

SOCIOLOGY SENIOR THESIS ADVISING GUIDE

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ADVICE AND FEEDBACK COMPILED FROM EXPERIENCED SENIOR THESIS ADVISERS INCLUDING IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY.

YOU MAY HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT ADVISING A SENIOR THESIS:

- What is it workload like on a monthly basis?
- How can I best help the student I am advising?
- What obstacles or difficulties am I likely to encounter?
- How should I deal with those difficulties when I encounter them?

BELOW ARE ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS FROM EXPERIENCED SENIOR THESIS ADVISERS

1. WHAT UNIVERSITY RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE FOR SENIOR THESIS ADVISERS?

- A. The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning created an excellent guide for senior thesis advisers.

Here is a link to the senior thesis advising guide:

<https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/advising-senior-theses>

- B. The Bok Center has a similarly useful guide on mentoring.

Here is a link to the mentoring guide:

<https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/mentoring>

- C. The Academic Resource Center has a useful guide for advisers and students

Here is a link to the senior thesis guide:

<https://academicresourcecenter.harvard.edu/senior-theses>

2. WHAT DEPARTMENTAL RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE FOR SENIOR THESIS ADVISERS?

- A. The Department provides seniors with a comprehensive guide on the senior thesis process and expectations.

i. This will be helpful as you familiarize yourself with the expectations, format, and structure of senior theses at Harvard.

ii. Here is a link to the departmental thesis guide:

https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/thesis_guide_sept_2012.pdf

- B. The Department has compiled advice from past thesis writers.

i. You may find it helpful to share this with the student you are advising.

ii. Here is a link to advice from past senior thesis writers:

<https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/pages/advice-past-thesis-writers>

3. WHAT IS THE BEST OR MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF ADVISING A SENIOR THESIS?

Advising senior theses has helped me better understand the research process from beginning to end. It's been a great way to mentor students through the senior year.

The excellent questions, through the year.

The most rewarding aspect is seeing how much students grow and learn. It really stretches them in new ways. They become real sociologists!

Getting to see the undergrad(s) you're advising experience the excitement of designing and carrying out an original research project.

Witnessing (Being able to help) the development of a research idea into a thesis.

Seeing how a students' thoughts develop and the enthusiasm they bring to their work.

I think watching the research project bloom from idea to full thesis is so rewarding. I really appreciate having regular meetings where we discuss new things as they learn them, and we talk through them to try to help them synthesize and develop those ideas.

Being able to help students every step of the way in conducting research on a topic they are very passionate about is probably the most rewarding aspect of advising a senior thesis is getting the opportunity to help.

Helping the student to become an independent researcher.

You get to see a project through from start to finish. It is especially rewarding when your advisee receives honors for their project.

Helping students produce a complete thesis from conceptualization to final draft.

4. WHAT IS THE MOST CHALLENGING ASPECT OF ADVISING A SENIOR THESIS?

It's a lot of work, and the work starts way before we're compensated - as early as March or April, even though the pay begins in the fall. One of my students had to stop writing a thesis because of Covid challenges, and the department cut off my pay, even though I had already worked for five months without pay before the semester had started. Thesis advising is quite a bit of work when you want to be hands on. For qualitative researchers especially, I've found it very helpful to do weekly check-ins with students who are doing fieldwork. Interviews and ethnography can be quite scary endeavors for a college senior. The extra support is helpful.

Trying to set and honor deadlines. Also, not having a sense of the students' familiarity of scholarly basics.

I'm not sure if this is the most challenging but it is certainly the most frustrating: I find it tough when students do things last minute. We have spent a year on the project and then if they don't give time for us to iron out the kinks at the end it feels like they are submitting something that could be SO MUCH BETTER if they had just not procrastinated.

Keeping your advisees on track, given that there aren't that many official deadlines.

Communicating expectations about timeline.

Lack of any guidance or guidelines in terms of timing, length, etc.

Trying to ensure they are *not* rushing at the end. Perhaps it is inevitable, but it seems that they plan to do a lot of drafting over winter break, and even with a schedule, the writing process takes them longer than they realize. With the start of the new semester then, it's hard to make progress until prioritizing it the last 2 weeks or so. Again, maybe this is inevitable! But I wonder if another soft chapter deadline (as opposed to self-set deadlines) could help prevent the last-minute crunch. I felt it was overstepping for me to set deadlines, so I encouraged my advisees to make a calendar for themselves (I did that with them, but wanted them to be the driver).

