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This month's column is by one of the best known researchers and mentors in the IS field, Professor Daniel Robey. When I looked over the "FAQ page" that Dan had written, I realized that his column could just as easily have been titled "The Eight Great Questions in a Doctoral Student's Life." In this column, Dan distills his many years of work at two large universities with doctoral students who have hailed from many different countries. Professor Robey has a unique and inspiring conceptualization of the mentor-student relationship. In this enlightening series of questions and answers, he allows all of us to share in his nurturing vision for a vital relationship that often becomes the cornerstone of our professional lives.

## Answers to Doctoral Students' Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Daniel Robey, Georgia State University

Over the past 20 years, I have had numerous opportunities to meet with doctoral students from schools in North America, Latin America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Usually such meetings occur on a visit to campus to talk about my research or at a doctoral consortium. I have also worked directly with doctoral students of my own at Georgia State University and Florida International University. I enjoy all of these opportunities to share ideas with people who are preparing themselves to enter the profession of higher education that I have found so rewarding. I tell my own students that they come to me at a good time because I am in a period of my career that I call the "mentoring frenzy." I feel privileged that new scholars might listen to my advice, and I am grateful for the invitation to author this column for *Decision Line*.

In this article, I offer some direct answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) that I have heard during my interactions with doctoral students all over the world. To each of these questions, I offer simple and direct advice. I offer a rationale for each answer, but I do not obscure my advice with convoluted rhetoric. Although each of the issues raised is complex and deserves thoughtful consideration, I hope that the direct approach will be more appealing and easier to remember.

The FAQs and their answers presume that doctoral students are far enough into their programs of study to be considering dissertation topics and potential advisors.

Moreover, the questions and answers look forward to the early years of one's academic career and, as such, may be of interest to junior faculty as well as doctoral students. The FAQs are ordered with respect to the progress a student has made in his or her program.

### How should I choose an advisor for my dissertation?

*Choose an advisor who is available, supportive, knowledgeable, and responsive.*

These four criteria appear in the order of their importance. Availability is most important because a dissertation requires regular interaction in face-to-face meetings in addition to remote interactions via email or telephone. If an advisor has moved to another school, taken a sabbatical, or simply does not make time to see students, choose someone else. If you are considering a junior faculty member as an advisor, be sure that you understand the potential impact of your prospective advisor's application for tenure and promotion at your university. An advisor who is denied promotion and tenure cannot physically be "there" for you.

Support is essential because a dissertation will certainly pose many challenges, and you will need intellectual, emotional, and material support. An ideal advisor can provide all of these modes of support, so look for people who are supportive and who care about you.



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Knowledge is important, but do not expect an advisor to be “the expert” in your topic area. Good advisors can advise well on topics in areas where they possess general knowledge but lack specific experience. General knowledge (and interest) suffices.

Finally, responsiveness is needed because slow responses to questions about topics, analyses, and methodology will lengthen your dissertation experience. A good advisor is one who sets other things aside to read and comment on your work. I frighten my own students by telling them that I refuse to be the bottleneck in their progress toward a finished dissertation. I promise three-day turnarounds on all submitted material, putting the onus squarely on them to make progress toward completion.

Do not choose an advisor simply because he or she is a famous name in the field. You will not “bask in the reflected glory” of a famous advisor for very long. More probably, you will be obscured by your advisor’s shadow and forever be known as “Dr. Biggie’s student.” If a famous name is available, supportive, knowledgeable, responsive, and is dying to work with you, you are truly blessed.

### **How do I choose a dissertation topic?**

*Choose your advisor first and allow the advisor to develop a topic with you.*

This may seem like strange advice because most students believe they should choose an advisor who is an expert on the topic selected by the student. The problem is that, left to his or her own devices, a student may never settle on a single topic. I suggest choosing a general area of interest and choosing an advisor who meets the criteria discussed in my answer to FAQ 1. Your advisor—if he or she is available, supportive, knowledgeable, and responsive—can be a valuable resource in formulating your topic.

You must also understand that the dissertation is not the only research you will ever do. If you have trouble deciding among different topics, pick the topic that is most timely or most feasible and choose it as your dissertation. You can do the remaining topics later if they still seem interesting.

Choose a dissertation topic that is sufficiently interesting so that you will be motivated to work on it. Don’t make it your life’s work. Few people become so well known for their dissertations that their later careers are materially affected. Smart students (and

advisors) view the dissertation as part of doctoral education, so a good dissertation is one from which the student learns and which is finished in reasonable time.

### **Should I review for journals and conferences if asked?**

*Yes.*

Reviewing is an essential part of intellectual life and has major advantages to the reviewer. Reviewing exercises your critical faculties and gives you insights into the process by which manuscripts are developed before publication. It can be reassuring to students, who have read only final work in the journals, to see scholarly work in its formative stages.

By accepting review assignments, you also signal to journal editors that you are interested in becoming professionally active. If your reviews are good, you are likely to be asked to review more papers in the future. In time, your superior reviews and personal track record may lead to invitations to join the editorial boards of journals in your field. Although the demands on your time will surely increase with such appointments, editorial board appointments are noteworthy accomplishments that are well worth attaining.

Limit the number of your reviews, however. I suggest no more than four reviews per year for a doctoral student. This amount will give you valuable experience and professional exposure without taking time away from other projects related to your study. Proceeding slowly will also give you time to absorb the feedback that is typically provided to you from the editors and other reviewers.

When you graduate and take a full-time university position, I recommend that you limit your reviewing activities to one paper per month. You may have to decline invitations, but as long as you do not decline all of them you will be regarded as a responsible member of the profession.

