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COPING WITH THE SENIOR THESIS SEMINAR: SOME THOUGHTS FOR BOTH STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS*

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ABSTRACT

Based on our experiences as professor and student, respectively, in the undergraduate Senior Thesis Seminar, we offer our thoughts on the fundamental issues facing participants in this class. We speak to students about selecting a topic, choosing a supervisor, working with classmates, delivering the oral presentation, and coping with difficulties. We advise professors on helping students select a topic, monitoring student progress, adjusting to different types of students, approaching the oral presentations, interacting with faculty in the presence of students, and injecting themselves into student work. Consideration of these ideas--presented as a series of lessons--should promote more effective learning experiences in this course

INTRODUCTION

The required undergraduate Senior Seminar in economics, during which students engage in substantive research projects, can be an exciting time for both students and faculty. Students often discover in this class that they really did learn a lot in the major, and that they can use their knowledge and training to analyze an economic issue that interests them. As they begin to appreciate what the program has given them, the students tend to develop close working relationships with each other. Moreover, students in this class begin to sense that they are developing a panoply of skills that will be crucial for success in the future--regardless of their career paths--as they research, write, and present orally their work. During the Senior Seminar, in addition, students and faculty may begin to work together intensively--often for the first time. Faculty supervisors can thus gain a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction as they help their students complete their undergraduate programs in the context of a substantial project that requires extensive interaction, give-and-take, and multiple drafts.

On the other hand, the Senior Seminar can provide students and faculty alike with some of their most painful academic experiences. Students can flounder as they attempt to tackle a task that appears unfamiliar, complex, intimidating, and open-ended. Faculty can get frustrated because now that they finally get a chance to provide substantive help and guidance, students often do not know how to accept it. The end results can be strained relations between participants, subpar work that gives no one a sense of accomplishment, students finishing the seminar without having achieved its central learning objectives, and research that simply does not get done.

Over the past few years, we have witnessed--in our capacities as professor and student--both of these scenarios develop and play out in our own Economics Senior Seminar. In the process we have learned much about what can make, or break, this particular course--at least in

our own particular academic environment. We would like, therefore, to share this knowledge with students and faculty supervisors before they embark on the thesis journey--when they will have the time and energy to consider what we have to offer and to prepare themselves for the work to come. We hope that in the process of reading this paper both prospective thesis students and faculty supervisors will a) be stimulated to think more about their respective tasks during the upcoming semester, b) encounter useful advice on how to avoid the disappointments and frustrations that we know--from experience--will develop in the absence of adequate prior preparation, and c) each get a sense of how the other is going to approach the job at hand and thereby gain some perspective on each other

We write this paper in the form of a series of lessons that focuses upon the key issues facing both students and faculty in the Senior Seminar, regardless of the specific structure of the course. These lessons, moreover, contain insights that may be of benefit to students and faculty in any course that requires a substantive research project. The first section of the paper, entitled "Dear Student," consists of our thoughts on how to select a topic, choose a faculty supervisor, work with classmates, organize and deliver the final oral presentation, and cope with the various difficulties that are likely to arise during the semester. In the second section, "Dear Professor," we offer advice to faculty on how to help students select a topic, how to monitor student progress during the term, how to adjust to students who have different styles and comfort levels when it comes to writing papers and interacting with professors, and how to approach the students' oral presentations. In addition, we warn faculty about injecting too much of themselves into student work, and about interacting with colleagues in ways that will make students uncomfortable. We close by suggesting a course of action that at least some prospective thesis students ought to consider seriously, as they embark upon their research efforts.

In developing these lessons we have drawn primarily upon our own experiences in the Economics Senior Seminar over the last several years. We realize, of course, that these have shaped the specifics of the message that we want to share with you, the reader. But regardless of whether you agree or disagree with each of the lessons that follow, if by reading through them you are stimulated to reflect upon, and prepare for, your own upcoming Senior Seminar experience, we consider our mission in writing this paper to be accomplished.

DEAR STUDENT:

1. Getting Started Is the Hardest Part

The undergraduate Senior Thesis Seminar is not the time to try your hand at "basic" research or to focus on the creation of new knowledge. Your goal is not to publish in a refereed economics journal. Your task, rather, is to demonstrate competency as an undergraduate economics major. The Senior Seminar is your chance to show your peers and teachers what you can do with what you have learned in the program. When your thesis is done, therefore, it should be readable and understandable--first and foremost--by your fellow senior economics majors. Should it also be acceptable as a professional conference presentation, or as a journal article, consider that a bonus.

