

A Proposed Ph.D. Student Bill of Rights

Marc Schniederjans
College of Business Administration
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

mschniederjans1@unl.edu

Abstract

Chairing a doctoral committee involves an ethics-driven responsibility and is critical to the success of Ph.D. candidates. This paper discusses issues concerning what prospective Ph.D. students should expect from faculty who chair their doctoral committees. From a personal perspective the author provides a set of basic rights, structured as a bill of articles, which should be afforded doctoral students in pursuit of their degrees. These rights provide guidelines for doctoral candidates in selecting prospective committee chairs. Also, this paper challenges all who chair doctoral committees to question their conduct in upholding basic student rights and setting ethical examples for students to emulate.

Keywords: Ph.D. Student Rights, Ethics, Ph.D. Committee Chair Responsibilities.

The Concept of Fairness in Student Rights

The theme of "fairness" is used in universities as a justification for student rights ("Graduate Handbook," 2007). This fairness theme's origin is based on the "Fairness Principle" used in many codes of conduct ("Create and Evaluate a Code of Conduct," 2006). According to Paine, Deshpande, Margolis and Bettcher (2005), the Fairness Principle consists of four component parts: fair dealing, fair treatment, fair competition, and fair process. Not surprisingly, the Fairness Principle is a primary construct in basic ethics textbooks (MacKinnon, 2006; Newton & Ford, 2005; Pojman, 2005; Quinn, 2005). In addition to basic textbooks, the Fairness Principle is now a common subject included in ethics books aimed at professionals in business (Brooks, 2006) and, in particular, education (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2006; Strike & Soltis, 2004; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005).

The Fairness Principle is important because of its "process" component. In an Internet survey conducted for this paper, of thirty US universities with Ph.D. programs, no specific student rights were delineated relating to the process of Ph.D. students' selection of committee chairs. Moreover, none of the generally structured student rights found online is applicable regarding the Ph.D. committee chair selection decision. While it is recognized many graduate schools and college departments may verbally distribute process selection information individually (e.g., University of Nebraska-Lincoln), the inability to access such information online in written form reveals that universities may be missing an opportunity to help prospective Ph.D. students make this critically important decision. More importantly, without documenting chair selection guidelines, docu-

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mented student rights are incomplete. If universities truly embrace the Fairness Principle for all students, then the rights of Ph.D. students regarding selection of committee chairs should be formally addressed and documented.

Introduction to Student Rights

In the US citizen rights are granted under the US Constitution. Yet in some circumstances, the rights of students do not equal the rights of a US citizen, even if the student is a US citizen. Currently, college students who perform journalistic tasks for their university newspapers are not granted the same censorship rights as reporters for private newspapers ("Washington lawmakers consider bolstering student-press rights," 2007). This lack of protection for student rights has led to a suggestion that universities should establish written student bills of rights (Smith, 2006). Surprisingly, some faculty, administrators, and even the American Civil Liberties Union oppose such documented rights ("Academic bill of rights criticized," 2006). They argue such a broad, sweeping formal document would inhibit education, which requires flexibility, controversial topics, and new ideas in order to challenge students to learn.

Despite the debate on formalizing student rights in writing, many universities have developed written statements on select areas of student rights. Indicative of fundamental activities that students require in the performance of their educational programs, these rights are focused on general student tasks. Illustrating these basic rights, Georgia Institute of Technology has a "student bill of academic rights" (Georgia Institute of Technology, 2007). The eleven common rights listed by Georgia Institute of Technology include the right to attend classes at regularly scheduled times, the right to consult with an assigned and qualified advisor, the right to consult with faculty outside the classroom, the right to have reasonable access to campus facilities to complete assignments, the right to receive a syllabus, the right allowing students reasonable time to learn material, the right to receive access to their student records, the right to have access to grading and evaluation criteria, the right to be informed of a grade appeal process, the right to have reasonable facilities in which to receive instruction, and the right to be informed of definitions of academic misconduct. Other universities, such as the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, delineate graduate student rights (from undergraduate student rights), but again focus narrowly on student complaints in graduate programs ("Graduate Handbook," 2007). Unfortunately, these generally stated, broad-natured rights do not appear to be helpful or address the process by which Ph.D. students select particular committee chairs to head their programs.

