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How to Choose Your Chair

It is impossible to overestimate the significance of the student-advisor relationship. One cannot be too careful about choosing an advisor. This is both a personal and professional relationship that rivals marriage and parenthood in its complexity, variety and ramifications for the rest of one's life. (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007, p. 263)

These observations were made by a new “doctor” who echoed what many doctoral students learn, with ease or difficulty, during their studies.

Your relationship with your chair (sometimes called advisor or supervisor) is absolutely the most important in your entire doctoral haul. The relationship is fraught with hazards. Yet it can prove immensely satisfying and yield rewards well into your professional life (Cassuto, 2013, 2014a; Grant & Tomal, 2013; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchinson, 2008; West, Gokalp, Peña, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011).

In my many years of coaching and independently advising doctoral candidates, I have seen too often how the “wrong” chair not only delays the student's completing the dissertation and graduating but creates much frustration. How to make sure you get the right chair? If only there were a ChairMatch.com!

Until a completely exasperated doctoral candidate, hopefully not ABD, comes up with such a site or app, you have other options. A few universities assign chairs and committees, usually dependent on their (supposedly) light roster of doctoral students.

More commonly, and more progressively, many universities have provisions for you to choose your chair. This is a solemn undertaking, and I caution you not to rush into your choice but to do your homework. You want to avoid musical chairs—going from one to another in the hope of a better experience (meaning faster approvals).

Sometimes your choices are limited because the research interests and specialties of only a few senior faculty match yours. Nevertheless, with diligence and ingenuity, you can clarify what kind of chair you would work best with. One doctoral student took the search so seriously she applied qualitative methods to the inquiry—and published her experience in a respected journal (Hernandez, 1996)!

So, based on my work with graduate students and many of their unfortunate experiences, here are some steps I recommend you take (with examples) to locate the best doctoral chair you can.

Gather Plenty of Information

The first step is to gather as much information as you can from as many sources as you can find.

Stomp in the grapevines of your classmates, other peers, and recent doctors. Their insights and observations about reliability and consistency, especially in hindsight, can be invaluable.

One of my clients, Sonia, said she wished she had paid more attention to her colleagues when she mentioned a certain professor's name. They raised their eyebrows and looked away. One finally called him erratic. Sure enough, midway through her proposal, she could no longer reach her chair. When she phoned him, she got disconnection messages, and her emails kept bouncing back. The story that circulated was that one day he locked his office, left his wife, took his Ipad and hiking boots, and disappeared into the mountains of Appalachia.

Talk to peers who are currently working with chairs you are considering. Are the students comfortable talking with the chair? How promptly do they get responses? Does the chair remind them about university deadlines? Are the chair's critiques more substantial than correcting of typos? Do the students feel the chair prompts them to think in greater depth about the topic? Does the chair address the students at least civilly? How satisfied overall are the students with the experience?

Fernando almost sobbed telling me of his chair's so-called critiques. They consisted of "correcting" every single instance in his 100-page draft of what the chair thought was misuse of numbers and condemning Fernando for not knowing the "right conventions." As it happened, Fernando was using the latest required edition of APA (2010), which has its own rather eccentric rules about numbers. The chair obviously was not up on them. (I counseled Fernando to refer the chair—politely—to the pages and paragraphs in APA that specify the number policies.)

Dig out faculty bios. Access the university/division/school/department website for faculty profiles. These should yield much: a professor's primary research interests, courses taught, publications, presentations, awards, grants, universities from which the degrees were granted, journal affiliations, and whether the professor acts as a dissertation chair. Photographs are often included, and you can see if the professor has kind eyes (not infallible, but it helps). Make sure too the professor isn't on 14 university committees.

Dora chose the perfect chair, she thought. The only trouble was that he held onto her drafts for months because of his work on the accreditation committee, the tenure committee, the university governance committee, the ethics committee, the admissions oversight committee, the committee to establish a new master's program, the committee to found a scholarly journal, and the committee to choose pizza toppings for the faculty dining room orders.

Search out enemy literature.

Bruce Shore (2014), a longtime and award-winning professor and advisor to doctoral students, wrote a fine book ostensibly for chairs and advisors, *The Graduate Advisor Handbook*. In a colloquial, engaging style, he shares advice and cautions. They are tremendously humane and candid, peppered with personal anecdotes and practices. You can learn a lot about what to ask for, expect, and stay away from with your chair and committee. Shore's perspective, revealed in the subtitle, should cheer you on: *A Student-Centered Approach*.

Next, ask questions.

Ask Questions About the Chair

What do you really want to know about a chair? What's really important to you? Based on the bio you accessed and other doctoral candidates' experiences, here are some suggestions (see also Calabrese, 2012; Grant & Tomal, 2013; Hernandez, 1996; Storms, Prada, & Donahue, 2011).