As you develop your research proposal, frame your project in the form of a central question that you will seek to answer in your thesis. Doing this will make your work more interesting (both to you and your readers), and more focused. Furthermore, keeping a central question in mind as you do your research will help you write a thesis, as opposed to a paper that simply summarizes all the material relevant to your general topic that you could find during the semester.

This latter kind of paper can take two forms: the "fact dump" (in which you collect all the facts you can find concerning your general topic and dump them on the reader), or the "source

dump" (in which you summarize everything that everyone else has said in the articles you read on the topic, and dump these insights on the reader). In neither of these cases will you have taken "ownership" of your research effort; you will not have written a paper that you can call your own. When your faculty supervisor reads it, s/he will ask (rightly) "Where are you in this thesis?", and you will finish the Seminar without having done what you wanted to do.

Avoid this unfortunate outcome by articulating your central thesis question as early as you can in the semester. But take all the time you need to do so, for "haste makes waste." Indeed, you will discover later in the semester that the time you spent developing your thesis question was time well spent. You will know what you are and are not looking for as you conduct your research, and you will know when you are done. On the other hand, if you rush past the task of defining your thesis question and jump right into the research nitty-gritty, you may well spend your time frantically collecting everything you can find on your topic—and being perpetually tense, because no matter how much material you gather you will not be sure if you are making progress.

No matter what specific topic you settle on, it should be empirically oriented. Now is your (possibly first) chance—on your own—to relate your theoretical knowledge to the real world. Make the most of it. Focus on a real-world application or case study that enables you to get involved with data as much as possible. This does not mean, however, that you must do econometric analysis. Running regressions is not the only way to do substantive empirical work. But take heed: when doing any sort of empirical research, the tasks of collecting data and doing statistical analysis take much longer, and are much messier, than you might realize before the fact.

Finally, do not pick a topic because it is new and hot. "New and hot" can be translated as "interesting," but also as "unsettled," "developing," and/or "controversial." As a result, your new and hot topic might well prove to be quicksand. For example, you may not be able to find the reference material at your level that you will need to complete your thesis. Alternatively, you may end up spending the semester watching your faculty supervisor do your project for you, and/or being at odds with faculty over your topic.

In sum, when selecting a topic, remember your primary task: to demonstrate competency as an undergraduate economics major. As you pursue this goal, moreover, look to your professors for help. We now offer you some advice on how to go about doing this.

2. "Help Wanted": One Faculty Supervisor

Do not limit your faculty search to those who are specialists in your desired topic. If you do, four kinds of problems could arise during the semester. First, your supervisor might get so enthused about the project that s/he might lead you into a specific research effort that requires too much time and effort of you—and hence will not get completed. Second, your supervisor might drag you into research that is simply beyond your abilities and training as an undergraduate economics major—again, out of enthusiasm for the topic. Third, you might end up spending all semester writing the thesis that your supervisor wants to write, and your interests and desires might get shunted aside. Last but not least, the faculty specialist(s) in your topic may not have the necessary time to spare, and/or may not be interested in working with you.

To avoid these pitfalls, start your search for a supervisor by talking informally about your thesis ideas with the faculty members you currently know the best—those whose classes you have already taken. Decide then, for yourself, which professor understands the nature of the senior thesis task best and is interested in helping you do the work that you want to do. The quality of your thesis, no matter what the specific topic, will be better as a result.

3. *Your Classmates Are Your Pals, Not Your Enemies*

Do not be afraid to share your thesis ideas, and to talk about your specific research efforts, with your fellow seminar students. Doing so can generate three types of benefits. First of all, your classmate(s) can help you articulate your topic more precisely. In our experience we have learned (and observed) that at least several of your classmates will happily serve as "sounding boards" for you—and in the process force you to define explicitly your central thesis question.

Second, some of your classmates might well be able to help you in specific ways as you conduct your research. For example, you may not be as Internet-savvy as you would like, but a classmate might. Based on our experience, we know that s/he will gladly help you get started (or help you get to where you want to go) on the Internet. Another classmate might have had several classes that touched upon your topic, and might well be able to direct you to relevant readings. Furthermore, as you interact with your classmates you will find that you have comparative advantages of your own—and that you can help your classmates make progress on their theses. As you do this your self-confidence will grow, and your own thesis work will go more smoothly as a result.

