

# Our Mysterious Dissertation Committees

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Advice



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By John Smith September 06, 2017

Of all the mysteries in graduate school, the greatest may be the dissertation committee.

When it works well, it offers academics an opportunity to shape both burgeoning scholars and future research in the field. Unfortunately, for many academics, the allure of serving on a doctoral committee — also called a thesis committee — fades quickly.

Any committee assignment comes with its share of challenges, of course, but the dynamic of a dissertation committee accentuates some of the more subtle and nuanced ways in which faculty members exercise privilege, not only over students but over other committee members.

**The I in team.** One of the oddest things about a thesis committee is how its members usually rely on the graduate student to mediate faculty communication. Most of the time, the student tells each member what the other committee members want. Any corporate consultant would simply suggest that professors meet to figure out what's best for a student rather than have that student mediate three or four separate, running dialogues for months on end.

Truth be told: Faculty members on a committee may not talk with each other. Additionally, in academe, we value not having managerial approaches to our scholarly labor. The last thing we want is more meetings.

I have yet to come across a departmental or university description that spells out particular roles for members of a dissertation committee. Of course the chair is often expected to coordinate things like exam dates and meeting schedules. I thought we had all silently agreed that the chair would also do the line editing of the student's chapters, the review of source material, and the manuscript's larger structure. As for the role of the other committee members, it seems to be anyone's guess.

When I was a young and naïve graduate student forming my own doctoral committee, I assumed that the members would all individually read my dissertation and make friendly suggestions. I was quickly relieved of that misconception. I learned that not every committee member was equally engaged with my writing. I also learned that they might not even like each other.

We won't need more meetings on how to train and retain a diverse faculty if we actively create a culture that is welcoming and responsive to everyone.

Two of my committee members disagreed seriously about both the content and form. Sitting at his dining table after reading my fully drafted dissertation, one committee member said, "I feel like I'm reading a young Hemingway. Don't change a thing." Three hours later, at a different dining table, another committee member told me, "I cannot have you leaving here this poorly of a writer. We'll need to go line by line through all five chapters." Contrary to how I felt at the time, I now know that the second adviser was more accurate and helpful than the first.

Dissertation writing is very stressful, what with the looming job market, the high cost of living in many cities, the balancing act of life and health — all while being expected to produce intellectual gold. To that, add the anxiety caused by those committee members who either: (a) are not reading your chapters, or (b) *are* reading your drafts but have confused your writing for theirs.

The student will need those same people to write "stellar" letters of recommendation. So how should you deal with conflicting committee advice? Should you push back? Students who don't might find themselves between Associate Professor Rock and Full Professor Hard Place.

Such situations are difficult for committee members as well. I've had several of my advisees tell me that a professor down the hall does not like my personal writing style and won't approve chapters that follow my writing advice. And I was chair of those committees. I would hate to jeopardize my students' working relations with those other faculty members, so I haven't said anything. Until this essay, I guess.

**Who is being examined here?** While not as oppressive an experience as it is for the student, the challenge of serving on a thesis committee is one of those things no one ever tells you about. No mentor ever says, "When you're an assistant professor, you'll be the third member of student committees, which means you should read closely only those chapters about your subject area and essentially sign off on the document since the chair is, by default, the line editor."

From what I can tell, however, thesis committees across academe do not share a standard or norm. For all I know, in some departments, the tradition is to leave the line editing to a junior member of the committee.

Most new academics just assume we should read the whole document and offer advice as we see fit. Then, once the committee members and the student are in the same room for the thesis defense (a scheduling process that can take months to arrange), a wholly other dynamic kicks in that confounds even the most ethnographically-minded of us. Performance, affect, repression, hero worship, excitable speech — really, you'd be amazed at what people in these meetings say and do.

I've personally seen professors read from their own drafted writing to show how they would have written about the

student's topic. I've seen a faculty member suggest a different research topic to a student who had already completed four years of fieldwork. I've also heard a few passive-aggressive remarks — ostensibly made to the student but really directed at a colleague in the room ("Of course you won't have this problem, if your spouse works for [major publisher].")

Meanwhile, the graduate student sits there sweating out the results. More times than should be the case, I've wanted to text the student, "Just keep smiling. This isn't about you."

And that's really the rub. When faculty members gather in a room with a student, we often seem unable or unwilling to recognize the privilege we exercise. Perhaps we so dearly want to be respected for our scholarly labor — in a world that values our work less and less — that we take it out on each other.