In lieu of a formal document of Ph.D. student rights, this paper proposes a Ph.D. student bill of rights for use in the selection process of committee chairs in traditional Ph.D. programs, where students have the option of selecting a program chair. In the context of student expectations for committee chairs, these rights seek to provide a listing of fundamental articles that Ph.D. students can use as selection criteria and for faculty consideration by those who might be committee chairs.

Toward a Ph.D. Student Bill of Rights

One of the key decisions for most graduate students in a doctoral program is who will chair their committees (Grover, 2001). Other factors, such as a school's reputation, do matter, but the chair of a doctoral committee is a critical success factor for the long-term success of a future faculty member (Erdem & Ozen, 2003; Grover, 2001).

While most doctorate-granting institutions require faculty to demonstrate their qualifications to serve on Ph.D. committees through accumulation of years of academic accomplishments, this does not mean the faculty member will automatically "have what it takes" to serve as a doctoral committee chair (Mehmet & Ekrem, 2000). It takes a special willingness to commit one's self to

a process that most colleagues kindly liken to as "giving birth to a child". Like the commitment one makes in raising a child, a faculty member should realize the job will usually last much longer than the few years the doctoral student spends in residency at a university during a Ph.D. program.

The role of preparing doctoral students involves an obligation on the part of faculty to be responsible to meet the needs of students (Wanta, Parsons, Dunwoody, Barton, & Barnes, 2003). The job of chairing a doctoral committee will by necessity involve the granting of a number of student rights that can extend throughout an academic lifetime. This paper is an introduction to this subject and, hopefully, is a beginning for some universities in drafting Ph.D. student rights. What follows is a statement of six articles that make up a short bill of rights for Ph.D. students, which is an extension of Schniederjans (2001) and additionally based on education and ethics research. These are six basic rights doctoral students should seek in discussions with prospective Ph.D. committee chair faculty.

Article I. Provide a Recognized Expert in the Dissertation Subject's Area

While it is unusual for Ph.D. students to know the exact areas they might base their dissertation on prior to being accepted at a university, it should be the right of every student to select the best qualified faculty member for the dissertation subject. That is, the control of the selection process should be in the hands of the student in traditional programs where they are given the right to select the Ph.D. program committee members. It is the ethical responsibility of faculty to make sure this right is given to students, even if it means drawing talent from other colleges or personally accepting a heavier than normal workload. It may also require changing doctoral chairs during a student's program to maximize the educational outcome.

It should be the responsibility of students to choose faculty members who are research accomplished in areas in which they might want to do their dissertation. This may require doing research on candidate committee chairs. Such research may result in generating new ideas for future research as well. Some brief suggestions on what to look for in a committee chair can be found in The Academic Job Forum (2004).

Many universities do not have unlimited sources of talented faculty, and most students recognize this fact. Fortunately, the service orientation of universities is such that faculty may find they can serve their own university by offering their services in Ph.D. programs at other universities. Faculty who share their expertise by serving on Ph.D. committees at other universities will generally find that their own university treats such a contribution as a reputation-building service to the academic field. Such faculty contributions to students can also stimulate research ideas for the participating faculty committee member and can provide faculty with new learning experiences. Indeed, some universities, such as Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology in Allahabad, India require an outside faculty member to serve on their Ph.D. students' committees as a condition for graduation and also to broaden their students' exposure to a wider-range of faculty expertise.

Article II. Permit Changes in the Program Committee

Once a doctoral program committee is established, problems can develop that create difficulties for students to complete their degrees. Some problems are student related (e.g., family or financial constraints) and other problems may originate with committee members (e.g., faculty too busy to do their program assigned tasks). While it is the responsibility of students to deal with any personal problems that may inhibit their doctoral program performance, doctoral students

should have the right to expect faculty to meet their obligations to their programs in a timely manner or allow the students to seek replacements.

This right would require the university administration to put into place procedures by which doctoral program committee members, including the chair, could be removed from a student's program and replaced by other faculty. Such written procedures will help to encourage doctoral students to request such changes when serious problems develop. Also, students should realize and accept the added work that a change in a program might entail (i.e., extra course work, redoing dissertation chapters, etc.). These procedures should also seek to ensure that doctoral students do not abuse this procedure. They also require students to live up to the deadlines and working relationship expectations of the committee members.

