February 5, 2003

**EdD Conversation Topic: Setting Realistic Goals for the Proposal Writing Process.**

**Panel Speakers:** Helen Snively & Carol Phillips

**Diane Ketelhut:** I want to make sure that everybody feels free to get up and down during the next hour to get something to eat. But today's conversation is supposed to be on the proposal writing process; on its many different angles. And we have two experts here with us to hopefully guide us through. And I am going to let Nancy do the introductions.

For those of you haven't been here before, maybe I should backup. This is a conversation series that comes about from results of a questionnaire that the doctoral students were sent earlier this year. People answered and sent back to Nancy and she and I sat down and kind of called out some major themes as we saw them throughout the questionnaire. We came up with a series of five conversations. The first one was on "Study Groups". And how intriguing it was that that had more D1s and D2s in it. This one seems to be a slightly more experienced group of students here. And we are now talking about the next stage in study groups. The actual QPP/DP process as we all look forward to doing this. I don't know if you all have anything prepared to say. I will let Nancy take over as head of our OSA and a wonderful supporter of the DSA.

**Nancy Nienhuis:** Unfortunately Mary Casey injured her back so she is not with us. The next conversation event, just to give you a heads up (we do this every first Wednesday of every month), is on "Balancing Family, Work and School Life" and all of that. And actually the Dean is going to be on that one along with Kitty Boles and Diane. And that will be in Eliot Lyman on the 5th. So, come back and join us for that.

Helen Snively and Carol Phillips you probably know them but they work in the Writing, Research and Teaching Center. And they do a lot of work not only to support the masters students and doctoral students in writing, but as you have probably known over the years they also offer workshops and other opportunities for Teaching Fellows to think about the work that they do with the doctoral students. And they have the experience of being graduate students here so they have not only negotiated these processes personally but they have a lot of experience with talking with doctoral students about the process of graduate work. So, we asked them to come and share some
of those ideas because I know as someone who has also done a doctorate that if you can get a sense of how to plan these major hurdles that Harvard makes us jump through you can do that a lot more successfully. It is really helpful to have time to reflect with other people about how you are thinking of going into these processes that are very complex and take a lot of time. And they require twice as much time if you don't have a good plan about how to do it. So, we are hoping that this conversation saves you all some time. Those of you who may have some experience or have heard advice from other people we would like for you to share that too. So, Helen and Carol will start off with some comments and then we will open up with questions and just conversation. Thanks a lot for doing this!

Carol Phillips: I, when I thought about this I realized that I can't really confine myself to a proposal process because of the post coursework thing is one major ball of wax. So, I am going to be talking about that. And the title of my talk (I love titles they are my favorite part) is: One theory, Two paradoxes, One Fact, Four Precepts to Live By, and One Mixed Metaphor and Some Good News!

So, the one theory that I have come up with from looking at this process is that no one would ever enter a doctoral program if they had the slightest idea how much work it is going to take. But once you have already invested all this time in it you kind of keep marching to the beat. Plus all those loans so, on-on first general otherwise soldier. So, that's the theory.

The first paradox is that everyone's doctoral program experience is completely unique and utterly different. This other half of the paradox is that everyone's doctoral experience is the same, because they are all hard. And that is the common thread of the doctoral experience is that even when it looks to you like yours is being so much more difficult and everybody else is just waltzing through. Some of you probably don't remember the Naked City that had the stories about ten million New Yorkers. It is the Naked City out there. A lot of pain lies under those smiling faces. We see it in our office. Everybody has a different hard time, but has a hard time for several reasons. One reason is because it is apparently hard. It is something that you have never done before. It is a big something that you have never done before. Much of what goes on during the whole thing is not under your control. You're working in isolation. I used to call this the isolation of the long distance dissertation writer. So, that's another burden. And you also have to think harder than you ever thought before. That's just from off the top of my head what's hard about it. But, there are other things too.
What's different is everybody comes in here from a very different place. Their professional experience, their personal experience, cultural experience, their goals, their committee, the courses they take—so all of that mix makes for very different things happening.

My second paradox is that it's not all about you. So, for instance when your advisor doesn't get back to you for three months that has nothing to do with you. That has to do with them. And what they have to do. But it is also all about you. Because you're the one who is trying to move along here. So, there is that tension all the time.

The Fact: Every faculty member is way over committed—especially, in terms of the advisee level. And that is kind of the straw that tends to break the camel's back around here. It is so inherently hard and all this stuff and then the faculty members have these loads of advisors that are basically, I don't think they are anywhere else. It is just completely disproportionate to what one usually sees in a doctoral program.

The Good News: Now that I have really painted a sour picture here. Some good news! Which is although it may not feel this way sometimes the doctoral process here is extremely non-adversarial, both because of the faculty and because of the structure. The faculty mean well. It is a very well meaning group of people. Which is why they say they will get it back to you the day after tomorrow. Because they don't want to say, “Oh I really can't get it back to you tomorrow.” So, that's really nice. And the other part is the structure. Where as in most doctoral programs you could write your whole dissertation and then you could come up to your orals and someone could say 'I think your methods were wrong'. And you go back to go if somebody on your committee says I think your methods are wrong. Instead we have that all up front. And in your orals they say, “Gee, I don't like what you are doing here with your methods, why don't you change this a little bit.” And then you do your work and that is a very user-friendly process.

