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WHAT SHOULD A PROSPECTIVE PH.D. STUDENT EXPECT from the faculty member who chairs his/her doctoral committee? We know that chairing a doctoral committee involves a great deal of responsibility and is critical to the success of Ph.D. candidates. The author of this issue's column, Professor Marc J. Schniederjans of the University of Nebraska, lays down a set of basic rights that should be afforded doctoral students in the pursuit of their degrees. In doing so, he challenges all of us who chair doctoral programs to ask ourselves whether we indeed uphold these basic student rights. He also provides guidelines for doctoral candidates in selecting a prospective program chair.

## A Short Bill of Rights for Ph.D. Students

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In the previous column, Varun Grover listed a variety of pitfalls (see "10 Mistakes Doctoral Students Make in Managing their Program," *Decision Line*, May 2001) that can be avoided by doctoral students if they exercise some care in managing their program. It is good advice for those students who are currently in a program. But what about those students who are still searching for a doctoral program and, perhaps more importantly, their program chairs? The fact is, the key decision for a student in a doctoral program is who will chair their program. Does the school's reputation matter? Sure, but from my perspective, the chair of a doctoral program is the most important critical success factor for the long-term success of a future faculty member. What should a prospective Ph.D. student have a right to expect of a good doctoral program chair?

Having served on well over 50 Ph.D. committees, I have come to see a very clear set of rights that should be granted to every doctoral student from his/her program chair. These rights were granted to me by my program chair, N. K. Kwak at Saint Louis University, and have been encouraged by my departmental chair, Sang M. Lee at the University of Nebraska, during the last 20 years I have been at the institution. While my school and most doctorate-granting institutions require faculty to demonstrate their qualifications to serve

on Ph.D. committees through the accumulation of many years of academic accomplishments, that does not mean the faculty member will automatically have what it takes to serve as a doctoral committee chair. It takes a special willingness to commit one's self to a process that most of my colleagues kindly liken to giving birth to a child. And like the commitment that one makes in raising a child, a faculty member should realize the job will last a lot longer than the few years the doctoral student maintains residency at a university during his/her program.

The job of chairing a doctoral committee involves granting candidates a number of expected rights that can extend throughout an academic lifetime. I will touch on four of these basic rights that doctoral students should look for in their discussions with prospective faculty who seek to chair their doctoral program.

### Find a Recognized Expert in the Dissertation Subject's Area

While it is rare for a doctoral student to know the exact area he/she will base their dissertation on prior to being accepted at a university, it should be the right of every student to select the best qualified faculty member for the dissertation subject. It is the ethical responsibility of faculty to make sure this right is given to students even if it



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means drawing talent from other colleges than their own within a university or personally accepting a heavier than normal workload. It may also require changing doctoral chairs during a student's program to maximize his/her educational outcome. It should be the responsibility of students to choose a faculty member who has written research papers or books in the areas in which they might want to do their dissertation.

### **Find a Chair Willing to Work with the Student on Research PRIOR to the Dissertation**

In universities where chairs are selected well before the dissertation work begins, the chair should begin encouraging students to give presentations and write publishable research as soon as possible. Emerging from a doctoral program as "published" should be viewed as a right for students. To begin the process, program chairs should be active in two or more professional societies and encourage participation of their doctoral students to join and participate as well. However, writing papers for presentation should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as the beginning of a process to publish a journal article.

Every term paper a doctoral student writes should be considered by their program chair as an opportunity for a publishable paper by the student. Chairs should also encourage their students to work with other faculty to gain the experience and publication advantages many faculty can offer students. The chair should particularly encourage students to do top-quality work to make every paper a possible publication. Along the way, the chair will learn about their students, especially their strengths and weaknesses in writing. This insight can then be used to help students improve their skills as they face the eventual dissertation work ahead.

It should be the student's responsibility to help keep the chair informed about their term paper research opportunities and ask for their advice on working with faculty.

### **Find a Chair Willing to Work with the Student on Research DURING the Dissertation**

Doctoral students should have the right to expect access to their program chairs daily during their dissertation period. This is critical since students might spend days of work going in a direction that might later be discarded by the program chair. With the advent of e-mail there is no excuse not to be in close contact with doctoral students. Chairs should also be willing to customize their time requirements to meet each student's individual needs. It should be the student's responsibility to help keep the chair informed about their progress as well as the obstacles they are experiencing. Usually chairs can quickly get their students back on track.

### **Find a Chair Willing to Work with the Student on Research AFTER the Dissertation**

Doctoral students should have the right to expect their program chairs to willingly offer to work with them after they complete their dissertation. It is impossible to impart all the knowledge of the "ins" and "outs" of successfully managing one's career to a Ph.D. student during their program. There are strategies and tactics to a successful publication career that only an experienced researcher can know and teach young scholars over a longer period of time. There are also unseen doors that must be opened to positions within professional organizations that a chair can and must offer their students. Helping former students achieve promotion, tenure, and awards for their research is both mutually beneficial and the most satisfying experience a committee chairperson can experience. Much like a parent who savors their child's success, so too does the former doctoral committee chair take pride in their former student's later accomplishments. The amount of pride is directly proportional to the long-term commitment and contribution the chair has made during the later years to that former student's career.

In summary, the rights I have stated in this column are basic, and most faculty members who serve as doctoral program chairs subscribe to them without question. Yet, it has been my experience that some faculty (perhaps because of the personal workload they are carrying) fail to provide these basic rights. It is my feeling that a doctoral student should affirm these rights with a prospective faculty member before settling on them as a program chair. ■

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