Article III. A Committee Chair Should Willingly Work with the Student on Research Prior to the Dissertation

In universities where committee chairs are selected well before the dissertation work begins, the chair should begin encouraging students to give presentations and write publishable research as soon as possible. Emerging from a doctoral program as "published" should be viewed as a participatory right for students who themselves must have a predilection for doing research. Presently, there are universities that make journal research publications a prerequisite for obtaining degrees.

To begin the process, program committee chairs should be active in two or more professional societies and encourage participation of their doctoral students in joining and participating in these as well. However, writing papers for presentation should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a beginning of the process for publishing a journal article.

Every term paper a doctoral student writes should be considered by the students and by their program committee chairs as an opportunity for a publishable paper. Committee chairs should also encourage students to work with other departmental faculty to gain additional publication experience advantages. The chair should particularly encourage students to do top quality research to increase the likelihood of a resulting publication. Along the way, the committee chair will learn about their students, especially their strengths and weaknesses in writing. This insight can then be used to help students improve skills as they face the eventual dissertation work ahead.

It should be the student's responsibility to keep the committee chair informed about term paper research opportunities and to ask for advice in working with faculty. Students may find committee chairs to be a great resource for generating new ideas for term papers and eventual journal publications.

Article IV. A Committee Chair Should Willingly Work with the Student on Research during the Dissertation

Taking the time to establish mentoring relationships in the training of doctoral students has consistently shown to be a success factor for Ph.D. students (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000; Koblinsky, Kuvalanka, & McClintock-Comeaux, 2006). Doctoral students should have the right to expect frequent access to program committee chairs during the dissertation period. This is critical, since students might spend days on work that might later be discarded by the program committee. With the advent of email there is no excuse not to be in close contact with doctoral students, even for program chairs who travel world-wide. Chairs should also be willing to customize their time requirements to meet each student's individual needs.

It should be the student's responsibility to help keep the chair informed about their progress as well as obstacles experienced. Usually, committee chairs can quickly get students "back on track" if a problem occurs or university policy becomes an obstacle.

Article V. A Committee Chair Should Willingly Work with the Student on Research after the Dissertation

Research has shown that satisfaction with mentoring programs of Ph.D. students increases as the relationship extends over a longer period of time than just the period of a doctoral program (Erdem & Ozen, 2003). Indeed, research has shown that without post-doctoral mentoring, the contributions of younger Ph.D.s to their respective fields can be diminished (Walker, Ouellette, & Ridde, 2006). Doctoral students should have the right to expect their program committee chairs to willingly offer to work with them after they complete their dissertations. It is impossible to impart all the knowledge of the "ins" and "outs" of successfully managing one's career to a Ph.D. student during the program. There are strategies and tactics to a successful publication career that only an experienced researcher can know and teach to young scholars over a longer period of time. Even basic writing skills are important, particularly for foreign students whose styles of writing may need additional polishing. There are also unseen doors that a chair could help open for students willing to extend the necessary efforts in order to advance within professional organizations. Helping former students achieve promotion, tenure, and awards for research and teaching is both mutually beneficial and the most satisfying experience for a committee chairperson. Much like a parent who cherishes a child's future success, so does the former doctoral committee chair take pride in a former student's later accomplishments. The amount of pride is directly proportional to the long-term commitment and contribution the chair makes during later years to the student's career. It is expected that former Ph.D. students will keep their program chairs informed about their research interests and encourage a continued and mutually beneficial collegial relationship, where the former student and chair can work on new research projects together as equals. It is also important that former Ph.D. students welcome new opportunities in professional organizations and research grants that their program chairs might help them obtain.

Article VI. A Committee Chair Should Provide a Role Model of Ethical Conduct

Not all universities may choose to write down a formal listing of Ph.D. student rights. Without a formal bill of Ph.D. student rights, it falls to the committee chair to set up codes of conduct between the student and the chairperson. The next best thing to a formal document is a good example set by the committee chair. Such personal codes of conduct should be based on a sound set of ethical values.

