

General Philosophy and Practices of Graduate Advising

Preamble

I do not take on task the advising of graduate students lightly or half-heartedly, and expect that students will put far more effort into their research than I can as I am typically serving on at least ten graduate student committees at any one time (and sometimes twice that). I am neither a hand-holder nor cheerleader; students expecting either probably will not get what they need out of me as a committee member but especially not as chair. I expect students to be self-motivated, diligent, non-procrastinatory, and responsible for their own academic progress. My role is that of guide and mentor, and I will put a lot of effort into my work with each student and expect a strong commitment and work ethic from students in return.

Research Topics

Unlike some other disciplines, social sciences in general and geography specifically are not fields in which faculty members have rafts of research ideas simply awaiting assignment to a willing graduate student. If we think of a good research idea, we are probably pursuing it ourselves. As a result, I anticipate that students working with me will come to the advising relationship with at least a germ of an idea if not a specific research area/topic of interest. I will guide this topic, provide plenty of feedback, and make sure that the quality of the product (thesis or dissertation) is suitable for the standards of the department and the discipline, but by the end it is my expectation that the student will become the expert and that I will learn a great deal from the student, not the other way around. I teach what I know in my classes; I expect to be taught new things by graduate students on whose committees I serve.

Though I have published on a range of topics that generally defies tidy categorization, themes that run through nearly all my past work include:

- Analytical/statistical method of analysis
- Emphasis on location, space, and/or place
- Positivist approach and application of methods, models, and pattern techniques
- Focus on economic and spatial behavior across many scales and topics

Though I am hesitant to proscribe student research and set forth absolute rules, there are some topics/formats that I have found to be less than satisfactory in the past and consequently have little interest pursuing in the future:

- Research with little or no quantitative analysis;
- Creative components, as opposed to traditional theses; and
- Topics in the realm of sports geography in which the **performance** of players, teams, or a specific sport (averages, wins, attendance, ticket prices, etc.) is the main focus of the research [My interests have related to topics examining larger economic or spatial issues of team/stadium location, economic impacts of big-time sports, and case studies in specific urban or regional locations.]

Work Ethic and Progress

I generally like to meet with my advisees bi-weekly (every other week) at the least, if not weekly, as their research progresses and as steady, constant work is being done on the research and writing of their theses. Having a weekly or bi-weekly “deadline” helps students progress because they have to demonstrate productivity over the preceding period. Students who routinely show up with nothing tangible will find themselves receiving exactly as much effort from me as they putting in themselves, and I will discontinue wanting to meet with them regularly if they are not making progress. In extreme cases I may give one-semester notice that lack of progress will result in me excusing myself from the committee. I am also not hesitant to award “UR” grades on GEOG 5000/6000 enrollments or low letter grades on other independent study enrollments if inadequate work warrants (also see sample independent study syllabus attached that I use each semester).

Students for whom I am a committee member rather than chair should visit me at regular intervals, usually monthly, so I can remain apprised of their progress and prospects. I will not generally want to see drafts of whole theses until the defense is scheduled, though I am happy to review certain sections/chapters that may pertain specifically to my areas of expertise.

I am unwilling to allow students to defend a dissertation proposal before completing PhD comprehensive exams. Comps demonstrate research *readiness*; the proposal then demonstrates application of research skills in preparing a research *plan*.

Preparation of Theses

I regard it as the student's (and advisor's) job to deliver extremely "clean", well-edited, researched, and packaged documents prior to a defense. In extreme cases I will insist the defense be rescheduled if the document is not remotely close to an acceptable, final form. As a student's committee chair I will thoroughly review drafts, but I expect my advisees to do their part by submitting documents that are as well-written and edited as possible. I will try my best to return any and all drafts sooner than the two-week period the department requires as a minimum turn-around time, but depending on my schedule and the quantity and quality of new material submitted to me, I may need the full two weeks. I will expect students to have acted on my past suggestions and typically will want the previous draft submitted with the new draft for comparison.

I assign my advisees readings and provide other materials to help them develop good theses; *Making the Implicit Explicit* (by Barbara E. Lovitts) has a lot of good, common-sense advice and I possess several other similar reference works.

Timing of Defenses and Departmental Deadlines

I am unwilling to entertain requests to push, stretch, or otherwise ignore departmental deadlines and policies. One area in which this frequently occurs is the dissertation or thesis proposal; departmental rules require that these be defended no later than the end of pre-Finals Week the semester before the student hopes to graduate. The pre-finals part of this rule prevents a glut of proposal defenses during Finals Week when faculty are busy with exams, projects, and generally wrapping up the semester. The part of this rule about defending the semester before a student graduates is to communicate clearly to students that a writing a thesis (or dissertation) is a challenging task that takes a long time to prepare; no student who bangs out a thesis, much less a dissertation, in less than a semester is going to have done a quality job. That is the basis of the rule, to promote a high level of accomplishment and quality in the research, both the research itself and the document. Other advisors/committee members in this department may choose to ignore these departmental policies, but I will not. I have other time commitments, and I am not willing to tolerate a low-quality "rush job" for the sake of expediency (i.e. "I need to graduate because of my new job, my new Ph.D. program, my Visa status"). I am also usually not able to review theses/dissertations or participate in defenses in June due to summer school.

