scientist.

Anon.

Tenure is never having to say you're sorry.<sup>12</sup>

A Wuffle, May 1976

<sup>11</sup>Cf. "Politics is too important to be left to economists" (A Wuffle, July 29, 1981).

<sup>12</sup>Publish or perish is not, however, meant to be taken literally. In April, 1984, a University of South Carolina assistant professor who was denied tenure kidnapped the president of the university and unsuccessfully sought to convince him to reverse the tenure denial. When that strategy failed, the assistant professor committed suicide. Cf. Confucius Say: "He who has assistant professors for friends need not watch soap operas."

**Living a Dissertation**

**Kim Lane Scheppele**  
University of Michigan

At the end of George Orwell's novel *1984*, Winston Smith is taken to the mysterious Room 101 for the final phase of his torture. Although he has already been subjected to horrible deprivations and has maintained his resolve to keep his secrets, the horrors of Room 101 break his spirit and make him reveal the name of his illicit lover, Julia, a symbol of his resistance against the regime. The torture that breaks through all of Winston's defenses makes him confront his private worst fear, and Winston is powerless against this invasion of his own mind.

Dissertations are a bit like the personalized torture of Room 101. In writing dissertations, at least high-risk, ambitious dissertations, we ask questions that we take to be fundamental, and it is precisely because we take our tasks so personally and so seriously that dissertations are capable of becoming our means of torture. Just as Julia represented Winston's



Gayle Binion of the University of California, Santa Barbara, chair of the selection committee for the Edward S. Corwin award, recognizes Kim Lane Scheppele (left).

**Writing a Dissertation:  
Advice from  
Five Award Winners**

*Editor's note: PS invited the recipients of APSA's 1985 dissertation awards to reflect on their experiences in writing a doctoral thesis and to offer advice to others. Five responses are printed below. Citations accompanying the awards can be found in the Fall 1985 issue of PS, pp. 976-979.*

Kim Lane Scheppele is the recipient of the Edward S. Corwin award for the best doctoral dissertation completed and accepted during 1983 or 1984 in the field of public law. Her dissertation, "Legal Secrets: Common-Law Rules and the Social Distribution of Knowledge," was submitted by the University of Chicago. Her dissertation chair was James Coleman.

## Forum

ability to escape from the oppressiveness of Oceania, our dissertations represent attempts to escape from the weaknesses of the scholars who have gone before. And just as Winston had to give up Julia in order to survive in Oceania, dissertation writers have to give up their dreams of perfection in order to finish the project. When we finally complete a dissertation, we often find that we have produced a manuscript that has just as many flaws as the scholarship we were trying to transcend. Perhaps they are different flaws, but they are flaws all the same.

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*My suggestion to those writing a dissertation would be to avoid getting hemmed in by the literature or overwhelmed by the experts in the field.*

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My dissertation took five years to write. Although I started teaching a six course per year teaching load almost immediately after my prospectus hearing and could not hope to make fast progress, five years was a very long time to maintain my faith (and everyone else's) that I would indeed ever finish. Along the way, I developed some strategies for keeping the project alive in the worst of times, strategies which may be useful to share:

1. *Reading charismatic texts.* Throughout the dissertation process, I kept close at hand my "charismatic texts." These were books and articles that I admired, that reminded me of what good scholarship could be and that served as models when I got stuck. When I had a difficult time trying to figure out how to begin a chapter, I read chapter beginnings of my charismatic texts. When my writing style got stale, I analyzed what made the prose in these texts so compelling. When I felt I had run short of ideas, I looked to these texts for a sense of what counted as an interesting idea. Most of my charismatic texts had nothing to do with the topic of my dissertation; they represented styles of thinking that I admired. They exercised my mind and gave me the endurance to keep writing.