Now these are the five precepts to live by. One is that the wise doctoral student is a manager of her committee—a manager in many ways. One is of her committee. In my mind is that people tend to make a really big deal about the COD. But the COD is really quite secondary to the committee. The COD just gets to rule the first week on your proposal. The committee is the group who decides
whether your work flies or not. So, it's critical to choose your committee carefully. And that means according to your particular needs. Are you looking for a subject expert? Are you looking for a methodology expert? Are you looking for somebody who does actually always get stuff back on time? I can tell you their names in secret someday. Are you looking for somebody who is a really hard critical reader? Are you looking for somebody who is going to cheer you on? Are you going to look for a shoulder to cry on? Are you looking for a big name that will be stellar on your CV? And more likely, you are looking for some combination of these. And it is really nice if you can have different people on your committee serving a different function for you. A lot of people sort of do the bad cop/good cop and in between cop. One person is really going to push them, and one person is just going to say? Good Job?.

The other thing is to collect data. You know all we do is research. Do research about these people that you are considering having on your committee. First you have to talk to your advisor about who he or she thinks you should have on your committee. And you also want to ask prospective committee members right out: “are there people that you cannot work with?” Because they know who they cannot work with. And then ask peers and previous students. What was this person to like to work with? And what was that person to like to work with? Do these three look like they will manage well together? The tricky part of this kind of thing, as you know as a researcher, the fact that x work well with you doesn’t mean they will work well with you. So, you get as much information as you can, but you have to put it in the appropriate perspective.

The other thing that people are often not aware of is in some sense you are the boss of your committee. In that you can hire and fire. So, I like to think of the QP and QP Proposal as the pilot for your dissertation. You can see if the committee function well together. Are they working in a way you like for you? If not, then you can fire them, which you don’t even have to do. Just never say anything again. And they disappear from your life and you ask the next person. And the interesting part is--students tend to feel very much that it will hurt them. This is the part that is not about you. It will not hurt them. They will be so thrilled that somebody doesn’t want to work with them that they will be jumping up and down. We often give ourselves much more importance than is realistic. I see this is ringing a bell! (audience laughter)
And then I have one very constant piece of advice. Never add a poor member to your committee under any circumstances ever! Because, you’re just going to have to do all this complicated coordination. Time coordination, approval coordination with another party who also has to get along with everybody else. So its so much more trouble than it’s worth. If there is a fourth person that you want to have input from - you ask them- they don’t have to be on your committee. Most people will be much happier to talk with you about your dissertation than to actually be on your committee where they have this locked in responsibility.

My second precept to the five is to be professional. Think of this entire process as your current job. Rather than think of yourself as this little vulnerable student to the big professors. So you’re middle management- right! And yeah there are other people above you, but you’re still a professional. So job requirements of this job are basically your usual professional job requirements. Good communication, good analytical skills, and good writing skills. And the part that I think everyone who has gotten this far has, is good analytical and good writing skills. The part to really strive for is the good communication skills. It is very challenging because people don’t have time and it is very hard for them to get back to you. So, what do I think the best strategy is? I think email is so terrific. I think this school would have fallen apart by now without email. So, anytime you are making some kind of change or any question you have- write a memo. Example, “Look I am going to be out of town, so this is going to be late. Is that okay with you?” In this professional section it is very important to get all the ducks in a row about who is sending what to who and when, because this is some sort of crazy relay race. It’s like a relay race in Alice in Wonderland, because you never know where the relay is going to. So, the more you can clarify whose doing what. Like the advisor may want to read every chapter. The second reader wants to read every chapter after you revised it after the advisor has read it. The third reader only wants to read the whole thing when it is done. Or whatever the configuration is. And really keep track of it. And do it according to what was said. Do everything you can to not let yourself be infantalized because there are a lot of forces trying to make it be and they are not like personal forces, they’re cosmic forces. Trying to make it that you are like some little kid and the big teacher and it’s not like that. The more you can get away from that the better.

The third thing, do not try to second-guess the COD or anybody else, because they are all smarter than you are. But, people often think what if I put it this way or what will the COD think? What if
I put it that way what will the COD think? You don’t know, you don’t have a clue. Get the list of the names of the people in the COD. You have no idea what any person in the COD is going to think. There is so much out there that it is critical for you to do your part. And don’t try to figure out what all the other players are that are involved.

The fourth thing is- “Nothing can go wrong, go wrong, go wrong.” In fact things will not go according to plan. There is a guarantee that things will not go according to plan. So, expect the unexpected. So roll with it and say “oh yes, this is one of the surprises that they told me is going to happen.”

