UPS AND DOWNS ON THE DISSERTATION ROAD

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Writing a dissertation – it's long, it's tedious, it's lonely. It's a common spot for students to bog down, although when we interviewed several dissertation writers recently, we found that most felt abashed about how long it was taking them to finish.

"I always feel like I'm not working hard enough," says Naomi Yavneh, a graduate student in Comparative Literature who is finishing her prospectus. "I feel as though most graduate students work harder than I do."

"I'm not the only person who takes a long time, so I know there are other issues there," says another humanities student. "But I don't know where I stop and the institution's problems start."

Instead of blaming yourself or the University, consider that many of the problems associated with dissertation writing are inevitable. Writing a dissertation—an important but difficult rite of passage to "intellectual adulthood," as Counseling Center psychologist Carol Morrison puts it—is by its very nature a bumpy transition. There is nothing wrong with you if you are struggling on this path, and there are things the Graduate Division can suggest, based on student interviews, that might help you plot a successful journey.

THE TRICKIEST CURVES IN THE ROAD

Although the research/dissertation stage of graduate work varies widely among disciplines, there are two points that seem to give students the most trouble: the period that commonly follows oral exams, when many students develop a topic and write a prospectus; as the actual writing of the dissertation. Most of the students we talked to found that collecting data was interesting enough to keep them going. Students in the sciences were the exception; however, they reported that the transition from taking classes to working in a lab can be difficult.

POST-ORALS: CONSIDER THE VOID

Or the abyss. Unfortunately, this is where many students find themselves when they begin the research/dissertation phase of their work, often immediately after they pass their oral examinations.

This is a place where there are no classes, no deadlines, no regular direction from instructors, no intermittent rewards of grades. Many students go into the abyss utterly spent from studying for their oral exams. Few feel prepared to begin immediately the arduous journey of developing a dissertation topic, if they have not already done so; writing a prospectus; and then a dissertation. "Everything has been structured for you up to that point, and then you have to switch gears and automatically be able to talk charge," says Yavneh. "You pass your exams, and the way you learn about your exams is by talking to people who have taken them, but I found that when you get to the prospectus, it's just expected that you know what you're doing."

Although the necessity of radically switching gears comes as a shock to some students, the faculty is well aware of the move toward independence and generally encourages it.

"…faculty gradually begins to remove the props supporting the student and to place more responsibility on the student for problem formulation, evaluation, execution and defense," says Sheila Widnall of graduate education in her "AAS Presidential Lecture: Voices from the Pipeline" (*Science*, 241:1740).

So, if you feel that the terms of graduate school have changed, you're right. You're also completely justified in feeling you're in unfamiliar territory and in asking for help.

BEGINNING AGAIN

"Graduate school success really involves the negotiation of two successful programs, one ending with passing course work and preliminaries…and the other beginning with 'applying' for admission to write a dissertation, through submission of an acceptable proposal," writes David Sternberg in *How to Complete and Survive A Doctoral Dissertation* (St. Martin's Press, 1981). "In a very real sense, dissertation writers are starting over again…"

Recognizing that you are, in a way, beginning again when you reach the research/dissertation stage can free you up to ask for the help you need and make you more tolerant of your doubts and anxieties about this new phase of your scholarly career. You are not alone if you feel you know very little about the mechanics of preparing a prospectus or dissertation, for example.

"I didn't really know what my prospectus was supposed to look like or what it meant to write a dissertation," says Yavneh, whose adviser was out of the country when she began to think about her prospectus. "Somebody says write a prospectus—well, great, what's a prospectus?"

When her adviser returned, Yavneh explained that she felt she didn't know enough about writing a dissertation. The response was gratifying. "She said, 'Well, no, it's not all your responsibility, and, of course, you don't know how to write a dissertation. You've never written one before, and that's my job.' No one had ever said this to me before, and it made me so happy that I had chosen to work with her…"

COLLEAGUE, MENTOR, OR TASKMASTER?

Being straightforward with the faculty at this point about what you don't know can save you months, even years, of work. But as students make the transition to

what Morrison refers to as "intellectual adulthood," many feel embarrassed to reveal to their advisers what they don't know. At the same time, they resent not getting more help from the faculty.

"You can just stop at some point and be satisfied with what you have. I wasn't ever satisfied with what I had, so I continued to work."

-Fred Wellstood, Physics

Students expect their major advisers to be "…a critic but constructive counselor, a relentless taskmaster but a supportive colleague, a model of scholarship but an understanding tutor," according to Ann Heiss, who studied Berkeley doctoral students in the 1960s ("Berkeley Students Appraise Their Academic Programs," *Educational Record*, Winter 1967).

The subtleties of this role, combined with the demands of teaching committee work, and research, make it difficult for professors to anticipate their students' needs. This means that most students have to ask their advisers for help, initiate meetings, and use the faculty as the resource they are fully intended to be.

The students we talked to who were aggressive in seeking help from their advisers were not disappointed.

"I feel as thought that's their job," says Walter Wong, a student in Public Policy, "so I don't feel bad about calling them and saying, 'I'd like to meet with you on Tuesday.' And the faculty I've worked with have never made me feel that I'm imposing on their time."

Often students mentioned that they would have liked more direction from their advisers at the beginning of the dissertation stage, but that they were satisfied with the help they got in the more advanced stages of their work.

"I think earlier on I would have (liked more direction) but not any more," says one student. "Now I feel I have better judgment. I don't need it as much.

"If you feel you're not getting the help you'd like from your adviser, psychologist Carol Morrison cautions against getting "stuck" in resentment about it, which can slow your dissertation work to a crawl (or even a full-stop).

"It's as though it's the person's last chance to have the parent/mentor that he or she has always wanted…" she says. "Sometimes I think that students are indeed wishing for more than is reasonable. Many times I think they are wishing for something that is quite reasonable, and it's just not going to happen."

If you'd like more help from your adviser, by all means ask for it. If, for whatever reason, it isn't forthcoming once you've stated your case, move on. Find other ways to get the help you need, either from other students, postdoctoral students, or other professors in the department.