

Proposing a Dissertation with a Free Rein

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Any Ph.D. knows that developing a basic statement of dissertation ideas rarely begins or ends with the formal proposal. In a sense, dissertators never stop “proposing.” Throughout the process of data gathering and writing, they must make sense of new ideas and information, contend with theoretical and empirical dead ends, and address the suggestions (or demands!) of advisors and committees. Nevertheless, the aspiring Ph.D. must start somewhere, and finding a starting point depends on one’s own aptitudes and interests and the expectations of the scholars who will ultimately assess one’s work. All of these may vary widely.

I’d like to focus on the experiences of those doctoral students whose advisors and other committee members take a largely hands-off approach at the earliest stages of the dissertation process—an approach I experienced in my own graduate education. My advisor and committee knew my interests and gave advice when I asked, but they generally provided me a great deal of independence in developing my initial thoughts and statements of my thesis and research design. Though “independence” may sound attractive, it is certainly not an unqualified good; it’s worth considering both the benefits and pitfalls of a hands-off committee at the proposal stage.

A sense of ownership is perhaps the greatest advantage of this relative independence. My work, which focused on the legal advocacy efforts of religious groups, was not a variation on my advisor’s own research agenda, nor did he attempt surreptitiously to drag my work closer to his own. Since his work was not a direct conduit for my research question, I investigated several bodies of literature, explored a variety of topics, and perhaps floundered around a bit, but I ultimately came to a set of ideas on my own terms. This early freedom had the added benefit of helping to maintain my interest throughout the entire project. Though I began to refer to the dissertation as “the

beast,” it was *my* beast and I never tired of living with it.

Relative independence also allowed me to think more broadly about various theories and methods than if my advisor had initially channeled my work into a narrow path of research. My earliest exploration of the dissertation topic drew from a wide range of subdisciplines in political science, as well as selected areas in sociology and history. This is not to say that a deep understanding of a narrower range of theories and methods suffered as a result of my breadth of study; that depth simply came later, as I began to refine my topic and see greater relevance in certain literatures.

Such benefits notwithstanding, this kind of independence is not for everyone. Even after only two or three years of graduate study, some students may have problems finding a topic without intensive guidance from senior scholars. These students may benefit from exploring a corner of their advisor’s research agenda, rather than struggling for another year to define their own. Because the job market tends to smile on those who are associated with established research themes, tapping into an advisor’s project may also help professional advancement. Moreover, in some cases graduate students will have little choice because their programs are deliberately designed to direct students toward narrow lines of research in which the department has particular faculty strengths.

Other graduate students, bursting with ideas yet left to their own devices, will be more likely to fall prey to the common problem of manageability. That is, they bite off more than they can reasonably chew and later face the painful realization that they need to redesign, or even redefine, their research to make it less unwieldy. Without some sifting by detached observers, creative students might try to force every passing thought into the dissertation. This can be a special problem when students confuse those ideas that are personally interesting with what is professionally interesting and likely

to generate some social scientific excitement. Committee oversight may help students avoid that problem.

Because a hands-off committee presents a mix of advantages and pitfalls, what should relatively independent graduate students do as they start to fumble around with a few ideas for their dissertations? One piece of advice comes immediately to mind: Start early! Procrastination is a disease that hits graduate students, especially those who are given a measure of independence, with particular force. You needn’t become frantic about finding that elusive topic, but you should always keep in mind that there will be a dissertation to write someday—and preferably sooner rather than later. There is no reason to despair about a lack of opportunities to help you find your way. In addition to advisors and other committee members, the political science discipline offers a number of built-in ways to get an early start through various professional experiences—seminars, conferences, reading groups, fellowship competitions, and so on—that may help the dissertator generate and refine a topic.

Graduate seminars provide one of the best avenues for doctoral students to begin to develop ideas. Yet many graduate students, not to mention departments themselves, use seminars primarily as preparation for general exams. This is shortsighted; even if they are a compulsory part of early graduate education, don’t overlook seminars as springboards into the dissertation.

Some departments offer courses or workshops specifically devoted to proposal writing and research design, while others simply leave that work to substantive seminars. Ideally, both kinds of courses should work in tandem. My substantive courses in judicial process and political culture introduced me to the theoretical puzzles and empirical realities at the center of my dissertation, while seminars on quantitative and qualitative research design helped me tighten my plan of attack. Both these

seminars and informal working groups of graduate students were ready-made not only for generating ideas, but also for obtaining critical feedback on those ideas from faculty and fellow students, many of whom continued as my best sounding boards far beyond the proposal stage.

You should also take advantage of academic conferences to present early versions of what might become portions of the dissertation. Conference participation prior to writing the formal proposal may help in many ways. You might take part in relatively coherent, well-attended panels with a clear focus, engaged and insightful discussants, and other participants brimming with constructive ideas. Even if, as is more likely than not, you aren't so lucky, you'll begin to build contacts outside of your department, bringing in a wider range of expertise; indeed, there might be scholars out there who know more about your topic than your committee, and who might be willing to provide advice. You'll also benefit from the accountability of externally imposed deadlines, an

antidote to procrastination. The oral presentation may help you sharpen the arguments that will ultimately evolve into the core of the dissertation—not to mention that it's never too early to get some practice for the job talk. Keep in mind, however, that conferences are generally intended as a medium for presenting active scholarship, not research proposals or glorified literature reviews. Yet you shouldn't be bashful about substantive research that may have a hole or two. Conference papers may be preliminary and tentative, with caveats here and there, and they often bear little resemblance to finished dissertation chapters, but presenting the work may still have the benefits I have mentioned.

Among all the professional opportunities I encountered in the dissertation process, writing a proposal for fellowship competitions was the first time I put together a serious statement of my thesis topic and research design. There was some urgency: These competitions were about *money*. My advisor and I gave more attention to proposals for fellowship

competitions than to the formal proposal for the department, and that attention ultimately paid off with funded research. There was also a happy byproduct: I was forced to present a clear, brief statement of the theoretical puzzle, to link that puzzle to relevant research, and to explain how I planned to unravel it. The accountability of looming deadlines and financial stakes kept me on track.

Participating in these broader professional experiences makes clear that proposing the dissertation is not merely an exchange between the committee and the dissertator. Those committees that deliberately encourage relative independence at the early stages of the dissertation do so because they recognize the benefits of letting students explore a bit. That independence heightens the importance of the range of opportunities the profession may offer to graduate students, from seminars and workshops built into graduate curricula to conferences, fellowship competitions, and other "extracurricular" possibilities.