The fifth thing is- to get by with a little help from your friends and also anybody else who is willing to help you. And that’s about the isolation. To go into a room and do this yourself is probably not a great idea. For some people it probably might work. For most people it’s not good. So, whatever you can do, support groups, writing groups, research groups, are there doctoral students who you are friends with, your friends, and your family. Any people who can help you along, ask them for help. Repay them later.

My final point is a mixed metaphor. Which is a combination of “The Little Engine that Could” and The Grateful Dead. Which is why I call it mixed. So, from R. Kipling if you can keep your head when all around people are losing theirs during the dissertation process. You’ll be better off because there is going to be a lot of head losing. The other one is the “Little Engine that Could.” Remember that little train that is trying to get up the mountain to bring the candy to the little kids on the other side. It says, “think I can, I think I can, I think I can!” you got to be doing that too. And as The Grateful Dead said “You got to keep on trucking.” So, these three thoughts boil down to in English- 1. Maintain perspective. 2. Believe in yourself. 3. Persist. Persistence is about 99%.

(clapping)

Helen Snively: I thought it was going to be Carol and Mary Casey and I only just pulled together a few thoughts. Mine is very low key, and its not typed up, it’s just off the top of my head. But the interesting thing is that I think I have a different perspective of the whole process. The email said “Setting Realistic Goals for the Proposal Process.” And so, I went on and asked, “Where are we not realistic?” And the answer is just about everywhere in the process. I can think of a point where
somebody I knew or a dozen people I know were not realistic. Let me just go through and talk about what’s realistic and the word I think fits is grandiose. I think we all get grandiose. This is Harvard. And all around us we see people trying to do so much. It is just very hard to keep things simple, and to make them small and doable. And I spend a lot of time even with Master students telling them, “Down boy, down boy.” My own story with this is that with my own QP proposal- I offered to review the three areas of literature. Have we heard this phrase before? “Three areas of Lit.” And the COD in its great wisdom shot it down.

And said you are trying to much. I basically had offered to read all of that in the library. But, I thought I was supposed to. There was one thing that I really wanted to do, but I felt like I should tack these other two onto it, to sort of make it look big enough and scholarly. And because it was sort of something obscure. None of my faculty really knew enough about it. So, when they read my paragraphs and said, “this seems good.” I was the one who seemed to see how much it was. But somehow the COD could see through that and said, “no, not realistic,” so, I cut it back. So, what I did is that I took one group of lit and then I split that in half and that seemed to work out very nicely. So, for anybody if you are feeling that your scope is too big, too small or whatever- talk about it. Show it around. I promise to keep the scalpel firmly in the cover during the first ten minutes of talking. I won’t shave anything off until we totally see the picture. But, there is a lesson in that for us.

Second, we always think that when submitting a proposal that we can just look at the calendar and pick a date to submit by. Well, I think it took at least a year before I submitted my proposal. Because every month rolled around and I would sit and say- “nope its not ready. Still not ready and it’s still not ready.” And I think that’s realistic. That is how it works. You just keep improving it and improving it. And it is really astonishing how much you can keep improving it until it is really ready. And I think that’s a place that we are really not realistic, because we don’t really understand the process until we are into it ourselves.

Another one is the time it actually takes to do the study. Transcription takes way longer. I mean unless you are going to pay somebody and that means that you will probably need to get another part-time job to just pay the person who is going to do the transcription. But one of the tips for that- which someone told me and I totally disregarded it. Just transcribe the important stuff and not
the chat. Just make a note to yourself about the chat. And transcribe the important stuff that you might actually use. And the data—your qualitative data.

Faculty nearly always take much longer than you expect. As we said they are overbooked. We do know of a couple exceptions. Time for revision can be more than you expected. And I think this feeling of perfectionism can get in the way with our drafts, especially with the bibliography. I don’t think the library checks to see if the bibliography is perfect. The COD doesn’t check to see if the bibliography is perfect. The faculty doesn’t check. They just go to check to see if their article is in there or to see if their colleagues article is in there.

So, there is a lesson about realism—Aim small, let the committee enlarge your proposal; if you aim for a small and doable project and let them tell you if you need to expand and let them tell you it’s not that easy. Time—watch your choices. Cut corners—just transcribe the important stuff. Expect that the faculty will take longer than you expected. Revisions—do as you’re told but, know that it won’t be perfect.

As I was sitting in Conroy writing this out, Linda DePalmer who was a TF last year; she came by and asked, “what are you doing?” And so I asked her, “Off the top of your head what advice would you give to this session we are talking about?” And she pointed her finger at me and said, “The one thing I would say is don’t expect to do this alone.” You need a study group, you need friends and when it’s time you need to come to us. And that is one of the things we are not realistic about, because we think we can do it alone. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Maybe you have a friend who is good at transcribing. Maybe you have a friend that can baby-sit for you while you are in a crucial part of it. Maybe you have a friend that can cook for you while you are trying to get that final draft done. Just don’t have this attitude that you can do it alone because it can’t be done. It takes a lot of support. In terms of models; it might be okay to use the model of somebody else’s proposal. It might be okay to look at other people’s dissertations and see how they worked into the chapters.

**Nancy Nienhuis:** Let’s open it up to questions.

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