Finally, unless you share your work and ideas with your classmates you will never realize that your classmates are no different from you. Each of you is attempting to complete a task that is new, unfamiliar, daunting and which at times may seem impossible. All of you will encounter difficulties at various points during the semester, and talking and working with your classmates is the only way you will discover this. As a result, you and your classmates will "bond" during the thesis trial, and the group that you become a part of will help you rise above your individual abilities and do better (and more rewarding) thesis work.

4. *Is There Enough of "You" In Your Final Oral Presentation?*

As you prepare your final oral presentation at the end of the semester, put yourself (not the material) in the spotlight. During your talk, spend some time discussing what led you to choose your topic. What components of your economics background (course material, concepts, tools, professors) influenced your choice of subject matter, and why? Why do you consider this topic to be important? What do you hope your audience will learn from your talk? Finally, be explicit about what you did in your research, what you did not do that someone else might have done with this topic, and why.

You see, most of the people in your audience (faculty and students alike) will not be there to learn about the topic you have studied. Some of the faculty will be experts in the field and will probably learn nothing new during your talk (especially if you follow the advice we gave you earlier in this paper). Others in the audience (including your student friends) will have little if any interest in the specifics of your subject. Most of your audience, therefore, will be more interested in you, why you chose your topic, and what you learned from doing your thesis than they will be in the thesis itself.

In other words, remember why your listeners are present, and design your talk accordingly. Doing this is likely to keep your audience interested and attentive throughout. This will make your public-speaking experience much less stressful, and may even help you maintain self-control and gain confidence as the talk progresses. On the other hand, if you choose to give your audience a detached, mechanical recitation of the subject matter, you should expect eyes to glaze over, bodies to squirm, and people to fall asleep. As a result, you are likely to get more and more embarrassed and apologetic as time progresses, and all your hard work during the semester will seem to unravel right before your eyes. This scenario may sound overly dramatic and harsh, but we have observed this unfortunate outcome too many times over the years.

5. *Your Final Oral Presentation and Your Paper Are Two Different Beasts*

As should be clear from the previous lesson, your talk and your thesis are two separate entities. At some point, of course, you will have to present some of the "meat" of your research. When this time comes, stick to the main points. Doing this will make it easier for your listeners to grasp the essence of your research (which is the most you can hope for in a short talk) and to appreciate your conclusions.

In fact, even if you have 45 minutes, you will not be able to cover your entire thesis in full detail—no matter how hard you try or how fast you speak! If you persist in such an effort, we must warn you that you will in all likelihood observe eyes glazing over, bodies squirming, and people falling asleep. This will be a painful and discouraging way to conclude your Senior Seminar.

Finally, we know that you might well have to make your oral presentation before your written thesis is due. In such a case, use your talk to help organize your work and to understand better what you have done (and not done) in your research. Do not let your talk become a distraction that keeps you from making progress on your thesis. Instead, transform your talk into a vehicle for improving your final written thesis.

6. *Be a Survivor, Not a Victim*

We realize, of course, that you may not find the ideal supervisor as you begin your Senior Seminar. You may only have a few classmates, each of whom has responsibilities that prevent him or her from being a colleague and/or an active participant in the seminar group. Your school may not have the library resources or computer facilities you think you need to do your research. You could well end up having trouble arranging meetings with your supervisor. You may not have enough time to do the thesis you would like to do. You may have never before given an extended oral presentation.

Do not spend your semester dwelling upon these constraints and inconveniences. Do not let them stop you in your tracks. Do not let what is impossible prevent you from doing what is possible. As you proceed, therefore, let yourself be flexible about your topic. Prepare yourself to adapt and adjust your research to take advantage of the resources, facilities, and people that are available to you. Look at the oral presentation as a chance to practice a much-needed job skill. Leave behind—physically and mentally—the work you are unable to do, the people you are unable to see, and the skill-development practice that you did not get in your previous classes. As the commercial says, "Just do it."

DEAR PROFESSOR:

1. *The Best Thesis Is a Completed Thesis*

Your task, as a Senior Thesis Supervisor, is to make sure that your student finishes the project with a sense of accomplishment, with a sense of pride in what s/he was able to do—as an undergraduate economics major at your school. This means that completion of the project is key. Under no circumstances should you allow (or direct) your student to get into a project that cannot be done in the allotted amount of time. You must, therefore, be willing to trade off intellectual purity and comprehensiveness for do-ability.

