

BEWARE THE HIDDEN AGENDA

Reprinted from the UC Berkeley Graduate Student Newsletter, The Graduate, Spring, 1989

As you move from the more structured period of graduate school—taking courses—to the less structured, more independent phase of dissertation writing, be aware that part of your training now lies in a new realm of professional experience that may not be explicitly stated to you.

“Ideally, as this process occurs, (moving into the more independent stage of doctoral work), the student has access to a variety of structured professional experiences...including opportunities to present and defend research results..., to evaluate and criticize the work of peers, to formulate and carry out research tasks of increasing importance, to participate in dialogues and debates about scientific and technical issues (for students in the sciences and engineering), and to discuss future career plans as they relate to current interests and activities,” says Sheila Widnall in her AAAS Presidential Address (*Science*, 241:1740).

Widnall says that often faculty members do not explain these expectations, which are an important part of graduate education, and necessary components to achieving intellectual and professional independence. She also believes that women and minority students are particularly vulnerable to missing out on these experiences, either because of lack of confidence or because they find them painful. Although increased sensitivity to this issue is called for on the part of universities and faculty, students should be aware that writing a dissertation is only one component of attaining “intellectual adulthood.” Participating in the community of scholars in your discipline, by attending meetings, presenting research, or other means, is vital.

THE CASE OF THE MOST-SIGNIFICANT-PAPER

The dissertation is the biggest single effort (series of tasks!) of a student’s graduate career. There’s no getting

around it, and it’s this crowning-touch aspect of dissertation writing that can bring on a case of writer’s block.

Feeling that you have to produce the most thorough, original, definitive work possible can trigger the one-more-trip-to-the-library-and-I’ll-know-enough loop (or the collect-more-data diversion) in hopes of finally producing a dissertation that is “good enough.”

“You can just stop at some point and be satisfied with what you have,” says Fred Wellstood, a Physics student who filed his dissertation last November. “I wasn’t ever satisfied with what I had, so I continued to work.”

It’s in the definition of “good enough” that many students finally liberate themselves to work on their dissertations and even to enjoy it. (Yes, we found some students who like working on their dissertations.)

“They (the faculty and other students) think excellent,” says Wong, who experienced a phase of feeling intimidated by what he had to produce. “I’m satisfied with being pretty good.”

What most students don’t realize is that “pretty good” is usually more than enough to earn a signed title page. Professors are more realistic than students are about what can be accomplished in a dissertation and generally expect considerably less than their students do.

“My adviser told me that I had more than enough to write on and that I should finish,” says Wellstood. “The experimental situation in some ways made me satisfied enough, not 100 percent satisfied—there were other things I wanted to do. It would still not be a complete thesis but at least it would be a reasonable shot at what I was trying to do.”

WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS ANYWAY?

When the dissertation writer’s road gets bleak, many students say they retrace their steps to see if they really want to complete the journey.

“Sometimes I hate it, but most of the time I like it,” says Sharon James, Comparative Literature student. “When I remember why I started graduate school in the first place, when I chose this topic, then I really do enjoy it and it’s nice to get back into page-to-hand contact with the poems I want to read and discuss.”

Nerad asked herself a question posed by the author of a time management book who urged people to think about the priorities in their lives.

“What would I do if I had only three or five months to live?” she says. “I asked myself this. And I really wanted to finish my dissertation! Somehow that freed me. I found out I would like to write, even though it is a really big chore.”

Writing a dissertation is a big chore and one that inevitably has its moments of discouragement and anxiety. Reviewing the reasons you began graduate school and what you’ve accomplished so far (completing course work and passing the qualifying exams are no small achievements) can keep you on course.