I have been sitting on doctoral committees for well over a decade. Since becoming a full professor a few years ago, I have had students ask me to chair their committees. For me, student advising is an act of passion and activism, and I take great enjoyment in working with students from historically underserved communities. For the scenario I am about to share, I should tell you that I am openly gay and nonwhite.

To accentuate the strangeness of committee membership, allow me to tell you about a situation that occurred in recent years. I chair the committee for a nonwhite female graduate student whose work is excellent. I was meeting with her and the other members of her committee — all of them prestigious men who had held the title of full professor, and been at my university, longer than me. They had each done fantastic research with minority populations. The scene was set for one of those moments when seemingly well-intentioned liberals rely upon coded hierarchies of privilege.

The student wondered aloud if she should write the dissertation in a personal voice, bringing in some of her poetry and field notes. That approach is not novel. Countless ethnographies have been written in personal voice and have experimented with prose (I did so myself in my dissertation and I see that approach often in scholarship I read, review, and edit). So I responded positively that such a dissertation would be very well received since it would be easier to publish as a book shortly afterward.

The colleague to my left interrupted me with a laugh, put his hands up in a "slow down" motion, and said "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's just focus on the dissertation." Perhaps sensing some sort of pack mentality, the other guy chimes in, "Yes, we don't want to start talking about the book when we haven't yet written the dissertation." The third guy laughed along with the other two. I'm still not sure what was funny.

Consider: I am the chair of the student's committee. I advocated for her since before she was admitted. I called the meeting. I hadn't suggested she drop out of the program or dance out her dissertation. I was simply suggesting that she should use whatever writing voice feels best for her and that a more personal voice would make for a more publishable book down the road. This student had the opportunity to produce something quite moving for her, her community, and her readers. We should be supporting her — not just in theoretical tones and feel-good affirmations — but in her actual practice of writing and envisioning the project as the manuscript is coming into being.

At the time, I shrugged it off, "it" being three colleagues minimizing my perspective. I'm sure every "junior" scholar — some more than others based on their gender, race, and the like — can empathize to some extent. I don't know if anyone else in that room — including the student — gave the matter any thought. My colleagues may have no idea that they just shut down the one gay professor at the table while also sending the signal to the student that her primary adviser might not be dishing out prime advice these days.

If the people in that room read this essay and recognize themselves, I hope they consider it an invitation to compare our perhaps varying perceptions. As academics, we don't always work in environments where we simply approach each other directly after a thesis defense. Because — and as our students often forget — I also rely on faculty colleagues for my merit and promotion reviews as well as letters of reference for grants and fellowships. In

academe, you can pass your exams, get a job, get published, get tenure, and discover that someone still keeps you in check.

**The elusive compassionate campus.** A mentor once told me that faculty egos are so large because the stakes are so small. But for many minority scholars and scholars in training, the stakes are not small at all. In academic culture, where so much of our work is done in isolation, dissertation committees are one of the places where we can create community.

As such, they are fertile ground for reassessing our interpersonal dynamics. Some advisers perceive their advice to students as mandates, not suggestions. Often, faculty members project their own perceived intellectual reputation on their advisees. Some professors think that their advisees must carry on a certain theoretical perspective. Some hold out their signatures in front of the students like carrots, thinking that they must create work that we would create, or else we will withhold our approval.

Moving forward, we might collectively benefit from some clarity about our relationships with graduate students and with each other. Here are some ideas that wouldn't hurt:

- We could be more direct with graduate students (and with each other) about the role each of us play on the committee — how, specifically, each of us can help. That would vary from committee to committee. For some students, each committee member could read certain sections of their dissertation; whereas for other students we might be available to offer detailed training in their research methods or professional mentoring beyond the degree.
- We could tell students our availability more clearly. No one is happy when a committee member who hasn't read the full work shows up to the defense with substantive demands. We could start asking students to clarify with the committee chair who is doing the line-editing. We could verbally affirm that we do not expect the student to duplicate our work, our theories, or the ways we communicate our research.
- As for the committee members, we could start talking with each other more often. The forum of the thesis committee invites us to be collaborative in our aims and methods. Supporting colleagues around the table isn't about appreciating that they look different, but that they came to this shared space differently and for different reasons. Helping students find their own voices begins with being able to hear the voices already around you. Perhaps hearing would lead to an actual valuing of different modes of scholarship.

Our exam processes for students reflect how we relate to each other as colleagues. We won't need more meetings on how to train and retain a diverse faculty if we actively create a culture that is welcoming and responsive to everyone.

*John Smith is the pseudonym of a professor in a social-studies department at a public research university.*