Ph.D. students interact with many educators throughout their educational programs from grade school through the Ph.D. It is with the committee chair that a student will more than likely have the most intense, and therefore, most memorable experiences. To those who have served as committee chairs, this role places one at the forefront of helping to set a good example as a scholar, which younger scholars might emulate. This brings the discussion back to the subject of ethics and what Kurtus (2007) refers to as the "Philosophy of Character". According to Kurtus (2007), a person's character is made up of traits that are specially related to ethical conduct. These character values include: honesty, morality, ethical integrity, fortitude, reliability, responsibility, determination, courage, compassion, consideration, and honorability. Some are fortunate to have seen all of these ethics-driven traits in program committee chairs and colleagues.

The question posed here is whether chairs actively demonstrate these traits while interacting with Ph.D. students. If not, an effort should be made to incorporate them into frequent communica-

tions between the committee chair and the student. Scholars have called for written ethical conduct codes for graduate students to be incorporated into their "living" experiences and not just the learning experiences of course content (Solberg, Strong, & McGuire, 1995). While the writing of the dissertation should provide ample opportunities for illustrations of these traits, they can at least be included as talking points in a discussion of the chair's own past experiences. Helping a Ph.D. student avoid future problems by passing educational experience along is what mentoring is all about.

Table 1: Summary of doctoral student bill of rights

ARTICLE	DESCRIPTION	FACULTY RESPONSIBILITY	STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY
I	Provide recognized expert	Expert advice to guide the selection of program committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Actively screen committee candidates – Work with chairs to identify and recruit outside faculty if necessary
II	Permit changes in committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Administrative tasks – Recognizing problems and develop solution recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Courage to request change – Willingness to accept change's consequences and costs
III	Work with students prior to dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mentoring by identifying research opportunities for student – Mentoring by identifying student strengths and weaknesses for correction – Work with students on journal research projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Willingness to do research – Keeping the chair informed on research interests and activities
IV	Work with students during the dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mentoring by guiding them through the steps of the dissertation process – Scheduling necessary time with each student 	Keeping the chair informed on progress of dissertation and obstacles
V	Work with students after the dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mentoring by identifying strategies for success toward future promotions – Mentoring by providing counsel when career problems happen – Aid former students by identifying and helping them to achieve positions of leadership in professional organizations and research grants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Keeping the chair informed on joint research opportunities and the willingness to work on such projects – Keeping the chair informed of a desire to obtain professional organization positions of leadership and opportunities for research grants
VI	Provide ethical role model	Mentoring by actively establishing and reinforcing standards of excellence in conduct throughout the entire relationship with the student	Learn to set high standards of ethical conduct

Summary

The bill of rights suggested in this paper is summarized in Table 1. These rights stated here are basic. Most faculty members who serve as doctoral program committee chairs subscribe to them without question. Yet, some faculty members (perhaps because of personal workloads) might fail to provide these basic rights to their students. It is recommended that a doctoral student affirm the article rights listed above with prospective faculty members before selecting a program committee chair. It is also recommended prospective committee chairs carefully consider the ramifications of the role when opting to be a committee chair. As Fields (1998) has observed, the mentoring abilities of a faculty can make the difference between a Ph.D. student finishing the degree or not.

While this proposed Ph.D. bill of rights may serve on a limited basis for the development of a documented set of university policies covering Ph.D. student rights, more issues can and should be raised. There are several areas of potential research related to the development of documented student rights. Future research might include an exploration of legal ramifications of written student rights to assess risks to the universities that would implement them. Future research might also be undertaken to identify critical success factors in the decision process of selecting a committee chair and appropriate policies developed and adopted to protect the rights of Ph.D. students. In addition, ethical guidelines for committee chairs might be developed to help orient doctoral students on professional conduct during and after dissertation work. A suggested starting point for development of these might center on the eleven traits suggested in the Philosophy of Character by Kurtus (2007).

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Biography



Marc J. Schniederjans is the C. Wheaton Battey Distinguished Professor of Business in the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has served on doctoral program committees for over 25 years. He currently teaches courses in operations management, information systems, and decision sciences and has authored over 100 journal articles covering a variety of topics in theory, application and case studies on operations management. Schniederjans research has also garnered awards from the Decision Science Institute and the American Production and Inventory Control Society, and he is a fellow of the Decision Sciences Institute.