

THE VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK

From *The Graduate*, UC-Berkeley

What kind of help does the faculty think graduate students are entitled to during the dissertation stage of graduate school? And what can you do to make sure you get the help you need –whether it be getting your chapters read on time or your letters of recommendation sent by the deadlines?

Doctoral candidates in the social sciences and humanities had a chance to hear answers to these questions on November 5, when the Graduate Division sponsored a faculty panel on “The View from the Other Side of the Desk: What Can Students Expect from their Major Advisers during the Dissertation Stage of Graduate School?”

Professors Gerald Feldman (History), Ernst Haas (Political Science), Laura Nader (Anthropology), Susan Schweik (English), and Elaine Tennant (German/Scandinavian) discussed issues ranging from what students should expect from different members of their committees, to whether a doctoral dissertation should be viewed as a union card or as a masterwork.

One point that came up very clearly at the beginning and was re-stated throughout the discussion is that there is no right or wrong way for the advising relationship to be.

“It’s a little bit like asking questions about a marriage,” said Elaine Tennant. “Each one is different, and there isn’t any right way as long as the members of the team are agreed on what the ground rules are.”

According to the panelists, a student’s discipline, personality, and particular stage of graduate school help determine the “ground rules,” –the type and amount of advising the student will get from his or her dissertation committee. A good piece of advice came from Ernst Haas and has to do with choosing a committee.

“Make sure that every person on the committee is really interested in your topic,” he said. “Don’t pick someone whose interest you cannot guarantee. You are wasting your time and the committee’s time if you put somebody on there who really isn’t committed to your topic.”

The panel had a variety of opinions on what a student can expect from a major adviser, or dissertation chair.

“The main thing that you ought to be able to expect is prompt reading of the writing you have submitted,” said Susan Schweik. “With the dissertation, the more that you are putting down on paper, the more help you can get. But the main priority is getting paper to your faculty member and setting up occasions to talk about it.”

History professor Gerald Feldman added that he thought students should expect “care and concern for your most significant problems while you’re writing the dissertation. This includes not only reading the dissertation, but also help in getting grants and advice about source material, archives, and field research.”

He added that students should also expect help from their major advisers in the form of advice and prompt letters of recommendation when they are going out on the job market.

A TWO-WAY STREET

If that's what you can expect from professors, here's what this busy and generally over-committed group expects from you: in a phrase, lead time.

"I expect students to be self-reliant, to meet the deadlines that they agree upon, and I expect them to turn in materials with some kind of agreement with their lead faculty," said Anthropology professor Laura Nader. "Students shouldn't turn in their dissertations a month before their postdocs begin and say 'please no changes'. At the same time, professors shouldn't have a dissertation six months before the post doc begins and not have it read in time. We really have to remember that there's an interaction between two people here."

Gerald Feldman offered additional advice. "Don't expect your dissertation adviser to have a computer-like brain that is capable of remembering sections of a chapter that you wrote two years ago," he said. "Provide your dissertation adviser with coherent amounts of work that he or she can keep in mind and really comment on in some kind of sensible way."

And if you're trying to get a faculty member's attention about a missed deadline? "A note, a telephone call, a reminder that a student has a deadline," said Elaine Tennant. "Any of those are perfectly fair game."

The faculty panel discussion was held in conjunction with a series of workshops on dissertation writing for doctoral candidates in the humanities and social sciences. The Graduate Division will sponsor a similar series in the spring for students in the biological and physical sciences.