

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Study of Religion and Harvard Divinity School
The Dissertation Prospectus

Within, at most, twelve months of passing generals, every doctoral candidate is expected to submit a Dissertation Prospectus. The prospectus is a proposal formulated by the student about the doctoral dissertation that he or she intends to write. Acceptance of the prospectus by the Standing Committee constitutes a kind of contract by which the full Committee agrees that if the student completes a successful dissertation that is in accord with, or a reasonable development from, what the prospectus delineates, it will recommend the degree.

Student Responsibilities -- It is the responsibility of the student to formulate, with as much advice and consultation as seem appropriate, a dissertation project that seems to him or her significant and worthwhile, *and that others will recognize as a solid contribution both to his or her subfield and to the study of religion more generally*. In this regard please refer to the enclosed statement "On Drafting a Dissertation Topic Proposal," and keep well in mind the following statement in the Supplement: "Each dissertation, in making a contribution to knowledge, should also illuminate our understanding of religion."

Each student must choose a member of the Harvard faculty to supervise the writing of the prospectus. Such a faculty member will most likely, but not necessarily, be the advisor who has been supervising the student's program to that point. The student must also propose two or three other faculty members to serve on his or her prospectus committee.

In composing the prospectus the student should be mindful that he or she is writing it for The Standing Committee on the Study of Religion as a whole, to whom it must be intelligible and cogent. Most Committee members will not be experts in the student's particular specialty.

The prospectus should be brief (not more than 3000 words, excluding bibliography and notes), and must be double-spaced. It is to be submitted in 25 copies to the Ph.D. Program Administrator 2 weeks in advance of the Standing Committee meeting at which it will be considered. A model title page is enclosed.

Advisor Responsibilities – Advisors are expected to be involved actively in the development of the prospectus—especially with regard to its scope and purpose—and to guide the student through early drafts.

When the prospectus is ready to be submitted to the Standing Committee, the student's advisor must confirm that all of the formal guidelines for the prospectus have been met, by signing the "Prospectus Checklist", which is attached. If the student's advisor will not be able to attend the Standing Committee meeting in which the prospectus is being discussed, he or she must write a covering letter to the Chair of the Committee, indicating

an evaluation of the project and a willingness to supervise the work. The letter also proposes two or three faculty members, in addition to the advisor, to serve as members of a prospectus committee. While the majority of the prospectus committee will be scholars in the student's particular specialty, others outside his or her field might be included as well.

Standing Committee Responsibilities -- Once the prospectus is submitted, it will be considered, along with comments of the advisor, by the Standing Committee at its earliest scheduled meeting. In some instances, the Standing Committee may vote to postpone approval of a prospectus, asking that it be revised or significantly re-written and then re-submitted. In some cases where concerns about a prospectus are expressed, someone to represent these may be named to the prospectus committee, either in place of or in addition to those suggested by the advisor. In every case, the advisor is a member of the prospectus committee.

Once the Standing Committee approves a prospectus, it will then refer it to the prospectus committee who will meet with the student to discuss the project in depth. Normally this is a two-hour meeting. The prospectus committee then reports back to the Standing Committee, recommending final approval of the proposal. In some cases the prospectus committee may indicate that it has asked the student to make some revisions and that it will delay its formal recommendation until they have been received. The prospectus committee, once its recommendation has been approved by the Standing Committee, is disbanded.

On Drafting a Dissertation Prospectus

The purpose of a prospectus is to enable students: (1) to clarify what they conceive to be the nature and significance of their prospective dissertation work, and (2) to receive constructive criticism, advice and approval from both the full Committee on the Study of Religion and members of a prospectus committee. Formulating a prospectus for the faculty represents *a significant stage* in the course of dissertation work, and its importance should not be underestimated. Not only does it allow students to come to a fuller and more adequate understanding of their own project; it also enlists the active support of the faculty who are expected to provide significant advice and criticism at this crucial stage in its development.

While there are no well-established formulas or models for writing a prospectus, every prospectus should attend to the following three issues:

1. **Topic and thesis.** There is an important distinction between a topic and a thesis. A topic represents the issue that the dissertation addresses. A thesis constitutes the position that the student takes in relation to the topic; i.e., the central claim that is to be defended. For example:

Topic: Barth's theological method

Thesis: Barth's theological method results from his interpretation of the Word of God as an act which is not subject to human manipulation.

In the prospectus, students should carefully circumscribe the topic of their dissertation, including historical and conceptual analyses of the topic (to the extent that such analyses clarify what the student takes to be at issue). They should also state, in a preliminary way, the thesis which they wish to defend, explicating it in whatever way they find helpful.

2. **Method.** The aim of this aspect of the prospectus is not only to show how the dissertation will be done, but that the student is familiar enough with the topic that the project can be done and done within a reasonable amount of time. Consequently, in discussing method, it is especially important to attend to any special theoretical problems that might occur in the course of research and to note how these problems might be addressed. The prospectus must also provide an outline of the projected chapter divisions and a brief description of how the argument will be developed from chapter to chapter.

3. **Contribution to scholarship.** Students should specify as carefully as they can what they consider to be the various ways their project will contribute to the field of study in which they work. In particular, it is helpful to a brief statement of the current status of their topic within their larger field of study, to indicate the various problems at issue, and to show how their project will advance the discussion. It is also important to know that prospectuses are read by the full Standing Committee before they are considered by Prospectus Committees and that the concern of the members of the full Committee, with respect to this aspect of the prospectus, is the extent to which dissertation work can be understood to contribute not only to particular fields of study but also to the broader study of religion (and to theological reflection, broadly construed, for Th. D. projects.) Students should keep this in mind as topic and thesis are formulated and developed and as the worth of the project for scholarship is stated.

It is not unusual that there be a period of letdown and even listlessness following general exams, for the successful conclusion of exams marks the end of an intense and highly structured program of study. Students are now expected to initiate and structure their own study, and it often takes some time to learn how to do this. Also, students usually take on various teaching responsibilities after generals. As a result, work on the prospectus is sometimes postponed until shortly before the due date one year after the exams. When this happens, there is a sharp and unfortunate break between preparation for the generals and work on the prospectus. This break could be easily avoided if the student's "special topic" general exam, and study for the exam, is explicitly conceived as *preparation for the prospectus*. Indeed, it might be helpful preparation for this exam to attempt to write at least the first draft of the prospectus *before* the exam itself is taken. This would allow students to present their prospectuses soon after generals and to move on to the main business at hand, the writing of the dissertation.