Always remember that your thesis student is an undergraduate (not a master's or doctoral student)—who is coming out of your undergraduate program. The task before your student, therefore, is to demonstrate competency as a senior economics major, not to extend the discipline or create new knowledge. Do not ask or force your student to engage in "basic" research. In our

experience we have observed that such a research effort a) does not promote the student's academic development, b) does not enhance the student's marketability in the business community, and c) discourages the student from pursuing further studies in economics.

Take the time, before the Senior Seminar begins, to prepare a "menu" of thesis topics for your student. Helping your student choose a topic in this way can serve to minimize his/her "topic anxiety"—an anxiety that will in all likelihood develop with a vengeance and lead to mental paralysis in the absence of your guidance. No useful purpose is served by allowing a student to agonize—and waste time—over this basic facet of a senior project.

Furthermore, you need to be aware that many (if not all) of your thesis students will have no idea what economics topics would be appropriate for a "senior thesis." The single most common question heard by the faculty directors of our Senior Thesis Seminar over the years has been "Does my topic really constitute a 'thesis'?" Rather than force your student to struggle with answering this question on his/her own (as one might require of a doctoral student), you should answer the question for your student by preparing a topic menu.

Remember also that your student probably has little (if any) prior research experience. Undergraduates do, however, write papers. And any student can tell someone how to write a "15-Page Paper": fill up 15 pages with all the stuff relevant to the general topic that the student can find. Although your student may have written dozens of such papers, s/he may be woefully unprepared for tackling the thesis. Simply defining the topic, beginning to read about it, and starting a full-scale search for references are difficult enough. But your student will have to do much more, for the senior thesis is a complex, multifaceted exercise. For example, s/he must learn how to read the relevant material analytically, and begin to apply that material to his/her thesis question. The student must learn (possibly from scratch) how to obtain relevant empirical data, and how to interpret the data in economic terms. Of course, the end result is a paper—but the written paper is just the "tip of the thesis iceberg," so to speak.

Therefore, you must be prepared to be your student's guide through these uncharted waters, from start to finish. If you simply send your student off at the beginning of the term with his/her topic, and have the student check in every few weeks or so during your office hours, the resulting thesis is likely to be one of two things: poor, or not finished.

To avoid this unfortunate outcome, we recommend that you set up a schedule of appointments with the student—outside of your office hours—during which the two of you will work on his/her thesis. If you have more than one thesis student, set up regular appointments with each of them. Otherwise, you will end up helping only those who take the initiative in seeking you out, and the others will be left behind. Doing this may be common practice in graduate school, when students are working on their Ph.D. dissertations, but this is not graduate school.

2. One Size Does Not Fit All

Devote the first appointment with your student to learning about who your student is, where s/he has been, and where s/he hopes to go in the future. In particular, make sure you are aware of your student's current class schedule and outside commitments, and be respectful of these constraints at all times. Talk with your student about his/her academic program, and the classes s/he has taken both inside and outside your department. Discover the extent to which your student has been asked to develop written and oral communications skills. Lead your student into a discussion of his/her future plans and career goals, as well. Doing this can help the two of you settle on the most appropriate thesis topic on your prepared menu, or modify the menu in accord with the student's background and interests. The more you learn about your student, the more you will be able to help your student find the specific research topic that a) interests him/her, and b) is feasible.

Remember, too, that even if two students have essentially identical academic backgrounds they may be very different when it comes to writing papers and interacting with faculty in the process. One may enjoy and profit from the give-and-take of discussions with you on various specific aspects of his/her research; another may be intimidated by such discussions and hence be unable to learn from them. You may have (or have had in the past) a student that benefited greatly from your comments and criticisms of rough drafts, and who learned during the seminar how to work with you in editing and revising his/her thesis. But you should not expect all your students to be able to function this way.

You might well get a thesis student who has rarely received detailed comments on previous written work, and/or who has not yet had to revise a paper. This student may not have any idea of the purpose of your commentary. S/he will probably not know what to do with your comments, and may well conclude that they are a judgment upon his/her ability. As a result, your well-intentioned comments may intimidate and confuse your student. If so, one of two things will happen: either the two of you will have to redefine your working relationship and hence start over again from scratch, or your student will disengage from the project. In the former case you can still rescue the thesis if you are willing to be adaptable and to devote the time and energy to it; in the latter case your student will find all sorts of reasons to avoid meeting with you—and doing the thesis—the rest of the semester. As a result, you will in all likelihood find yourself at the end of the semester having to choose between passing subpar work and holding up the student's graduation. This will leave an unpleasant taste in your mouth for years.