- Does the professor have the time for you?
- Are your research interests similar?
- Are you devotees of the same methodologies? If at a dinner party together, and you differ, avoid religion, politics, and research methodologies.
- Will the chair be—or get—knowledgeable about the research in your field?
- Will the chair be responsive to your emails and calls (not that you're going to be a pest)?
- Will the chair critique your drafts in a reasonable time? Some universities specify professorial 2-week turnarounds; unfortunately, this "rule" guarantees nothing.
- Will the chair keep track of your drafts? Don't laugh; a client's chair kept losing her current drafts, confusing unedited with later edited versions, and repeatedly emailing her for the latest versions.
- Will the chair be available for meetings and generous with time—within reason? (You don't need to recount your life story leading up to the dissertation.)
- Will the chair be encouraging and supportive in critiques and communication?
- Will the chair be reasonably "hard" in critiques? A chair who is too "easy" is doing you no favors. Don't be lulled. Later critiques by committee members and university reviewers can shock you, require revisions, and delay graduation. More important, "easy" chair critiques don't elicit your best work.
- Will the chair be clear in instructions?
- Will the chair be professional and friendly in your dealings?
- Will the chair work well with other committee members and "fight" for you with them if necessary?
- Will the chair be reasonably stable at the university? At a crucial time in a client's dissertation, his chair left the university abruptly under hushed circumstances. The client had to scrounge for another chair.
- Will the chair you are considering be open to a preliminary meeting or "interview"? Cassuto (2014b) suggested this strongly and noted that only one student asked to interview him of over two dozen students he eventually advised.
- Will the chair help you later in your career?

In that large study of doctoral candidates (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010), students cited as the most positive traits of chairs those who were accessible, helpful, socializing, and caring. Your personal list may differ, but create it.

One university has an actual checklist and form for students to help them choose their chairs and committees, a laudable practice. The student completes initial questions on the topic, research design, methodology, preferred faculty member area of expertise, and other diagnostic sections. An important one is faculty personal characteristics.

Some of the characteristics are opposites: Supportive or hands-off, highly goal directive or minimally goal directive, soft critiques or sharp. Other characteristics would seem to constitute the perfect members: Gives strong feedback, has a sense of humor, patient, collegial, calming to the candidate, committed to success, nurtures candidate's self-sufficiency, inspires intellectual growth, enthusiastic, and understands the dissertation and IRB processes, and more. Consider all of these.

One more key characteristic was singled out by Grant and Tomal (2013). The committee and especially the chair should “provide healthy development of the candidate’s ego identity as a doctoral scholar” (p. 222). Obviously, when a chair is sarcastic and cutting, the candidate’s understandable response is ego deflation. The “healthy development,” though, presumes guidance about excellent writing, prompting of quality thinking, and continuous support of your budding scholarly mindset.

I am glad to say that because of good chairs (and my help, admittedly) I’ve seen many students learn, grow, and blossom intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. After Melissa’s proposal defense, she said she could feel herself “no longer afraid but taking hold.” When Patrick published his dissertation findings, he told me that from his chair and our work together he had learned a great deal about scholarly expression. He continues to publish.

Ask Questions of Yourself

Ask yourself questions as you did about prospective chairs. What do you want and need in a chair? Hernandez (1996), whom I admire for her scholarly, businesslike, and clever approach, and whose topic and approach are evergreen, asked: “What sorts of things do I need in a relationship?” (para. 37). Her responses:-

- Space?
- Support?
- Guidance?
- Freedom?
- Security? (para. 37)

Hernandez (1996) also raised the question of her best timeline for completing the dissertation and what she wanted to do afterwards (for her, teaching and scholarship, private practice as a family therapist, or a combination). In this question was the implication of whether the chair could help her attain her goals. Ask yourself the same in relation to your own career goals.

How Do You Feel?

After you do all your homework, ask yourself the biggest question:

How do I *feel* about this faculty member?

Listen inside. You’ve often done this with other things. When you meet someone new, you can tell immediately whether you like them or not. When you enter a certain place, you can feel whether it feels good or not.

For your chair, if you think you should be reasonable and apply logic (“He’s a well-known tenured professor!”), and if your gut is telling you otherwise, it won’t work. If you stack up all kinds of rational arguments to convince yourself of what *should* be the best choice (“She’s got stellar publications and connections!”), it won’t work. That’s why you really gravitate to the new associate professor who misplaces his glasses and stumbles over his words.

So, gather information, ask the right questions, and suspend your intellect (the only time I'll advise this). Listen to your feelings and emotions. And you will be guided you to your best chair who can truly help you reach your goals of dissertation completion and award of your doctorate.

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For balance with (or escape from) the academic, she has also published over 300 writing craft articles, spiritual pieces, essays, and fiction in print and online periodicals and blog sites, including Author Magazine, Children's Book Insider, Graduate Schools Magazine, Inspire Me Today, Transformation Magazine, Writer's Digest, The Writer, and Women in Higher Education.

*In her previous book *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books, 2011), she draws examples from academic consulting and other aspects of life to help readers release regrets, relabel their past, and reach their lifelong yearnings. Website: www.trustyourlifenow.com (<http://www.trustyourlifenow.com>)*

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