

*Enhancing the*

ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT FOR  
DOCTORAL STUDENTS

*SOME GUIDELINES*

The Executive Board of the Graduate School offers these policies and guidelines to help define the expectations of students and the responsibilities of faculty for doctoral education. They are likely to contribute to program quality, improve student morale, limit attrition, and shorten the time it takes to complete the degree.

We also seek to provide doctoral programs with examples of good practice, which will assist the Graduate School in advising faculty and students when serious questions and concerns arise.

Among the topics covered in this document are: department guidelines, program advising, the prospectus, the dissertation chair and committee (considerations for candidate, considerations for the dissertation advisor, considerations for the cognate members and considerations for committee members), and dissertation support groups.

These guidelines are derived from conversations with faculty and graduate students, from examination of policies already in place in some of our doctoral programs, from recommendations of the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), of the Association of American Universities (AAU), and of Bowen and Rudenstine (contained in their new book, *In Pursuit of the Ph. D.*), and from a recent Berkeley study of the conditions under which students complete their degrees.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN  
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## DEPARTMENTAL AND PROGRAM GUIDELINES

In collaboration with graduate students, departments and programs should, in writing:

define the objectives of graduate education in the discipline;

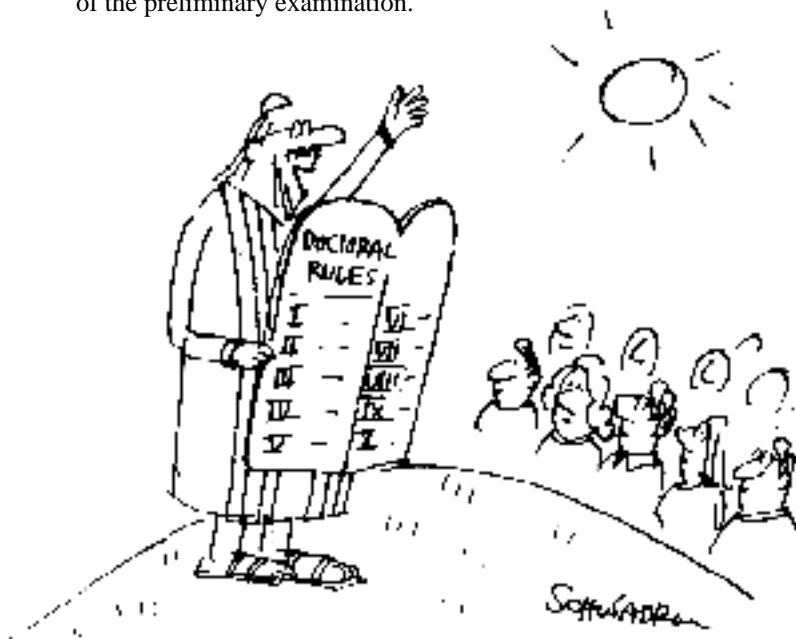
describe what is expected in qualifying and/or preliminary examinations; and

explain what constitutes a successful dissertation and oral defense.

DEPARTMENTS AND PROGRAMS should also:

encourage students to begin research related to their dissertation as early as feasible in their graduate careers, preferably before they take prelims, to ease the transition to candidacy; and

assure that coursework, orals, and preparation of a prospectus function as stepping stones to the completion of the dissertation. This may involve making the writing of a prospectus part of the preliminary examination.



## PROGRAM ADVISING

FACULTY assigned as program advisors should help students understand the process of becoming a professional in the discipline.

The obligation to learn and to take seriously the academic advising of students should be reinforced by the department or program, and advisors should be appropriately rewarded. Departments should assign advisors to students as they arrive on campus, and should periodically:

- review the effectiveness of their advising procedures;
- discuss alternative approaches to advising students; and
- mentor junior or newly arrived faculty in advising procedures.