2. *Drafting in multiple formats.* While I was working on the dissertation, I kept a dissertation diary. Into this diary went proto-ideas, ideas that could not even begin to be written into a chapter. The diary allowed me to keep track of these stray thoughts and to measure my progress against my own early fumbblings. After I had some ideas in the dissertation diary, I would then move to a first real draft in another format. Invariably, my first drafts of the dissertation were oral. I was fortunate to have a number of friends who were willing to listen, in person and long-distance, to the early stages of arguments and to provide helpful criticism. The next stage involved the letter-draft. I had a wonderful advisor who was willing to read and respond to long letters outlining arguments of chapters. These letters then served as the basis for chapter writing. My first draft of the chapter was actually the fourth draft of the ideas, although each of the previous drafts had been in a different format.

3. *Creating a work routine.* Apparently, most people have their own idiosyncratic writing habits. Either they have only one sort of pen with which they can write or they can't live without the word processor. Either they require music to concentrate or they are distracted by the slightest noise. Either they work steadily in regular hours every day or they write in binges which leave them exhausted. Either they write with a particular audience in mind or they write for themselves. Most graduate students have not

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*I found it necessary to place strict time limits on my work.*

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yet figured out their idiosyncratic writing habits because they've mostly written in sprints rather than marathons or with some of the conditions (like deadlines and audiences) given rather than constructed. It is possible to do sprint and deadline writing out of phase with your ideal writing conditions. But open-ended marathon writing cannot be done that way. One needs to learn and indulge those writing habits that produce words on the page. Creating an idiosyncratic

pattern that becomes your own work routine is a necessary first step for serious writing.

4. *Blitzing*. There comes a time in every dissertation when it just has to take over your life. I resisted this for a long time, thinking I could get the dissertation done and still do normal things. But dissertations are greedy. They want every minute and they won't let go of you until you give in and give up everything, including all the social activity of the earlier phases. The phase of blitzing, diving into the dissertation and not coming out until it is done, means abandoning everyone and everything else—at least temporarily. The difficulty, as many people learn, is that much changes about both the writer and the world while the writer is hiding. At the end of the blitz, one sometimes finds one has, without realizing it at the time, broken with the past. It is this phase which most recalls Winston Smith's betrayal of Julia. The dissertation writer, like Winston Smith, betrays everyone and everything, at least temporarily, when faced with a personally constructed nightmare come to life. And after the betrayal, one becomes, like Winston Smith, deeply committed to the force which ruptured one's life. One may even receive praise for surviving the ordeal and for having emerged as a full member of a new community, sacrificing an old life as an intellectual adolescent for a new life as an academic adult.

The poet and novelist Marge Piercy, giving advice to young creative writers, in "For the Young Who Want To" (from *The Moon Is Always Female*, New York: Knopf, 1980, pp. 84-85) has obviously experienced the process of marathon writing and its stages of betrayal, commitment and the construction of a new identity. She wrote: "The real writer is one/ who really writes. Talent/ is an invention like phlogiston/ after the fact of fire./ Work is its own cure. You have to/ like it better than being loved."

## Reflections on Writing a Dissertation

**David Pion-Berlin**

Ohio State University

Writing my dissertation was an exercise in goal setting and accomplishment. It was rather easy for me to prepare a list of imaginable dissertation topics. It was much more difficult to shorten the list down to those topics which were doable. I had to make a preliminary assessment: can data sets be found or created to support a given hypothesis? I quickly realized that once a topic was chosen there were still many points along the way to completion when similar questions had to be asked. Setting goals and subgoals was an exercise in flexibility. It was frustrating to discover through research that some information was just not available. Therefore certain arguments had to be dropped or modified in light of empirical gaps.

While the research process may influence objectives it never determines them. To the contrary, I found it important to be creative in the design of a theoretical framework. This was the most difficult



David Pion-Berlin (left) receives the Gabriel A. Almond award from selection committee chair Robert H. Bates of the California Institute of Technology.

David Pion-Berlin received the Gabriel A. Almond award for the best doctoral dissertation completed and accepted during 1983 or 1984 in the field of comparative politics. His dissertation, "Ideas as Predictors: A Comparative Study of Coercion in Peru and Argentina," was directed by John F. McCamant and submitted by the University of Denver.