Recommendation Letters

I am happy to write recommendation/reference letters for students. I need to be provided the proper mailing address and person/committee to whom to address the letter, a description of the position for which you are applying, a résumé/CV, and adequate time (upwards of two weeks) before the deadline to ensure the ability to concentrate on the task sufficiently. If I have already written a similar letter for a student in the past, then the two week period is generally not an issue since I can just tweak the existing letter.

More and more graduate programs are migrating towards an on-line recommendation or evaluation system, in which you provide them with my e-mail address, and they subsequently contact me directly with a log-in and instructions. That is both acceptable and even desirable, if the school gives you a choice. Do be sure to notify me in advance, however – always ask someone’s permission to be listed as a reference, and make sure that you have cultivated enough of a relationship with a reference that they can actually speak at length and in detail about your qualifications.

Most importantly, however, I will not write any letters for students who do not waive the right to read the letters, or situations in which the letter is not confidential. Employers and other universities count on candid and honest evaluations of prospective employees and students, and this could include elements that might not be considered positive, though this can very often be quite subjective. Be sure to have checked and/or signed the section waiving this right before asking me to write a letter. Oklahoma State University has also developed consent forms for students to give to faculty in advance of requesting recommendation letters (mostly to cover FERPA-related situations); these are available on the university website. I also strongly prefer to mail letters directly to the recipients rather than giving them (in sealed envelopes) to the student to mail, though I understand that some departments insist on receiving a single mailed packet with all materials included.

Notes for non-GEOG students

For those of you for whom I serve as an outside committee member, your departmental rules/deadlines may differ a little or a lot from Geography's. I will work within your department's practices and policies. However, I still need a minimum of two full calendar weeks to review thesis or dissertation drafts, just as is required in the Department of Geography. Please work accordingly.

Final Thoughts

Many graduate students matriculate without a clear idea what research they want to pursue; this is normal. Unfortunately, many also begin their studies with no real idea why they are here and are still in an undergraduate mindset of expecting to be given specific assignments to complete and that graduation will automatically follow. Graduate school moves students away from being consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge, and students need to understand this shift and the different expectations of graduate students if they want to work with me (and, likely, most faculty). Students often apologize to me when they come in and have not made any recent progress, but this is unnecessary – it is not especially impacting my life or work if a student has lost his momentum. The motivation and desire to succeed needs to come from within each student, so students need to be active, proactive, and fully invested in their work because, in the end, it is their degree and no one else's. I will guide, coach, and critique, but I cannot do the work for the student or give them all the answers – more than likely, I don't know them myself and am hoping to be educated by my students.

April, 2010

Independent Study course agreement
GEOG XXXX.XXX – Term YEAR

Student: _____ Instructor: Jon Comer
Term: _____ Credit hours: X

Purpose: To conduct extensive research into...

Effort: It is expected that the student will put forth approximately 3 work hours for every credit hour per week (for normal semesters) – around 150 hours total for a typical 3 credit hour enrollment, the standard ratio of 2 hours out of class for every 1 hour in class. Since there is no class meeting, all work is done independently (in consultation with the instructor).

Deliverable(s):

- (1) Students enrolled in GEOG 5000/6000 will be expected to produce at least chapters of the final thesis/dissertation if not the final document. Doctoral students may still be in the process of conducting their basic research, but even for early-stage GEOG 6000 enrollees some type of document (revision of proposal, literature review/annotated bibliography, summary of data/analysis, etc.) is expected for the awarding of “SR”.
- (2) Student enrolled in sections like GEOG 5510, 6910, or 6930 will typically be engaged in extensive research to supplement or supersede material covered in classes taken with me (GEOG 5303 or 6303) and will engage in literature and/or data analysis, statistical/quantitative modeling, and ultimately a “term paper” write-up of said research.
- (3) In either case above, deliverables will be specified here.

Grading:

The final grade will reflect overall quality and quantity of work produced. Students must understand that evaluating work of this nature is inherently qualitative, but ultimately the authority to assign a grade rests with the instructor. The instructor and student will meet at the end of the term to discuss the final grade before it is entered into SIS. In the case of GEOG 5000/6000 this is a binary SR/UR decision, but for other independent study sections it is usually a letter grade.

Jonathan C. Comer (date)

Student name (date)