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AUTHOR & ACADEMIC EXCHANGE QUARTERLY

Member-At-Large Role on Doctoral Committees

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Abstract

Although the importance of a well-functioning doctoral committee has been noted, there is little advice specific to the role of the at-large or external member. This paper examines the role of the member-at-large on doctoral committees, including processes and both faculty and student perspectives. Drawing from both the literature and the author's experiences, this paper demonstrates that when there is a proper fit on the committee, the at-large member can serve a beneficial role for the committee, faculty member, and student.

Introduction

The process of guiding students through the attainment of a doctorate degree is typically overseen by a committee of faculty members that are charged with such tasks as approving the plan of study, research proposal, and ultimately the dissertation itself. This committee is comprised of graduate faculty members, with one serving as the chair and others representing the major and cognate areas of study. Some institutions have an additional member role on these committees, that of the "member-at-large," who is drawn from a department other than that of the student's area or areas of academic study. The intent behind the inclusion of the additional member is to protect the process from becoming too insular and provide some level of external input, if not oversight. Ball State University informed members-at-large that they are on the committee "Represent[ing] the concerns of the entire University for consistency and quality in graduate study" (personal communication, February 11, 2016). One respondent in Sugimoto's 2012 study described this role as that of the "procedural watchdog" (p. 10).

While advice is available to students seeking to assemble committees that function efficiently and effectively and to faculty members considering serving on doctoral committees, there is scant information particular to the role of the member-at-large. Since this member is by definition outside the student's areas of study, the role is unique but can still hold utility and benefit for all parties involved.

This paper examines the doctoral committee and the processes used to produce new doctoral degree holders, the faculty perspective of serving as a member-at-large, and the student perspective of the function of this member on their committee. Through this examination, drawing from both the literature and the author's experience, faculty members who are considering serving as a member-at-large as well as students seeking a faculty member to serve will have a clearer understanding of the role and how it may be best utilized for success for the committee, process, faculty member, and student.

Doctoral Committee Membership and Processes

The doctoral committee is typically comprised of three to five faculty members, who both guide and assess the student throughout the plan of study, dissertation, and defense. However, much of the information available to students assembling their committee team focuses on the chair or advisor. Mauch and Birch (1998) devoted an entire chapter of their book to the subject of the advisor and remarked "The advisor is the most important person in the scholastic life of the student during T/D [Thesis/Dissertation] work" (p. 33). Sugimoto (2012) echoed this sentiment, stating "Within the realm of graduate mentoring, the relationship between a doctoral student and his or her dissertation advisor has been cited as the most critical element in doctoral education" (p.4).

The role of the rest of the members on the committee has not been given as much emphasis. Cassuto noted the role of the of the committee members as distinct from that of the advisor, but not how: "What is the role of the committee compared with that of the adviser? The answer is not at all clear" (2012, para. 3). While the role may be more ambiguous, expertise in content and/or research methodology is commonly sought in committee membership (Cleary, Hunt, & Jackson, 2011; Freeman & Loadman, 1985).

Mentoring is one area that has been suggested as the responsibility of all committee members, not only the advisor. Sugimoto (2012) found that the advisor was the primary mentor for doctoral students, "with dissertation committee members serving in a secondary, yet purposive, role" (p. 2). Sugimoto described this as a "mentoring constellation in doctoral education" (2012, p. 9). Mollica and Nemeth (2014) suggest that the growing number of doctoral programs, including both traditional and online, provides an imperative to facilitate and formalize the mentoring process to reduce student isolation and stress. Through content, methodology, and mentoring, all committee members – including the member-at-large - may contribute to the success of the committee as a whole.

Faculty Perspective

There are several reasons which might help motivate a faculty member considering serving as a member-at-large on a doctoral committee. Fitzpatrick, Secrist, and Wright (1998) note: "Faculty get recognition, status, and compensation (and that's an important word to remember) for serving on dissertation committees. Institutions that do not advise many dissertations have faculty that vie for that caveat to add to their tenure status" (p. 33). The author of this article concurs; while the author's institution does not offer any direct compensation for service such as membership on a doctoral committee, it is a consideration for promotion, tenure, and merit deliberations. Since the author's department does not offer any doctoral degrees, membership on a doctoral committee is one way to distinguish oneself from one's peers.

Additionally, members-at-large may be included as co-authors, co-presenters, or contributors on papers, presentations, and other works derived from a student's dissertation work (Barnes & Austin, 2008; Cleary, et al., 2011; Sugimoto, 2012). These collaborative works could enhance curriculum vitae of the member-at-large with regard to promotion, tenure, merit, etc. Although this author has never had the privilege to work with doctoral student on papers and presentations outside the dissertation, it would expected to be a positive factor beyond the service on the committee.

