

Thinking About Senior Theses

Richard Adelstein

Seniors are submitting their completed honors theses this week, and professors are gearing up to read and evaluate them next week, so this seems a good moment to get you thinking about whether you might want to write a thesis next year, and what such a project entails. Let me help get you started by offering some informal thoughts on what you might expect from the experience as your senior year proceeds.

The thesis year is not congruent with the academic year, even though it has the same summer vacation. It runs from April to April, and if you begin now by trying to articulate a reasonably clear idea of what you'd like to write about, you'll reap the dividends a year from now. Perhaps you have a question or problem in some area of the social studies, broadly defined, that has intrigued you for a while and about which you'd like to learn more, or perhaps you've taken a course that you particularly enjoyed and would like to pursue some of the issues raised there in greater depth. Whatever the source of this initial interest, if you have some ideas about a thesis project, seek out a member of the faculty, inside the CSS or out, whose interests lie close to your own (this is frequently a professor you've had in a course, but it need not be) to discuss these ideas and explore whether you and the professor can enter into a cordial and productive working relationship. Now is the time to be making these preliminary inquiries of potential advisors. Most professors enjoy supervising honors theses -- after all, it's a chance to work closely with highly motivated students on interesting research, and for us older folk, it doesn't get much better than that -- and will be happy to sign on to your project if there's a good match of interests and personalities. Early in September is generally not too late to create this relationship, but if you wait till then, you run the risk that the advisor's dance card will be full, and that he or she won't be able to take on another advisee. Don't worry if your ideas are not yet fully formed, or if you can't yet articulate anything beyond a general area in which your thesis topic might lie -- this is par for the course at this stage. Find a professor whose area of expertise is in or near your general area of interest and talk to him or her about the field and your own ideas. Informal brainstorming of this sort often leads to excellent projects, and gives both sides a chance to size one another up and see whether the relationship is likely to be a smooth one. Be open to suggestions from the professors you speak with and allow yourself to be moved from one topic to another within your general area of interest -- the profs are all experienced researchers, aware of problems or pitfalls that you might not anticipate and perhaps able to see more clearly than you can at this stage what is possible and what is not. As I'll suggest below, negotiation of this sort goes on continuously until the thesis is done, and it's wise to accustom yourself to it right at the start.

Once you've secured the services of a suitable advisor, late in the spring of your junior year or very early in the fall, the next step is to register for the senior thesis tutorial (CSS 409) under the advisor's supervision in the fall. You may not preregister for CSS 409 but you simply add it during the fall drop-add period. If the work goes as planned and the thesis is continued into the spring semester, students receive a grade of "X" for CSS 409 (that is, a placeholder grade for work not yet completed) and register for a second thesis tutorial, CSS 410, in the spring. Candidates for honors must complete their theses by the second week in April (see above!), a date set by the Honors College, not the CSS. In a very few cases, thesis writers choose not to submit their work for consideration for honors, or fail to complete the work by the Honors College deadline; these students have until the end of the spring semester to complete their work, and while they cannot graduate with honors, they do receive full credit with a grade (given by the advisor) for each of the two thesis tutorials. Students who do submit their work for honors have it evaluated by a committee that includes their advisor and two other professors, one a CSS core faculty member and the other from outside the CSS. These evaluations determine whether the thesis will receive Honors, High Honors or no honors. The honors designation

is independent of the grades given by the advisor in CSS 409 and 410; honors candidates receive both the honors designation and the tutorial grades.

If you aren't able to secure the agreement of an advisor before you leave for the summer, try at least to have one or two on tap who will be willing to consider the question further in September. Your advisor may suggest some reading for the summer, but then again, he or she may not. Sometimes such summer work is fruitful, sometimes not, sometimes it's enjoyable, sometimes not, but in general it's not essential. The senior year is quite long enough for your research, if you work steadily and conscientiously. But whatever the state of your work at the end of the summer, your advisor will want you to get off to a quick start in the fall. So at the very start of the semester, he or she may well ask you to prepare a short research prospectus (roughly five to seven pages) that lays out the questions you hope to investigate and the research strategy you will use to address them. Be prepared for a request of this kind -- it's yet another reason to begin thinking seriously about your project before your junior year ends.

