

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR DISSERTATION or THESIS COMMITTEE¹

The most important people in the academic life of a graduate student are the members of his/her dissertation or thesis committee. The committee chair is usually the director of the student's research and has a vested interest in seeing that the student does well and finishes promptly, but all members must be satisfied that the student has done a thorough and responsible job of research.

In the best of all possible worlds, the student-committee relationship is one of mutual intellectual respect and stimulation, warmth, support, and understanding. Faculty often learn as much from good graduate students as students learn from faculty, and their reputations rest in part on the quality of their graduate students.

In the less-than-perfect real world, however, such relationships sometimes fall apart. Faculty and students alike are human, with the same variety of likes, dislikes, preferences, personality traits, blind spots, and tender egos as any other group of people. What follows are some suggestions for choosing your committee, for working well with it, and for seeking help if things go wrong.

Establishing Your Committee

1. Think carefully about what special knowledge or expertise each member of the committee can contribute to your successful completion of the best possible doctoral dissertation or master's thesis. In addition to their research knowledge, methodological skills, and expert scholarship, the ideal committee members also bring the ability to emotionally support you, challenge and extend you, help guide you through the system, and provide stringent editorial input. Aim for this mix of skills whenever possible.
2. Do not confine yourself to those faculty members whose current research interests closely mirror your own; your choices are wider than you might think. Talk with other graduate students, with faculty members both inside and outside your own department, and to your graduate program adviser. Most departments have folklore about how particular faculty members interact with their graduate students. Do not choose a committee completely based on folklore; but do not ignore it, either.
3. If you already know who the chair should be because you have a good working relationship with a particular faculty member, talk with him/her about the makeup of the committee. S/he may already have established a network of faculty who work well together on committees. You do not have to accept all suggestions, but it is to your advantage to discuss your choices with the chair before you make them final.
4. Departmental traditions vary as to whether the student or the committee chair asks the other members of the committee to serve. It is advisable to inform a faculty member that you would like for him/her to serve on your committee. That gives the faculty members an opportunity to tell you if they will be on sabbatical, if they

¹ Taken from Graduate Division newsletter, 1996.

already have so many graduate students they cannot serve you well, or if there are any other possible problems they foresee.

Keeping the Committee Happy

1. Visit the members of your committee periodically and report on your progress. This suggestion serves several functions. Frequent consultation serves to recharge your creative batteries and helps you finish your dissertation or thesis more quickly. If you will have to orally defend your dissertation/thesis prior to final submission/approval, this assures that the faces around your oral examination table are familiar and understanding; you will be less nervous and will perform better.
2. As a bare minimum of consultation, provide each member of the committee with his or her own copy of the next-to-last draft of your dissertation/thesis. Most faculty members resent being asked to sign a dissertation or thesis that they have not seen until it is presented for the oral defense, or which is presented to them as a "finished product." If you choose your committee members wisely, every one of them can be of help to you with suggestions about style, organization, or approach.
3. You do not have to accept all suggestions about minor changes; but you should listen carefully to major objections. Consult, discuss, and redefine. Whether your future career is in academia, government, industrial research, or the private sector, you will be involved in collegial resolution of intellectual problems for the rest of your life. Start now!

Troubleshooting Problems

Most students maintain good relations with their committees, finish their research, and earn their degrees with no problems. Occasionally, however, differences of opinion regarding the research occur within a committee, or some personality conflicts may develop. If you find yourself in one of these situations, remember: By all means, try to stay on good terms with your committee chair and keep calm. Acceptable accommodations can be found to almost any problem and the Graduate Division can try to help you as you seek to resolve these problems.

Final Thoughts on Committees

Doctoral and master's candidates still have a great deal of responsibility, and hence, control over what goes on during this period of time--the role of the committee is important but limited. Most significantly, the conduct and presentation of the dissertation/thesis research is **the student's responsibility**. Meeting the canons of the particular discipline governing dissertations/theses in the student's field is, again, **the student's responsibility**.

Faculty can provide encouragement, suggestions, and opportunities, but it is not up to the committee to see that you get a degree. You must take the initiative, partly as a way of proving that you are serious about graduate research, partly as an overture to opening a person-to-person relationship that can be intensely rewarding.

Each student-committee relationship is unique. Some very successful ones are quite formal and distant; others are close and vivacious. You may need to do a little soul searching before you name a committee to determine what you want the committee to do for and with you. As one veteran graduate advised some new enrollees, "Don't necessarily choose as your long-term mentor the professor with whom you have easiest rapport, who gives ready praise, or who promises the least hassle. Choose one who will push you to excel."

Other Student-Responsibility Issues

Last but not least, it is **the student's responsibility** to:

- meet the MA thesis or Ph.D. dissertation formatting requirements as established UCSB Graduate Division in the publication *UCSB Guide to Filing Theses and Dissertations*, available at www.graddiv.ucsb.edu
- be aware of all applicable deadlines and apply for graduation in a timely manner.