The responsibilities of ADVISORS include:

- communicating the goals of the program, and the nature of the milestones to degree completion;
- undertaking a clear and well-defined process of assessment, which allows students to know their standing in the program;
- promoting seminars and other research activities that ease the transition from coursework to dissertation research and writing;
- discouraging the postponing of prelims beyond the third year of the program;
- helping students to identify faculty with whom they will do research, and ultimately, the whom they will do the dissertation, and
- promoting fairness in the distribution of financial support within the department or program and offering timely information about the distribution process.



STUDENTS should work with advisors to lay out for themselves a road map (or “critical path”) for completing the program. Strategies to accomplish this include:

- getting complete information about degree requirements, major milestones, timetables and deadlines, and available financial support packages; and

- seeking information about how well things are going, especially at critical stages in the process. This can be of value in detecting problems early and correcting them.

**RECOMMENDATION:** We recommend that an approved prospectus be made a requirement for candidacy.

A prospectus is a student's proposal or plan for dissertation research and writing. Departments are asked to consider the following as minimum requirements for an acceptable prospectus:

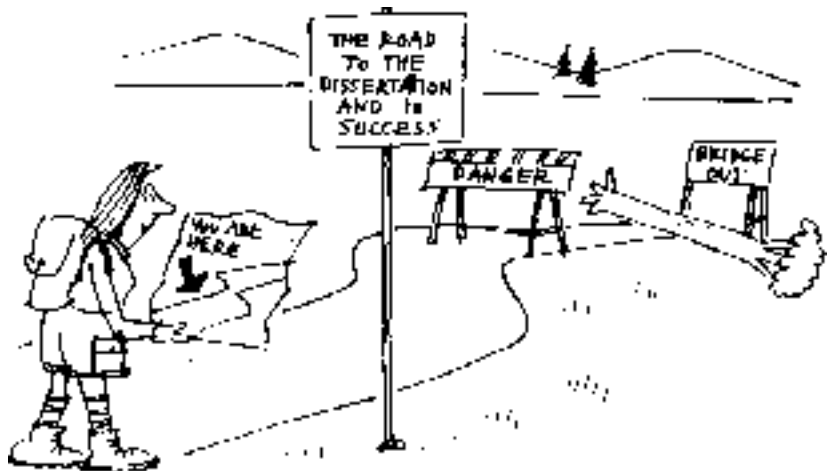
a statement of the proposed dissertation topic, its underlying hypotheses or objective(s), and the importance of the proposed work to advancing the understanding of the discipline;

a plan for a review of major literature and bibliography, demonstrating the student's mastery of the literature of a particular subject area and how the research topic relates to prior published work; and

a description of methodology to be used in the research and a review of the basis on which the conclusions will be drawn.

An idea of the approximate length of an acceptable prospectus should be communicated to students.

A carefully prepared prospectus can provide a clear "road map" for the dissertation. The dissertation proposal should be refined by the student and chair in consultation with the dissertation committee.



**RECOMMENDATION:** It is recommended that, with the prospectus, the department or program require a formal, written plan for completing the research and dissertation, and that this plan be an agreement signed by the candidate, the dissertation chair, and committee members. Moreover, the candidate should meet several times during the process and at least annually with the chair and the dissertation committee, to review progress on the dissertation and draw up a plan for the next steps in the process. All plans should be placed in the candidates departmental file. *The Graduate School's consideration of any extensions of time to degree will be based on a review of the timetable.*

Plans should include:

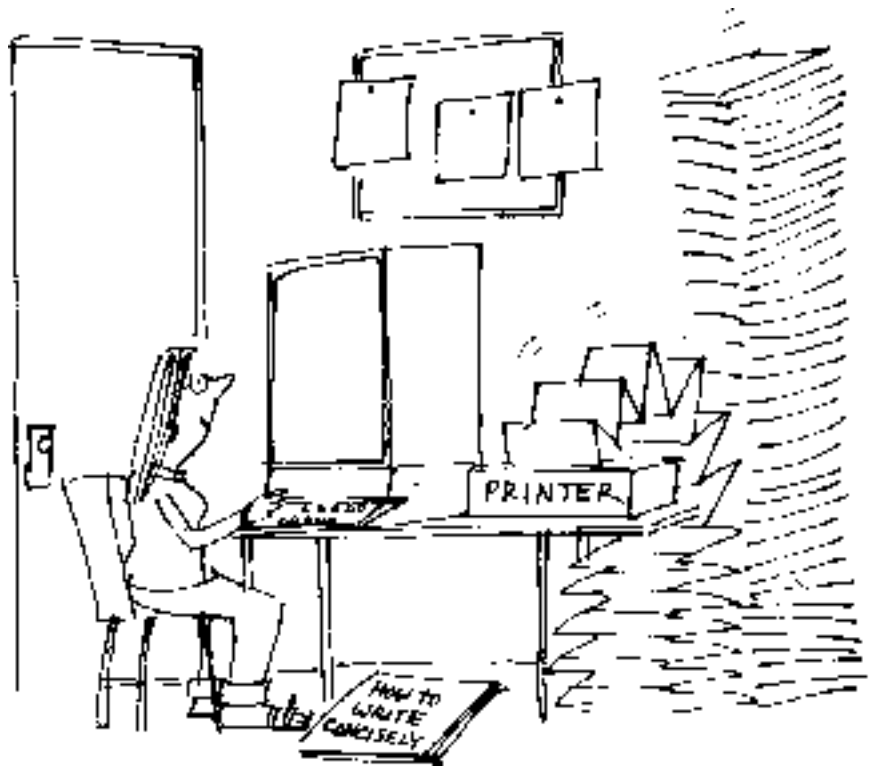
- a timetable for completing the dissertation. The schedule of anticipated faculty leaves and absences should be considered when drawing up this timetable;
- a tentative schedule of meetings of advisor with candidate, and where appropriate, of the student with the entire dissertation committee, to provide consultation both early in the process and on a continuing basis until the dissertation is approved;
- a suggested timeline for submission of a draft of the first portion of the work; and
- an outline of the types and duration of financial support that are anticipated to be available during the period involved in research and writing and the kinds of resources—faculty, laboratory, library, and computer—that will be needed.

In agreeing to the plan:

The CANDIDATE should pledge, insofar as possible, to meet the timetable, and to adhere to the scheduled meetings with the advisor and the committee.

The DISSERTATION ADVISOR should be committed to the task of coaching the dissertation author to write in the accepted style and language of the discipline, and to provide appropriate support to the student academically and intellectually. When necessary, the advisor will recommend that the student enroll in technical writing courses as well.

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE MEMBERS should understand that some dissertation writers may desire meetings throughout the process, to provide feedback and guidance. In any event, they need to make the same commitment to timely review and return of drafts as the dissertation chair.



A good temperamental and intellectual fit between candidate, dissertation advisor, and committee can be critically important to a productive relationship.

## Considerations for the Candidate

Before selecting a dissertation advisor and committee, candidates should speak with other experienced students in the program. One graduate school advises candidates to consider the following questions before deciding upon an advisor:

What is the reputation of the advisor within the field of study?

How compatible are the advisor's work habits with the student's?  
How long will it take to return written materials with comments?  
Is the faculty member willing to serve as an editor?

How accessible is the advisor for discussion? How much time does the advisor spend away from campus?

How much freedom will be granted in the choice of a dissertation topic?

How much help will the advisor give in obtaining funding for students?

Does the advisor have a reputation for ethical behavior and for being intellectually and psychologically supportive of students?

How long do students take to complete their degrees with this advisor, and, at least in the case of domestic students, what is the placement record of the advisor's students?

Candidates are reminded that every program has its own procedures for assigning advisors to students; that these procedures should be followed; and that faculty members will ask their own questions of the student.

## Considerations for the Dissertation Advisor

In agreeing to serve as dissertation advisor, faculty should be prepared to spend the time and effort involved in supervising the dissertation research and writing.

In agreeing to work as dissertation supervisor, the faculty member should:

reach an understanding with the student about what constitutes a reasonable time period for the review and return of dissertation drafts;

discuss how much editing she/he is willing to provide;

decide what procedures will be followed in the submission of sections of the dissertation, i.e. whether they come only to the advisor, first to the advisor and then to the committee, or simultaneously to the advisor and the committee as a whole.