Once these organizational details are taken care of, the actual work of scholarly research begins. This will almost certainly be very different from anything you've ever done in school before, a long, intense experience filled with pleasure, anxiety, satisfaction, frustration, despair, elation and a thousand other emotions that tumble on one another throughout the year, so it's good to try to be prepared for it. Perhaps the first thing to say is that the thesis year almost always lasts longer than your initial enthusiasm for your topic. No matter how fired up you are in September, in February, when the days are cold and short and it feels like you've been working on this thing forever with no light at the end of the tunnel, you will almost certainly hit an emotional low point that puts your project in some peril. If you started the year with a topic area in which you had a "reasonable" interest, such that the initial reading was sort of interesting and the thesis work itself not too bad, then your thesis is likely to crash in the February trough -- tepid enthusiasm in September, or even strong enthusiasm that doesn't anticipate the trials of the thesis winter, will be fully drained by the first day of the spring semester. The lesson from this is not to start a thesis in September unless you're really excited about the topic area, and have a deep and genuine intellectual curiosity about it. Only this kind of "supercharged" enthusiasm about the subject and the prospect of the research itself will be enough to sustain your project through the dark days of February, and even in this case, the enthusiasm of September will likely turn to something less in midstream, with the excitement and pressure created by the deadline serving as the major forces pushing you through to the end. I certainly don't mean to suggest that the thesis experience is a bleak one; for most people it isn't, and the rewards are wonderful. But I do mean to say that a thesis is not a casual undertaking, as one might take a course just to get a taste of the subject matter. It's a project that requires lots of hard, lonely work, lots of self-discipline, and a toughness of mind and spirit that can overcome the obstacles that will inevitably crop up as you work. Most of us can't summon the energy to complete such a project without a very strong initial motivation to know more about the subject. Just thinking that it would be nice to graduate with honors is generally not enough. If you're sure that you've got the requisite enthusiasm for the project, and the strong desire to see the project through to completion, by all means go for it. But if you don't, think very hard before you start.

Let's suppose now that you've passed this first internal hurdle, and are sure that you're sufficiently fired up about your topic area now that you'll be able to push your thesis through to a successful conclusion a year from now. What's it like to actually write a thesis? One thing that seniors are often surprised by is that serious scholarship is, in the nature of things, an exercise in continuous uncertainty. By this I mean that, even though you are an undergraduate and thus not likely to produce a piece of truly original scholarship of the kind that more experienced researchers are expected to produce, you are writing about questions that no one has ever written about in the particular way that you are writing about them. So there's no "answer" to be found in a book in the library, or even in your advisor's head. A thesis is not a problem to be solved, so that you know you're done when you get the