3. Don't Fight in Front of The Kids

Reserve disagreements with other faculty whom your thesis student has consulted to times or places away from the student. Arguments among faculty over student work can be quite intimidating to any student. Your student is likely to walk away from such episodes feeling uncomfortable, out of control, and as if the subject matter of the thesis is the most important thing to you.

Remember, your student probably suffers enough anxiety over his/her thesis work without feeling as if the project has strained relations between you and other members of the department. Furthermore, the last thing any student needs to deal with is the feeling that s/he must act as a mediator between mentors. No undergraduate has, nor should s/he be expected to have, the ability to decide which of you is right.

During your student's thesis work, of course, s/he might brush up against (or even focus upon) a specific debate within the profession. In such circumstances, help the student learn about the debate, and how his/her economics toolkit can be used to interpret the contrasting positions. Do not take sides yourself and force the student to line up behind you—and possibly against a faculty colleague (from whom the student may have taken classes). Injecting yourself into the student's thesis in this way is inappropriate, and may indeed prevent the student from making the research effort his/her own. Always remember to whom the project ultimately belongs.

4. When It Comes to The Final Oral Presentations, Be There!

Attendance is mandatory. Support your students, and give them the respect they deserve. Those who have fought to the end of the Senior Seminar should leave it knowing that you understand what they have been through. Students usually say that they hope no one (especially faculty) attends their final oral presentations, but do not take them at their word. Nothing can undermine a student's sense of accomplishment more than faculty—particularly those who have helped the student during the semester—not showing up for his/her final presentation.

5. *During the Oral Presentations, Not All Questions Are Created Equal*

The thesis presentation is not the time for you to prove that you know more than the student, or to make a speech. Nor is it the time for you to argue with colleagues over the material. The students know you are smarter and more knowledgeable than they are, so there is no need to rub it in. Leave your pet peeves at the door.

Questions directed to what the student said and did in his/her thesis are appropriate. Questions that focus on what should have been done if this was a project carried out by a professional economist, a Ph.D. dissertation, or a research effort undertaken by a student with more time, resources, and/or training are not appropriate. Therefore, those of you serving as thesis supervisors should keep watch during the question-and-answer period, and be ready and willing to head off and/or defuse improper queries. Supervisors, do not let your students "twist in the wind," buffeted about by faculty questioning and disputation, as their talks come to a close. Jump in and help!

A CONCLUDING THOUGHT

We recommend that senior economics majors consider seeking out an internship or an economics-related job experience just prior to (or during) the Senior Seminar--if such a course of action is feasible, given the particulars of the student's academic and financial situation. Why? Doing so may lead the student directly into a thesis topic, as we have seen on several occasions. Topics that are likely to present themselves in such an environment, moreover, will be empirically oriented and will not require state-of-the-art analytical techniques to complete. In short, such topics will be appropriate for most senior research projects.

Furthermore, doing specific job-related research should help a graduating senior who is entering the job market. In our experience, the business world is often wary of economic analysis; potential employers have a stereotype of economics as detached from the "real world," and of economists as "ivory-tower" academics. A theoretical and/or literature-driven ("source-dump") thesis will not impress those employers who are looking for skills that can translate into success in the business environment. Can the student function effectively as an empirical problem-solver? Can the student think on his/her feet, interact with others, and write coherently? How developed are the student's oral-communications skills? These are the questions many employers want answers to, when interviewing recent (or about-to-be-graduated) B.A.s or B.B.A.s in economics. The "wrong" kind of thesis will not only fail to provide answers to most of these questions, it may also simply reinforce the employers' prejudices concerning the discipline--and hence damage the employment prospects of future economics graduates as well.

Following our advice, we believe, will enable the student to send more of the right signals to potential employers in the business world. Moreover, such thesis work will not reduce the student's chances of entering the economics profession through conference presentations and/or publications. Over the last three years, Senior Seminar students at our university have had five papers published in professional conference proceedings. Two other thesis seminars that the lead author has run at other universities in recent years have generated two professional conference presentations and one refereed economics journal article.

In sum, regardless of the student's future career aspirations, we believe that developing a thesis out of a job situation that forces the student to observe economics in action is an excellent strategy to pursue. Doing this can a) help the student connect his/her theoretical training with business reality, b) enable the student to get comfortable in a working environment that requires him/her to make use of economic analysis, c) enhance the student's marketability upon graduation, d) increase the student's interest in his/her thesis, and e) still make it possible for the student to do work that is acceptable in the economics profession.