The most challenging aspect is probably making sure that the student doesn't doubt herself or question the possibility of finishing strong.

Time commitment. Also, with great inflation students have unrealistic views about their ability - overconfidence, and it is challenging to gently help them to realize how much they need to work on and that even if they put in a lot of work their thesis might not be top quality.

If you're not completely familiar with the substantive area and/or methods, it requires you to expand your knowledge to be able to help your advisee. Depending on the level of help they need, weekly meetings might also be needed, which can be difficult to balance with other responsibilities.

It can be frustrating when students ignore the advice you give them, but it is important to remember that it is their project. They need to make their own decisions about what directions to take their thesis.

5. WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU KNEW PRIOR TO ADVISING A SENIOR THESIS?

The work begins way earlier than expected, and the thesis is due quite early, too.

Memos are a very good instrument for productivity.

The key thing for me is: Are you doing this because you really want to or because you feel you should? Are you excited about dedicating senior year to this topic or are you mostly concerned about a feather in your cap? This is what I try to figure out prior to advising. A thesis is such a huge lift that the internal (rather than external) motivation really needs to be there or things will fall apart.

I wish I'd known more about the time commitment. In general, it really wasn't bad, but having to grade a thesis on top of advising felt like a bit much, especially for what we are paid.

1. Keeping on the timeline matters a lot.
2. Discuss plan B for data collection.
3. Resilience is a virtue that not all students have.

I really feel that there needs to be a brief training for thesis advisors!! The only advice or guidelines offered are super informal and passed on from more advanced Gs. This is a huge problem. I could imagine a 1 hour training session (optional after the first year for each G) where we actually talk about what the thesis is, what is expected/required, etc.

More examples of senior theses to read could be nice. I've only read my own advisees' theses and the ones I've graded. It'd be great to know what are grades attached to different example theses. It's hard to know ourselves what is the ideal scope of a senior thesis -- e.g. at one point I thought 25 interviews would be a really good goal, despite the pandemic, but I believe that Hilary (I think it was her but not positive) told my advisee that would be still a bit low. I always defer to the folks in charge, and I encourage my advisee to ask them questions, but I want to make sure that I don't give incorrect advice.

I wish I had known how to better help out students struggling with COVID and the other unexpected challenges they had to face.

The quality of written work of the student.

Time commitment. That is okay to not know everything.

The last month before the thesis is due (February and early March) are going to be very busy and a bit hectic unless your student is very on top of things.

6. DO YOU HAVE ANY BEST PRACTICES FOR ADVISING A SENIOR THESIS? WHAT WORKED PARTICULARLY WELL FOR AND THE STUDENT YOU ADVISED?

Weekly check-ins in the summer to ensure that data collection is going smoothly and the student is making smart decisions in the field. If a student starts the fall with their data already collected, the whole process goes much more smoothly.

It helps to have regular meetings.

The one thing that I think is crucial is a regular meeting time or regular check in time. Some kind of system. Sometimes it combines meeting and email check ins, but whatever it is, it is the regular schedule on the calendar that helps.

Doing regular email check-ins was helpful. My advisee sent me an email every Friday with an update on what they'd worked on that week. Sometimes there wasn't really much to report, so the email would say "I didn't really work on the thesis this week." But it was still a helpful accountability mechanism.

Biweekly check-in meetings.

Just meeting consistently and talking through the problems they ran into.

I highly encourage having a regular meeting schedule! We did biweekly for most of the time, and then weekly for the last few months. Even when my advisee didn't have anything they thought they "needed" to discuss, just the regular contact was good to keep the progress going. We always ended up talking about something anyway!

A lot of encouragement and a boost in confidence seems to be a secret recipe for successful theses!

What worked well: Creating structure for meetings and deadlines to receive drafts. Being transparent about level of feedback you are able to give. Directing advisee to other graduate students and/or faculty who may be able to help.

7. PLEASE DESCRIBE AN OBSTACLE YOU FACED AS YOU ADVISED A SENIOR THESIS AND HOW YOU OVERCAME THAT OBSTACLE.

Doing fieldwork during Covid presented enormous challenges. Another issue is students needing to work during the summer while also doing data collection. Helping students manage their time and plan a big research project has been really important.

