

On the Review of Research Proposals

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I've prepared here a few general comments about the process of having dissertation proposals reviewed by the faculty. You need to understand that you're in a New World now; no more Kansas for you. "Kansas" here represents the only academic model that you've probably ever known — made up of the classroom or equivalent, the term, and the summative grade by the instructor at the end. Leaving aside for the moment the question as to whether this traditional model is ever effective at stimulating quality intellectual effort, my point is that applying the "grading" model to the proposal review process is not appropriate, and may be actually harmful to the ultimate goal.

The fact is that most proposals, even those that have been worked on for several weeks in the context of the Dissertation Proposal Seminar, are pretty weak. An initial proposal will inevitably need a large amount of work to turn it into an effective dissertation, and sometimes will require such a substantial overhaul that it turns into an entirely different project. The task of the review is to present you with a Reality Check. This is really our — and perhaps even your — first real measurement of your proposed project against the criteria used formally to evaluate dissertations. Of course we're going to find things wrong with it — no dissertation, let alone an early draft of one, escapes unscarred from the required examination of its intellectual and scientific content and merit. Sometimes we're able to confine ourselves to a relatively mild set of suggestions for improvement; sometimes students need to be jolted into a more promising direction, one that won't let you down short of the goal of a high-quality dissertation. But there is always something. No prospectus will ever inspire the faculty to offer up a flourish of trumpets; praising with faint damns is about the best you can look forward to.

When students react to this review as though it were a grade, they're not only missing the point — they're using a model that's often counter-productive to what's needed at this stage of the doctoral education process. We've commented on a number of occasions that the end of course work and the start of the dissertation constitutes a fairly complete revolution in the academic paradigm — from consumer to producer, subordinate to equal, respondent to initiator, collective to individual. Unless you choose to go back to school for another doctorate or a professional degree — which is unusual but not unheard of — you've become, or at least are becoming, an independent intellectual unit. Nothing will ever be "graded" again, in the sense that virtually everything you did in the academic domain up until now was "graded".

This does not by any means say or imply that your work will not be assessed, measured, and judged by your intellectual community; on occasion those assessments will be fiercely

negative. But the standards are now those of the academic and scientific community generally, not the whims of the teachers — Miss Hanawalt and the thrice-damned Mr. Brooks (who told us with great confidence that dinosaurs were mammals) come to mind for me — that confused, upset, and annoyed you by their arbitrary and often capricious application, played favorites among your peers, and distributed rewards that you were supposed to value because they were part of your “permanent record” but which had neither intrinsic utility to you nor corresponded particularly well with your own sense of accomplishment in any intellectual task. In short, you now need to deal with academic criticism not as a summative assessment of you, not even of your work, but as a formative exercise in strengthening you and your study in your capacity as participants in the Great Intellectual Snowball.

If you’re looking on a research review as a grade, you need to reframe the situation— to create a new description of what’s happening emphasizing what’s next, not what you’ve done to date. What you placed before your reviewers didn’t really matter — it was inevitable that it would emerge from the review in a more or less different shape, and it’s going to take several more different shapes at least before it turns into the Big One — the Big D. More criticism is actually better than less criticism, because you’ve learned something. If all the Committee did was to pin a gold star on you and send you down the path, you’d have a right to feel a little short-changed. You want the benefits that come as the thoughts of the faculty help shape your study in better directions; that’s what you’re paying us for, after all — access to our minds. But in order to begin changing or reframing yourself and your understanding of academic critiquing, you’ve got to begin by shedding that old “grading” thing.

I repeat — it doesn’t matter at all what you have done up to now; what matters is what you do from here on out. A prospectus, and eventually a dissertation, isn’t graded, it’s reacted to in a proactive sense. You’re not being personally judged here, and your worth assessed — we’re trying to help you go in the right direction. And if the review’s overall reaction is that they’d like to look at your study again before they turn you and your Chair loose — all that implies is that they want another crack at helping you. That’s positive, not negative.

Your theoretical framework is probably the most important thing in your prospectus. A good framework describes a clear line running from the research questions to the literature to the propositions/hypotheses to be tested to the methods. In the literature review, it’s not length that makes the difference, but what you pack into it. The initial proposal is not a lot more than a statement of interest, true, but it’s a statement that has to show that you understand to some degree the geography of the land you’re proposing to explore. If you were to send us a proposal on your proposed climb of Mt. Everest, we’d be looking for some description of cold-weather gear and dried food; if the proposal then begins by describing the wet suits you’re planning to buy and the difficulties of handling camels, it would be irresponsible of us to send you off on your journey without at least calling to your attention that there are some things about Mt. Everest that you aren’t paying attention to. If there are three or four major areas you’re going to draw on to create your theoretical approach,

you only need 2-3 well-selected examples of each area to show that you have some idea of what you're getting into. What we're looking for is evidence that you understand where to start looking for material in your areas of interest, not that you already know it all.

