

RENEWING THE PH.D. AT YALE: THE 2-4 PROJECT

We believe that it is time to reassess our Ph.D. programs in a highly focused way, concentrating on the critical years between the completion of course work and very substantial research on Ph.D. dissertations – years 2-4 in most programs. We want our Ph.D. programs to show greater flexibility, imagination, and responsiveness to shifting intellectual needs, student aspirations, and broadening professional opportunities and demands. Anecdotal evidence and our participation in formal programs, such as the Woodrow Wilson Foundation's "Responsive Ph.D." initiative and the Ph.D. Completion Project funded by the Council of Graduate Schools, suggest that delays in years 2-4 push back direct dissertation research and writing and hinder entrance into professional life by impeding dissertation completion. Problems and successes in years 2-4 strongly influence final outcomes, most obviously in the receipt of the Ph.D. but equally profoundly in serving as students' principal models for success in their first professional positions inside and outside academia.

We therefore invite all departments to evaluate their Ph.D. programs in the fall of 2006, using the questions and suggestions below as guidelines for assessment and change. The Graduate School recognizes that the individuality of departments and programs will stimulate different responses to some of the issues suggested here. At the same time, we hope that departments and programs will tackle difficult questions because they are real and, in fact, offer opportunities for improvement. We ask that you think creatively about the futures that your students face professionally and personally rather than defend what always has been done. Mainly, we simply ask that you look at your programs in light of the desired end – Ph.D.s who are competitive in tough job markets, intellectually resilient, and even more fascinated by research and teaching as they begin independent professional life than they were when they entered graduate school.

THE TRANSITION FROM THE 2ND TO THE 4TH YEAR OF STUDY

In years 2-4 most Ph.D. students move from formal class work to independent scholarship. Science students complete lab rotations and exams, choose an advisor and a lab with and in which to work, write a dissertation prospectus, and begin independent research and writing. Most humanities and social science students finish their last courses, take exams, write a prospectus, and also begin teaching. When all goes smoothly, science, humanities, and social science students have advanced to candidacy by the end of the third year and are deeply engaged in dissertation research in the fourth year. The Graduate School is concerned to help students negotiate these processes as fluidly and effectively as possible.

Although inherent disciplinary differences and departmental requirements make it difficult to generalize, the time to candidacy has remained steady and relatively high, and students too frequently require extensions of the candidacy deadline. The concern is that every extension in the middle of a program risks lengthening the time to complete the Ph.D. But even when deadlines are met in a timely fashion, anecdotal evidence also suggests that students often encounter the most serious obstacles of their graduate

experiences during these middle years. In too many instances, students are simply ill-prepared to begin the independent work required of them. The goal of the evaluative measures outlined below is to help students embark on the independent work of advancing to candidacy efficiently and with confidence so that the researching and writing of the dissertation is neither unduly delayed nor fraught with anxiety.

AREAS OF CONCERN IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

We wish to focus on several critical areas on which to improve the experience of students in years 2-4.

- ***Mentoring.*** Does the mentoring in the department provide adequate guidance and feedback?
- ***Course work.*** Does course work train students to move to exams efficiently as well as conduct independent research and formulate a dissertation topic? Have students been graded realistically? Does course work prepare students to become independent researchers and writers, moving beyond criticism of the contemporary discipline?
- ***Program structure.*** Does the configuration of exams, prospectus-writing and first-time teaching enable students to make optimal progress during these years?
- ***Collaborative frameworks.*** Students beginning research sometimes feel isolated and unsure of how to proceed. Does the department have collaborative frameworks to allay this isolation?
- ***Evaluation.*** Are the department's early evaluative structures too porous so that students reach the dissertation stage without having met essential challenges and, sometimes, even requirements?
- ***Expectations.*** Are the department's programmatic expectations clearly stated and publicized to students early on?