answer and it all checks out; it's more like clearing a path in a forest that no one has ever traversed before. Indeed, not only will you be unsure about the "answer," you are almost certain to be unsure about the question until the two or three weeks before the thesis is due. This is because, for every scholarly researcher, young or old, research begins with a topic area rather than with a real topic. Today, for example, you might suppose that you can write a thesis about topic X, devoting twenty pages to "subquestion" X1, fifteen to X2, another twenty to X3, and so on till you've got a thesis. But not long after you begin work on subquestion X1, it will become clear to you that, in order to do a decent job on X1 and treat it in the depth it deserves, you'll have to consider a range of "subquestions" X11, X12, and so on. And perhaps subquestion X11 requires some investigation of even finer questions, X111, X112, etc. By the time you've covered all the relevant bases for the initial subquestion X1, you've written 120 pages and it's April 5th, so that your thesis has turned out not to be about X at all, but about a (very small) part of X, a part that you thought in September that you could treat adequately in ten or twenty pages. Similarly, of course, with X2 and X3 and so forth. Every thesis topic area X, that is, contains many, many potentially superior honors theses within it, and one of the major tasks of the thesis project is to identify this needle of a thesis topic in the haystack of the topic area and confine your writing to an adequate treatment of the needle without trying to expand the thesis beyond what the time you have for it will allow and without losing your interest in the topic as you "zoom in" from the big area X to the tiny plot of ground that ultimately comprises your thesis. Along the way, there is a series of painful choices to be made -- "I'm interested in X1 and X2, but here it is the first of December and I've barely scratched the surface of X1; now I've got to abandon X2 for the duration of the thesis, simply turning away from the readings and the questions relating to X2 until the thesis is done." Writing a thesis, in this sense, is like peeling an onion. It's a continual process of narrowing your focus down, putting some interesting questions aside because you must pursue others in greater depth. As a result, until almost the very end, you can't really say just what your actual thesis topic is. Instead, your topic area simply becomes smaller and smaller until all that's left is what in retrospect turned out to be a finely delineated topic for which the thesis that you've actually written is the appropriate vehicle. This sort of continuous uncertainty -- your inability to say what the title of your thesis will be until it's done -- is very hard on everyone's psyche. Be prepared, but by all means don't despair.

One final set of thoughts. Different people work in different ways. Some students need a lot of structure in the form of specific assignments of work and clear deadlines, and some don't. Some advisors are "hands on," and take the task of supervising more literally than other, more "laissez-faire" advisors do. It's important that you and your advisor are on the same page in this respect. If you need the structure of a schedule and deadlines, make sure your advisor is willing to do his or her part in creating it; if you chafe under such close supervision, find an advisor who will let you organize your work on your own. But if you take the latter course (as, for example, I would), remember that the responsibility for kicking yourself in the behind and getting the work actually done is completely yours. The danger is that, without the pressure of deadlines or regular meetings with your advisor, you will simply let the work slide through the fall semester. You are, after all, taking a thesis course, CSS 409. But it's a course without a syllabus, without class meetings or homework or tests or due dates. You, and only you, determine when you will work, and when you won't. If you have the foresight and the self-discipline to set aside twelve or fifteen hours every week (the time you'd have to spend each week on a regular course) during which you commit yourself to concentrate on your thesis work, you will be at an enormous advantage, and the spring semester will be tolerable, even enjoyable, as the work proceeds toward its conclusion. But if the lack of direct supervision leads you to find a reason or excuse not to work this week or next ("It's only October, my thesis isn't due for six months, no one will notice if I skip the three hours of reading I'd planned for this afternoon and go catch some rays"), so that your work has not progressed very much past the first layer of two of the onion by Christmas, you're in trouble. A serious thesis takes serious, continuous, concentrated work over an extended

period of time. You've almost certainly never done anything like it. Promise yourself that you'll do it right, and then put that promise first on your list of priorities for your senior year.

Sounds like a prison sentence, doesn't it? In some ways, I suppose, it is, but it's worth it. As you respond to the many challenges, intellectual and emotional, of the year, you learn a great deal about yourself. You learn a lot about something you're interested in as well, you have a strong shot at graduating with honors, and you have the satisfaction of doing a hard job well. There's nothing quite like that last feeling. And there's nothing that comes close to the period between April 10 and Commencement for people who have completed a Senior Thesis -- trust me, it's the absolute zenith of your life. Your college work is done (I know, you've got a course or two to finish, but that's a piece of cake for experienced seniors in the spring). So you have nothing more that has to be done in order to graduate. And until you graduate, you have no opportunity to do the next thing in your life, so there's no reason to feel guilty for not doing that next thing now. You thus have six weeks when the last thing in your life is done (and done well) and the next thing in your life can't yet begin. The sun is out, the weather is warming up, you're the master of your undergraduate domain, and the only responsibility you have is to live long enough to shake President Roth's hand when he gives you your diploma. There's nothing like it -- ask (next week!) any senior you know who's just finished a Senior Thesis. You'll never forget it.