In the methodology, again we're not looking for complete resolution of all the issues, but simply evidence that you've thought about the major issues to be resolved. What we sometimes refer to as "the Sixfold Way" (design, measures, controls, sample, procedures, analysis) isn't a magic mantra, but it's pretty fair to say that you'd better have at least a sentence if not a bit more about each of them, because (as the faculty has learned from collective decades of doing field research) the problematical areas that you put off thinking about hoping that they'll go away are precisely the ones that will bite you on the b*** when you're least equipped to cope. As an example, one recent proposal describing a project to study how teenagers use the Internet never said anything about the proposed sample. This led the reviewers to suspect that the student had put off thinking about it, figuring "How much trouble can it be to round up a bunch of kids anyway?". The answer, as he would have found out, is "a whole lot"; the Committee was worried that he'd have everything in place and then wind up chasing all over, getting all frustrated, and winding up with some scruffy batch he managed to bail out of Juvie Hall (well, perhaps an extreme example, but you get the point). How much would it have added to his time and the length of the prospectus to add a couple of sentences about the need to recruit the participants carefully against some basic criteria, what groups he'd reach out to in his recruitment, and above all, how many he thought he'd need? All we really wanted to know is that he recognized that participants for his sample aren't just going to materialize out of the Transporter when he energizes the button, but have to be cultivated, watered, and catered to. At this stage, we don't need all the details of how he's going to do it (though by the proposal he'd better have all that figured out, you betcha!)

To repeat — this ISN'T about rating you, or whether you "miss the boat", or anything of the sort. We're not keeping score, and the number of tries it takes you to create a good prospectus, a good proposal, and eventually a good dissertation is relevant only to you and only in terms of whether you have the mental and emotional energy to keep at it. Like anything else more complicated than chewing gum, some people find academic research to be intuitive and easy, while others find it unnatural and difficult. But that's pretty much orthogonal to the question of whether they do good research or not. Some people who find the language and the process to be simple and natural have carried out awful studies, and some to whom following the rules is like pulling teeth have carried out some gems of studies. This is precisely why we do NOT give letter grades on the prospectus, the seminar, or any part of the dissertation process.

In sum, we're just trying to help you here. Telling you that everything's going to be fine and letting you toddle off towards Everest in your wetsuit on the camel isn't doing you any favors. Likewise, sending you off to test some hypotheses that you're later going to find out have been tested to death, or to start out setting up a field project that we pretty much know that you're going to find out halfway through is unworkable, or for which you haven't

a prayer of getting enough statistical power, would be professionally irresponsible on our part.

A degree of vagueness can be seen as a good thing — that is, you haven't cut off too many possibilities. Like any implementation process, the creation of a research study is one of sequentially making decisions about what TO do and thereby simultaneously cutting yourself off from all the other possibilities that you COULD have chosen. At the prospectus stage, you can go in a lot of different ways, some of which are going to be better than others. When it evaluates prospectuses, reviewers always trying to strike a balance between a study that's too rigidly and narrowly defined, and one that's so loose it barely exists.

It is legitimate to think seriously about the magnitude of what you're getting into. Many people, very good and talented people, decide when they're at the point of the dissertation commitment that they don't choose to invest the time and energy to carry them through to the completion of the project. I have a good friend, for example, who is a very effective organizational development and change consultant who decided, after completing all her course work and passing her qualifying exams at a top-tier school with flying colors, that the effort she'd have to invest in creating a project and writing a dissertation would be better invested elsewhere. She was right; although she could have earned the degree, it would have cost her more in terms of her mental and emotional resources that it would have been worth to her in later years, given what she does best. As in any other major turning point in life, it's reasonable to conduct self-examination. "Γνοθι σεαυτον", as the Greeks were wont to say, and it's good advice generally. The saddest cases are the people who invest a lot of themselves and their resources in a dissertation project that they can't finish, or that disintegrates halfway through into a hopeless muddle of things that it turns out they can't measure or turn out to have no variance, or that they just get terminally bored with and can't bear to look at any more.

In sum, the review of your proposal makes no comment on you, just about your remaining work with us here at TUI. We're here to help, and the best we can do at this point is not let you set off down a road that we know leads nowhere. Ultimately it's up to you to finish this thing.