AREAS OF CONCERN IN THE SCIENCES

Students in the sciences tend to move relatively quickly into dissertation research. There are, nonetheless, some concerns shared with the humanities and social science departments. These include issues of effective mentoring, clear and frequent evaluations, and clearly communicated expectations. Two distinct features of the science programs would benefit from substantial evaluation.

- ***Program structure.*** Does the configuration of research rotations and special projects provide sufficient experience for both faculty and students to make lab placement decisions?
- ***Evaluation.*** Are the research experiences formally evaluated and are results communicated to students in writing as recommended in the Engelman Committee Report? Does the department or program have a clear mechanism for evaluating research performance and potential early on?

SOLUTIONS

Some issues might be addressed centrally by the Graduate School, although none of these possibilities could be implemented without considerable discussion in and with departments and programs. Items of discussion might include the subjects below, with the understanding that changes in requirements would apply only to newly admitted students.

- More stringent honors requirements than those in place
- Change in the current H, HP, P, and F grading system
- More efficient examination system
- Written evaluations of overall performance in years one and two
- Departmental or field colloquia during the preparation of exams and the prospectus
- First and even second dissertation chapter conferences at set intervals
- Creation of a departmental dissertation seminar or seminars meeting weekly or bi-weekly, taught by faculty, especially for students in the writing stage that might count as 1 deferred course in the required curriculum, also effectively reducing the regular seminar requirement by 1
- Regular yearly departmental workshops on professional expectations in the discipline, ranging from publishing to grants, teaching, and family and professional life issues
- More flexible financial aid package that would enable students to move the teaching years to the most beneficial times (see below)
- A reduction of time to candidacy in 7-term departments to 6, based on the provision of much increased summer funding
- Some linkage of admissions targets to total program size

Solutions responsive to the needs of each discipline and that are created by individual departments after substantial discussion probably offer the best opportunity for effective improvement in Ph.D. programs. At the same time, some departmental issues will intersect with broader Graduate School policies and practices, and departments and the Graduate School will need to be aware of these confluences.

At the departmental level, we recommend the following:

- ***Careful examination of mentoring practices*** within the department and consistent guidelines about the importance of faculty meetings with students and providing timely feedback on written work.

- ***Examination of the type and amount of course work required.*** This is probably the single most crucial area in which departments and programs can improve the experience of their students. Such a re-examination would not necessarily entail a reduction in the total amount of course work, but rather, a reconfiguration of when course work occurs (e.g. moving some course work to post-candidacy in the form of a dissertation seminar). It might also entail course work aimed more specifically at preparing students for field exams and independent research, particularly in the second year. Course work should also introduce students to the exigencies of shaping a proper topic and creating an argument, using large amounts of material.
- ***Evaluating the examination system.*** If students rather regularly do not complete examinations and the dissertation prospectus in the third year, faculty should reconsider current examination practices. Are the exams too convoluted? Delaying exams usually delays dissertations.
- ***Configuration of program.*** Should the Graduate School make its funding package more flexible in the humanities and social sciences? For example, these departments might reconsider the order in which students complete course work, teach for the first time and prepare exams and the prospectus. Right now, the usual model is to begin teaching in year three, just when students are also preparing for exams and the prospectus. Might some students do better by teaching in the second year as they complete the last year of course work, as has long happened in the History of Art (an exception to the general humanities and social science pattern)? In addition to leaving more time available for the preparation of post-course work requirements, it would enable students to reserve a year of funding without teaching for post-candidacy research in the fourth or fifth year.
- ***Opportunities for students to attend research groups*** and to present their work in more formal ways to their peers and faculty.
- ***Discussion of the current evaluative structures in place in the department.*** The departments and programs should be sure that they provide sufficient formal evaluation of students in years one, two and three, up until students submit their first dissertation progress reports. Expectations should be clearly defined from the outset. Even as they enter the program, students should be made aware of the points at which they will be evaluated and on what basis these evaluations will be made. A student should never feel unsure about his or her standing in the program. Following the recommendation of the recently completed Engelman Committee report, the Graduate School will expect all departments to provide each student will a progress report at the end of each academic year in which the student is registered.