For faculty members who have studied in one area but now working in another discipline, serving on a doctoral committee in their original field may provide a way to stay connected to their original field. Sugimoto, Ni, Russell, and Bychowski, B. (2011) stated: "As scholars trained in one discipline are hired by another discipline, it can be expected that they will not wholly abandon the knowledge, skills, and norms they learned in their 'home' discipline" (p. 1809). This is the case for the author of this article, who is fortunate to be able to serve on committees in the author's own doctoral discipline (adult education) while

holding a position in a much different department (technology). This allows the author to stay connected with the home discipline's content, methodology, students, and even faculty.

Additionally, there are intrinsic rewards to serving as a member of a dissertation committee, including the sense of pride and accomplishment in helping a successful student through the process. Cleary, et al. (2011) stated "For staff, successfully supervising PhD students brings a sense of achievement and status and is proudly listed on the supervisor's curriculum vitae" (p. 277). Madsen (1992) remarked:

There is no doubt that a sound thesis ably defended is one of the high points of the academic experience. The glow of satisfaction the committee members feel when a student performs credibly can stay with them for days. Their vicarious pride and pleasure in her achievement are thoroughly understandable. After all, they helped to guide and nurture her in the course of her academic career. (p. 120)

Finally, faculty members may also consider that the process can also be fun, as attested by the author. Working with the student and other faculty members on the committee, as well as learning about a subject outside one's expertise, can be an enjoyable process.

Student Perspective

Selecting the faculty members that will serve on a doctoral student's committee is both an important and challenging process. Fitzpatrick, Secrist, and Wright stated, "The selection of the dissertation committee members is the bumpiest decision that the doctoral student makes" (1998, p. 31). This process may be complicated by the lack of availability of student feedback of the performance of committee supervisors (Academics Anonymous, 2015). Since it can be difficult to change the committee composition after it is established, the student should use care in assembling the committee, including selecting the member-at-large.

As previously identified, expertise in the content area and research methodology that the doctoral student intends to use are often key attributes sought in members of the committee. Cleary et al. (2011) expressed "Ultimately, it is best to select people who can add to knowledge gaps and are aligned to the research perspective" (p. 277). Similarly, Freeman and Loadman (1985) avowed "We believe...that stronger measures should be taken at both institutions to ensure that virtually all guidance committees include members who have expertise in the methodology and subject matter of the candidate's dissertation" (p. 338).

While the members from the student's own discipline are typically well-versed in the content area, the member-at-large may also compliment this expertise. As discussed in the faculty perspective, the author's background discipline is different from the current teaching assignment. As a member-at-large serving in the "home" discipline, the author is able to bring additional depth to the committee's content area. In this way, the member-at-large may fulfill an additional role for the student's benefit while still technically being "external" to the degree-granting department. Students may also consider that comprehensive content knowledge in a field was actually ranked least important in a study by Dogan and Bikmaz (2015), who found more administrative aspects, such as following the plan, encouraging, and providing prompt feedback were more highly valued by graduate students.

Students who anticipate working in a different discipline after graduation may also consider selecting a member-at-large from the future area. The author of this paper utilized this approach, selecting a member-at-large from the department where the author desired to work. Besides being an advocate during the dissertation process, the member-at-large continued to serve as a mentor to the author for years after the dissertation was completed.

Students are often cautioned to insure that they have a committee member that is thoroughly familiar with the research methodology that the student wishes to utilize to complete the study. With the superfluity of research approaches available, familiarity with the student's chosen one might not otherwise be available, and the member-at-large might also be chosen for this role. For example, the author was able to contribute an understanding of and experience with grounded theory to one committee that otherwise had none. This is in accordance with Wu and Beaunae's (2014) recommendation of recommend having at least one member familiar with grounded theory on any doctoral committee. Students might also select an at-large-member who can serve as an entry point to a particular community that the student desires to access (Sugimoto, 2012).

Finally, students should also consider the importance of selecting faculty members that will work well together. Casanueva and Caro (2013) found that social factors positively influenced the award of the doctorate more than the scientific productivity of the members. The member-at-large, whose role may expressly include that of insuring that the proper procedures are followed throughout the process, assures that the student's interests are protected as well as the university's interests. Barnes and Austin (2009) describe this as advocating and state that "Doctoral students can find that having an advocate—someone who is willing to go to bat for them in times of trouble - can make a difference in terms of success (p. 309). Being an "outsider," the member-at-large would be expected to be removed from departmental politics and grudges, and may serve as a fair mediator to disputes along the way.

Conclusion

While the member-at-large role on doctoral committees has not been examined in the same degree of detail as that of the advisor and other committee members, it serves a useful role for those institutions that utilize it. Doctoral committee membership and processes were examined with regard to the member-at-large position, specifically including content, methodology, and mentoring. Both the faculty and student perspectives were discussed, drawing from the literature and the author's own experiences. Readers that are faculty members considering serving on committees as a member-at-large and students seeking faculty to serve in this role may use this examination to strengthen future doctoral committee memberships and processes.

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