

CHOOSING A DISSERTATION OR THESIS ADVISOR/MENTOR

Miriam Stark
Fall 2013

There is no one right or wrong way to choose a dissertation or thesis advisor. At UHM you are assigned an interim advisor, with the understanding that you should feel free to select an alternative advisor after you have gained some experience in the program and some time to sort out your research interests. Some people choose a professor with whom they have previously worked, or for whom they served as a teaching or research assistant. Remember that your mentor must be your advocate. She/he must be someone you trust, and who will help you do your best work possible. That means that she/he is the first person on your committee to read your writing drafts, and the primary person who writes reference letters as you apply for professional opportunities and graduate funding.

You should choose a mentor who is knowledgeable in your domain of interest. This is the person who will write the most influential letter for positions you seek. This person is chiefly responsible for your professional training--remember, the mentor/mentee relationship is a professional one, with duties and responsibilities on each side. We try to outline those mutual responsibilities below.

Competent mentoring is critical to the completion of any student's program of study.

QUALITIES TO CONSIDER

The person whom you select as your advisor should:

- Be someone with whom you are comfortable working
- Actively encourage you to do your best work and *not* accept mediocre work from you
- Regularly make time to work with and support you, regardless of her/his own professional schedule
- Write you strong letters of recommendation
- Give all your work a thorough and critical reading and provide you with detailed and useful comments on your drafts
- Be well positioned in the professional world. It is not advisable to have a retired faculty member, or someone outside the department as your dissertation advisor, with some exceptions (e.g. due to your research topic).
- Have a demonstrated ability to formulate research questions and design studies; these qualities are reflected in a productive and consistent publication record
- Have a deep familiarity with current research in your area
- Be someone from whom you feel you still have much to learn, even after having taken several classes
- Be a respected member of the academic/ professional community

- Have a good national and international network
- Have a good reputation as an advisor: what have been the experiences of other students?
- Be someone whose respect you would like to earn
- Be calm and supportive, to help you through the anxiety-ridden parts of the process or your bouts of self-doubt

Do not choose someone you actively dislike, do not respect, or who scares you. You will tend not to interact with him/her to the extent that is required. Do not choose someone who has a weak track record with graduate students. Ask senior graduate students about their experiences working with different professors. Try to take a class with a professor before you ask him/her to chair your committee.

THE MENTOR/ADVISOR WILL ALSO CHOOSE YOU

The person you approach to be your advisor is under no obligation to serve in this demanding role. He/she will think about it and decide whether to serve in this capacity based on:

- Situational circumstances: Whether he/she is going on sabbatical or research leave, current work load—the number of students they are already working with—and other work demands, such as committee work and teaching load, or personal issues (health)
- Intellectual fit: Knowledge of the intended research project on a theoretical and empirical level
- Assessment of your abilities as a researcher: Professors are more apt to take on students they respect and think have potential. Some of the ways in which students earn respect is demonstrated through their class work (punctuality, quality of work completed, willingness to do background work—including going to the library), their willingness to work, their willingness to listen and respond to suggestions and criticism. In discussions with professors, students also demonstrate ability by their preparedness and their ability to work beyond what they have learned in class. Showing that you are going to do readings and build your knowledge base outside the classroom (i.e., going beyond what you are minimally told to do) is critical.
- Assessment of your ability to listen to, and heed, advice: Professors do not want to talk to people who ignore their advice or argue with them every time they offer advice.
- Acceptance of the professor's standards of quality: A professor will put in a good deal of time and effort on your work and will ask that in return you try to do an outstanding job. Professors do not want to feel that they are wasting their time. Professors do not want to work with students who want to get their degrees by simply slipping through the system, or by being mediocre. Since professor's reputations are judged in part on the quality of the work of their students, what you produce reflects on him/her.

Both professors and students may also consider things such as personality styles, conflicting intellectual interests, tensions that could arise from differing personal politics. These are secondary considerations but something that may be considered.

BEFORE YOU APPROACH A PROSPECTIVE MENTOR

Doing some advance research will make a big difference in the reception you receive from a potential mentor. Before you go to see him/her make sure that you have read several of his/her books or papers so that you understand his/her work. There is nothing more embarrassing than going into a professor, stating you want to work on a problem and finding out that the professor has already published on the topic. It will make you look as if you are not really interested in the topic and that you do not consider the professor's expertise worth your time and effort.

Make a special appointment to discuss your work with the professor; going during office hours may mean that you are interrupted. The professor may make the appointment during office hours but he/she will block out the time for you.

Take a copy of your *Curriculum Vitae* with you, a copy of the courses you have taken, and a brief prospectus or statement of research interest with you.

Be organized. Be able to articulate your goals.

A CAVEAT: THE DUTIES OF AN ADVISOR

Your advisor's job is to ensure that you produce quality work, and that you complete your education in a timely manner. You must respect his/her opinion if he/she insists work needs to be redone, papers need to be edited, or research methods need to be refined. The advisor has a responsibility to the profession, to the department, to the university and to the community, to ensure that you will produce the best research possible. The advisor's role is to insist that you meet standards of professional quality and that you strive for professional excellence.

THE STUDENT'S RESPONSIBILITIES TO HIS/HER MENTOR AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Strained relations with a chair or committee members can delay the completion of a project and make it an unpleasant experience. Good relations can expedite and lessen the emotional burden of fieldwork and writing.

Keep them apprised of your progress.

Decide on how much assistance you want and need. Discuss this with them.

Periodically take stock and have sessions with your mentor. Talk about problems and advances. Ask for a reality check periodically: A "How am I doing?" assessment.

CHOOSING THE REST OF YOUR COMMITTEE

After you have chosen your mentor you will pick the rest of your committee in consultation with him/her. Again, there is no correct way to choose a committee. Read the departmental rules on who is eligible, and the number of required committee members. The committee composition will reflect departmental requirements with regard to specialization as well as your thesis/dissertation topic. The Ph.D. dissertation committee is generally composed of at least some members who served on your comprehensive examination committee. Remember, the decision is yours, but should be done under advisement with your committee advisor.

It is easier to ask someone with whom you have taken a class, so make sure you take classes from a number of professors early in your graduate career. Taking courses from only a few individuals can cause problems later. Potential committee members assess whether they are appropriate to be on your committee and this decision will partly be based on an assessment of your previous work--it helps if they are familiar with you and your work.

You may want someone who is not a member of the departmental faculty. If he/she is a UH faculty member in another department or program, a member of the Graduate Faculty, this is a straightforward process. If he or she is on a faculty elsewhere, then special cases can be made. The name of the individual must be submitted to the Graduate College. Remember that this takes extra time.

If a committee member is drawn from outside the university, you will have to coordinate logistics for conference calls during your key committee events (defenses, meetings). All members of the committee must participate for the oral comprehensive examinations.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- The individual meets departmental and university (Graduate Division) requirements
- Has qualities of integrity and engenders your respect
- Willingness to read your work critically and carefully
- Is reasonable--you can anticipate how they will react
- Has multiple research interests
- Has good editing and writing skills
- Will not be on sabbatical when you intend to defend
- Is interested in your general topic
- Has a high standard of quality in research endeavors. A demanding teacher can be a very good advisor – depending on that person's temperament and level of commitment