### **In my own research, should I collaborate with other authors or should I try for solo authorship?**

*Both.*

If you collaborate with other authors on every paper you write, you will not demonstrate the capacity for independent work. In most institutional environments, dem-

onstrating independence is important. However, you do not need to generate a large number of solo-authored papers. Usually, one or two solo articles in six years is sufficient to convince a promotion and tenure committee that you are able to complete research independently.

Jointly authored work is often better work because it incorporates the contributions of multiple authors with different strengths. Better work means more work published in better journals. Thus, you should not doggedly pursue solo projects where colleagues are willing to offer help that you really need to make such projects succeed.

However, you should not view joint authorship as a strategy for reducing your workload on a project. Consider a joint project to be one where everyone on the team contributes 100 percent. Add in the transaction costs, and you actually get more total effort for joint projects than for solo projects. This is the reason why most published work is multi-authored; it reflects more effort and expertise.

You should seek to establish productive relationships with a limited number of colleagues. In establishing co-authorship arrangements, I suggest that you work with people that you like. Collaboration can be tremendously rewarding, and it can be tremendously frustrating. Choose your co-authors wisely.

### **What is my obligation to co-author papers from my dissertation with my advisor?**

*I don’t know, but you should get it straight before misunderstandings occur.*

Some institutions have clear norms about the rights of dissertation advisors to co-author with their students. In extreme cases, students are expected to repay the favor of dissertation supervision with co-authored work, even though the advisor may contribute little effort to manuscripts prepared after the dissertation is finished. In such cases, the norms should probably be observed even if they seem unfair.

In an ideal situation, the advisor will respond to invitations to co-author dissertation-related articles but will not expect it as a “divine right.” Ideally, an advisor will contribute meaningfully to joint manuscripts and serve as a colleague instead of an entitled person who expects to be “paid back.”

To avoid misunderstandings, students should discuss co-authorship arrangements with their advisors well in advance of the completion of the dissertation. A well-chosen advisor should have little difficulty relating to the student's need to clarify ownership and responsibility for manuscripts emanating from the dissertation.

### In general, how should the order of authorship in co-authored work be determined?

*Put the project initiator and leader first.*

This criterion acknowledges the importance of vision and direction on a project. On papers initiated by students (e.g., course papers or dissertations), I believe that first authorship should go to the student. However, there are several additional criteria to consider:

- Alternate the order of authorship on multiple papers. This criterion works for a team that will share work equally across multiple articles.
- Place the authors in alphabetical or random order. These criteria usually are selected when contributions are equal and where the authors cannot determine other criteria to apply.
- Put senior faculty first, followed by junior faculty and students. This criterion bestows first authorship on people who enjoy a higher social position, independent of their contributions to the work. I personally think that first authorship should be earned, not bestowed, so I do not favor this criterion.

- Give first authorship to the person who needs a publication the most. This criterion introduces a selfish motive and a logical flaw. We could all argue that we need first authorship because it does more for us to have our names first than to have a co-author's name first. First authorship should not be a charitable contribution by any author to another, so find another criterion that makes more sense.

### What should my research priority be in the first year after getting my Ph.D.?

*You should prepare two manuscripts from your dissertation for submission to top journals. At least one of these should be solo-authored.*

The importance of "mining" your dissertation cannot be overemphasized. Although you may be tired of the dissertation after spending two to three years with it, you must shape it into the form of journal articles soon after your defense is completed. The dissertation is probably the most carefully supervised work you will ever do, and it would be a shame not to take advantage of the extensive feedback you have received.

Many students seek new projects with new colleagues when they take their first academic positions. I recommend against making binding commitments to new work before the old work is complete. You can discuss possible future work with your new faculty colleagues, but you need most of your research time in your first year in a new position to convert your dissertation into published articles.

### Should my publication strategy in the years following my studies emphasize quality or quantity?

*Quality.*

You can fulfill all of your professional ambitions with a series of premier journal articles, and your colleagues will recognize you for it. A portfolio filled with large numbers of articles in obscure journals is valued less than a portfolio with three, four or five outstanding articles in recognized top-tier journals. Clearly, not everything you write will end up in premier journals. But premier journals should be your main target.

I am sure doctoral students have many more questions than the eight that I have posed on their behalf. My answers to these questions should not be taken as the only correct answers, and I do not assume that all doctoral students are the same and need the same advice. One's individual advisor may be able to provide deeper insights into a particular student's situation. Nonetheless, having pledged not to waffle on my advice, the answers given above are direct and reflect the collective concerns of many students in many different academic settings. ■

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### Graphical Report

The shipping pattern and labels found in A9:E12 in Figure 1 makes a good candidate for a graphical report, and there are several good options. The first works well when there are only a few rows and columns and includes a table of the shipments and is shown in Figure 5. This is a color column graph (option #4) with a data table.

The inclusion of a Data Table with the graph may not be as attractive when the names of the supply and demand cities are

longer, or there are too many rows or columns (more than 5). When the model has a few rows and many columns, then the column graph without the data table is a good option. At that point, the colors may be a bit confusing, and so if black is chosen along with some patterns, it is not a bad choice. Figure 6 shows such a graph for a problem with 3 Plants by 6 Warehouses. This could be accompanied by the semi-automatic report instead of a data table.

A final option is to choose the 3D column graph (option #7) for problems with a moderate number of rows and columns, as shown in Figure 7 for a third Transportation model example. The only problem with this option is that some columns can get hidden behind taller ones in front. The 100 units of Lost Sales at Tucson are hidden in the back corner unless the series are reversed under the graph options. ■