## Considerations for the Cognate Member

The cognate member of the dissertation committee should:

be familiar with the standard for doctoral research;

represent the Graduate School and its faculty, maintaining high standards of quality for the dissertation; and

provide the intellectual stimulus from a field related to that of the candidate.

## Considerations for the Dissertation Committee Members

Because the dissertation committee is charged with the supervision of a candidate's dissertation activities, the entire committee should agree to be a resource upon which the candidate may draw throughout the period of dissertation-oriented research and writing.

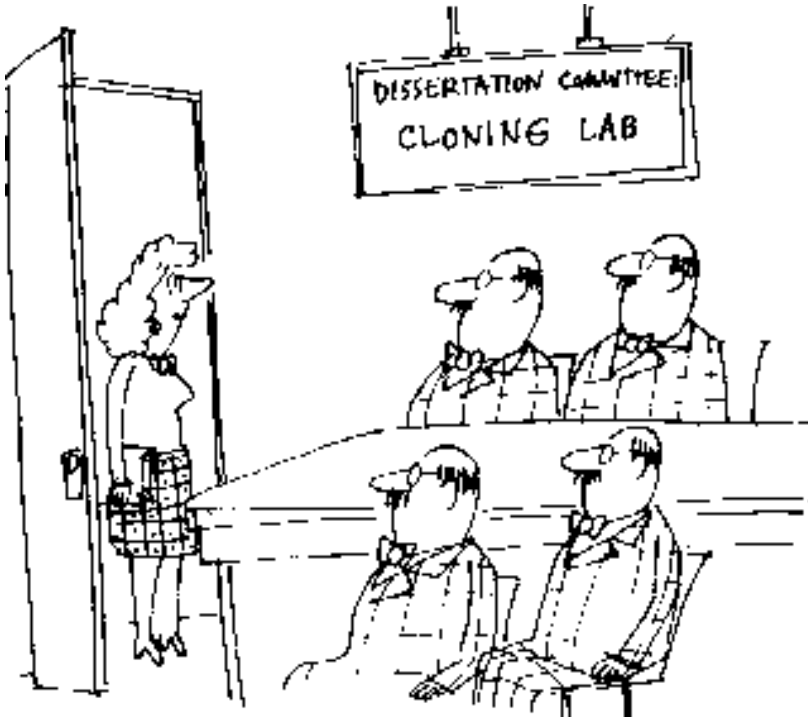
CANDIDATES AND FACULTY involved in the enterprise should recognize:

that the dissertation is a demonstration of the capacity for independent work that marks the beginning of a scholarly career, not a magnum opus in itself;

that candid and open communication, as well as a supportive intellectual, psychological and ethical collaboration, are essential to success; and

that there may need to be changes in the committee membership before the process is completed. These changes should be made as smoothly as possible to protect both candidate and faculty members from adverse consequences.

Should the student encounter what he or she considers to be inappropriate obstacles to completion from the dissertation chair or committee members, the student is free to consult the Graduate Dean.



## DISSERTATION SUPPORT GROUPS

To assist in the dissertation writing process, the Graduate School will promote and sponsor dissertation support groups and encourage departments to sponsor such groups. Groups may meet in Rackham facilities, and the Graduate School staff will, when requested, provide such support as helping to identify interested participants and arranging for faculty to meet with the groups to provide informal feedback and accounts of their own experiences.

The groups may be composed of candidates drawn from within one field of study, or they may be interdisciplinary in their format.

The advantages to such groups are that:

they provide an opportunity to share experiences, including practical tips on dissertation writing, and accounts of the frustrations that may be involved in the process;

they enable candidates to feel less isolated and help them to make the transition from taking classes to doing research and writing; and

they encourage candidates to develop initiatives within their own departments—based either in ideas borrowed from other programs or on mutual, shared strengths—such as sponsoring conferences or finding placements.