I tend to perhaps over-praise, too soon and too often. But I also do not intend to discourage or be harsh. I still have not figured out this balance.

To the point above about students procrastinating--often the biggest obstacle!--I have at times just insisted that they give me whatever they have on something (a chapter etc.) by a particular date, no matter if it is just notes or an outline. If I can just give them some concrete feedback on SOMETHING, even if that thing is very sketchy, it helps.

I wasn't familiar with the literature my advisee was drawing from/trying to speak to, so I didn't feel like I could offer much feedback in that realm. Instead, I tried to compensate by offering relatively detailed feedback in other areas.

Recruiting interviewees was challenging for my advisee and we were glad that we talked about back-up plans earlier. We ended up trying online targeted recruiting and it went surprisingly well.

My student frequently ignored my advice. After a while, I just decided to go with the flow and let them do whatever they felt was best (while still offering my advice). My student would also often ask me about guidelines and timelines and etc, and I frequently didn't know what to tell them.

I honestly cannot think of a big obstacle. This year, never meeting in person could have been an obstacle (Jocelyn had connected us via email in Spring 2020), but with regular video chats, we really established a good relationship despite the lack of in-person contact!

The student I was advising (and her entire family) got COVID. She felt that she had lost a couple of weeks worth of work and questioned whether she'd be able to catch up. We overcame the obstacle together by talking through what we could still do, what we had

to let go of, and coming up with a newly adjusted timeline/plan that would take us to the finish line.

Obstacle: Not being fully versed in substantive area.

Solution: Having student read on subject and report back summaries in our early meetings. Directing student to others who are more well versed in subject.

Sometimes a student will feel it is impossible for them to complete their thesis in time. You will need to have a frank conversation with them about what is possible in the remaining time. I suggest reaching out to faculty and staff in the department to get a sense of what is feasible. Laura Thomas, the Director of Undergraduate Students, and Associate Director of Undergraduate Studies are great resources for this.

8. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU FEEL SOMEONE SHOULD KNOW AS THEY PREPARE TO ADVISE A SENIOR THESIS?

Start early, be there for your students. Students come in with all sorts of ideas they've picked up about the research process. The most toxic, I think, is the idea that they need to "find a gap in the literature." That advice is totally debilitating to such an early researcher. I ask students what conversation they want to join, and that seems to ease some of the anxiety.

I think one of the most helpful things is to frame for students how original research is more 'messy' than course papers or projects where the parameters are handed to you. So I give them a spiel about how it is embracing this messiness (uncertainty of what you are going to find, problem solving research design barriers that one encounters, etc.), rather than having it stress you out or seem like a problem, that is the opportunity for real intellectual growth.

Be prepared to grade a thesis at the end!!!

I think advising a thesis was a great learning experience for me. 1) It forced me to be a listener rather than a speaker, and a couch rather than a player. My advisee had a great idea but one that is not necessarily well verbalized or connected to theory. Suddenly I found myself in a position to "validate" and "push back" at the same time. That is not an easy drill. 2) Recommending them to make compromises and adjustments forced me to look back at my own research projects, and it eased me making compromises and adjustments.

I wasn't prepared for how unsupervised and ambiguous the whole process is. There's nothing to be done on an individual level to prepare for that--that is, it's a structural problem the department should fix--but it would be good to know what they're walking into!

I felt it was helpful upfront to have a good convo about the kind of advising style the advisee would thrive in. I tend to want to help a lot, but I know that can also overwhelm some people. Just discussing what would be most generative and supportive for the student helps you to know how to navigate the job and relationship. This year especially, I found the process to be extremely rewarding for me, and I would highly recommend this experience during grad school! I certainly feel so much more prepared to advise research in a faculty position.

I feel it'd be important to remember that, for most students, the senior thesis means more than just a simple research project or a grade. The student I have advised described it as "the epitome of everything [she] worked towards and fought for." She felt that it was a way to thank her family for all the sacrifices they made for her education--a way to make them proud. Making sure that they finish strong is thus essential and should be a responsibility that no one should take lightly.

Be aware of your limits and be transparent with the student at the beginning. Set clear expectations.