

By Leonard Cassuto JULY 15, 2012

"You are the CEO of your own dissertation," I tell my advisees. "My title is 'adviser.'" But who's in charge, really? My task may be to give advice, but my approval is required for the thesis to pass and the degree to be [awarded](#). It's the graduate student's dissertation, but the imprimatur belongs to me, so perhaps the process belongs to both of us.

But that equation leaves out some other important actors, namely the other members of the dissertation committee. Usually ranging from two to four members in addition to the adviser, the committee also confers approval of a dissertation, and the group's approval is just as necessary.

What is the role of the committee compared with that of the adviser? The answer is not at all clear. "We don't know as much about the adviser-committee relationship as we should," said Daniel Denecke, associate vice president for programs and best practices at the Council of Graduate Schools, in an e-mail to me. "It's an area of graduate study that deserves more attention."

In *The Graduate Grind*, a good book on graduate school from the student's point of view, Patricia Hinchey and Isabel Kimmel observe that "while all faculty members have power over students, they also have unequal amounts of power among themselves." And that imbalance can cause problems.

The imbalance is highly field-specific. In the laboratory sciences, the adviser owns the means of production of the thesis. Students work in their advisers' labs and are [financed](#) by their grants. The student's name goes on any publications that result from the experiments done there, but so does the adviser's. The dissertation, usually a collection of experimental results, goes out under the student's name, but it's thoroughly underwritten by the adviser's money.

Given that setup, we might expect the committee's role to be limited—and it usually is. Just as the U.S. Senate provides "advice and consent" before ratifying treaties, members of dissertation committees in the sciences offer typically broad oversight to the work that the adviser is managing in detail in the laboratory. For committee members to get closer than that would risk the appearance of meddling in a colleague's financial affairs.

The humanities are organized quite differently. Again, we can follow the money. Doctoral students are usually financed on the departmental level, either through stipends or compensation for undergraduate teaching. The adviser has no financial stake in the student's dissertation work, and the adviser's name appears nowhere within any publications that result—except maybe in the acknowledgments.

Instead, the adviser's investment in the student's research takes the form of time. A good adviser in the nonlaboratory fields (including mathematics and some of the social sciences) will read multiple drafts of a dissertation and meet with the student often.

How many drafts will that be, and how often will those meetings take place? It depends on some combination of mutual preference, temperament, and taste. But when a dissertation reaches the end of the line in the nonlab fields, the adviser's stake in the student's work is intellectual and emotional—and it's usually considerable. Not for nothing are so many Ph.D.'s often seen (and not only by themselves) as the scions of their advisers. The proliferation of metaphors of descent is only one indication that the adviser-student relation can be as personal as it is professional.

In nonlab fields, too, the committee does less than the adviser. I tell my advisees that they may, as a rule of thumb, count on each committee member for one close reading of each chapter. Further readings by committee members (such as the one at the very end, when the whole thesis is turned in) will be more cursory, more in the nature of ratification than detailed engagement. That's the brief I extend to myself when I serve as a dissertation-committee member.

When is the best time for students to cash in that one careful reading?

Again, it depends. Students should obviously aim for the moment when they will get the most out of each committee member's particular approach and expertise. That might come near the beginning of the process: Maybe the student needs help for a piece of writing to find its way. Or maybe the close reading would be more helpful once the chapter is mapped out, the research done, and the findings need critical evaluation. Part of a student's job as CEO of the dissertation is to decide (with the adviser's guidance) how deeply to involve the committee at each stage.

Which leads me to a hypothetical. What if the adviser and the student decide to bring the committee into the process relatively late in the [game](#), and then the committee disapproves of the work?

I heard about such a case recently. The two committee members felt pressured to approve work that they didn't think was ready. The student (who had kept the committee apprised of his plans and schedule throughout) felt blindsided. His adviser had been telling him that his dissertation was nearly ready, and now his committee, instead of conferring overall approval with suggestions for revision, was making significant demands. While supporting his student, the adviser saw merit in his colleagues' views. Mostly, he felt out of control of a process that he was used to guiding.

That particular case was resolved collegially through a compromise but nevertheless left everyone involved feeling grumpy (as good compromises often do). The student worked like a sled dog and revised as much as he could in a truncated period of time, and the committee members voiced their reservations but approved his dissertation. Because the student had decided not to look for academic work before the dispute even started, questions of how to phrase letters of recommendations never arose.

I wonder, though: What if the opposing sides had refused to meet halfway? The student could have fired the committee and sought easier-to-please replacements, but it might have been hard to find colleagues willing to step in under those terms. The impasse might have persisted.

That scenario is admittedly unlikely because faculty members treat each other and their students with consideration most of the time. But it does point to real and potential difficulties based on the different responsibilities and obligations of the adviser and the committee.

Committee members need a middle ground between presumptive deference to the adviser and an unpleasant [demonstration](#) against a graduate student's nearly completed dissertation. Where might that middle ground lie?

Some years ago Columbia University's English department did away with the position of adviser entirely and mandated that each committee member (there are three) hold equal sway. That arrangement, which was designed to limit the imperial power of the adviser, theoretically levels any power imbalances at the outset. In practice, though, students seek a main point of contact. Moreover, the outside world expects them to have an adviser, especially when they apply for academic jobs. A three-headed adviser ought to confer an advantage, but not when each head expects one of the others to take the lead. Such a system requires a lot of collegiality of its participants—maybe too much.

Instead, this is an area where the humanities might take a cue from the sciences, where many departments demand that Ph.D. candidates give periodic semiformal presentations to their committees. Some humanities departments already require that Ph.D. candidates formally defend their thesis proposals before their whole committees. Surely that's a good thing: The student gets more input, and the committee gets to witness the project's liftoff.

But such close monitoring needs to extend beyond takeoff. Professors need to regularly check graduate-student work as it progresses, and we need to do it together.

Lots of Ph.D. programs in the sciences require such group checkpoints. The biomedical group within Brown University's Ph.D. program in engineering requires written and oral progress reports each year, while the department of industrial engineering at the University of Houston requires semiannual "research progress reports" to the adviser and the committee together. The botany-and-plant-sciences department at the University of California at Riverside requires that an annual "Student Progress Report" be submitted following a meeting between the student and "all members of his/her Guidance, Thesis, or Dissertation Committee."

That approach would translate readily to nonscientific fields. If a doctoral student in the humanities presented an annual progress report in the form of a 20-minute talk to his or her committee, everyone on the panel would be informed together about the state of the project and could share suggestions (and/or cautions) about how to proceed. In addition, the important decisions about when to have committee members look closely at each chapter could be planned out thoughtfully.

We worry a lot—and rightly so—about dissertation writing becoming too solitary. The same concerns should apply to dissertation advising. We need to collaborate more on the work we do to guide students through the writing process. No matter who has read which parts of a dissertation at any given point, coming together regularly to confer about the work in progress would put everyone on the same page. We could use more of that.

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories—including descriptions of how dissertation committees work in different departments—at lcassuto@erols.com.