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**What They Say About You Behind Closed Doors**

***How faculty members on a graduate student's committee are, and aren't, like cooking-show judges***



*Image: Serge Bloch for The Chronicle*

By Amanda I. Seligman

Graduate studies offers few more nerve-racking moments, I suspect, than when you are asked to leave the room while members of the faculty committee decide your future. It's a moment that you can't prepare for, no matter how thoroughly you've studied for your preliminary exams, or how well you've defended your proposal, thesis, or dissertation. All you can do in such moments is wait.

If you fail at any of those points, it's probably a failure of advising as much as a reflection of your inadequacies as a graduate student. Failure shouldn't happen at late stages in your graduate studies, but it does—more often at some institutions and departments than at others.

As you wait, the minutes ticking away, you may wonder what on earth the faculty members have to talk about for such a long time. Perhaps you hear laughter or muffled shouting emanating from behind the closed door. Is your committee mocking you for some misstep? Maybe you hear nothing but your own breathing while the faculty argue among themselves about whether you may continue in the program after the preliminary exam.

What could be taking so long? What happens during this mysterious time?

Academic departments don't invite observers into the room for these deliberations, so students will never get a fly-on-the-wall view of the proceedings unless they become professors at doctoral-granting institutions themselves.

In closed-door discussions, the faculty panel may spend much of its effort coaching your adviser about how to: help you translate the exam's focus into a dissertation topic, make final adjustments to the thesis before submission, or reconceptualize the dissertation for publication. The deliberations rarely change the result from pass to fail, but faculty assessments of passable work are not necessarily glowing. Committee members may not want to speak their piece directly to you, but your adviser needs to know their thoughts in order to continue to guide you.

In my experience, nothing resembles these candid conversations so much as the discussions of judges on television cooking competitions like *The Next Iron Chef, Chopped,* and *The Taste.* The difference: When the director sends the cooks out of the room, the cameras continue to roll as the judges debate. To get some insight into what faculty members are saying about you behind closed doors, consider the following kinds of comments that judges make during TV cooking competitions.

**Yum, or alternately, yuck.** Just as judges respond viscerally to the quality of the food presented, so, too, do faculty members comment on the overall impression they have of a student's work. As surface impressions are very much a matter of taste, they also disagree with one another and feel free to say so in these meetings.

**I wish this dish had a bit more salt.** With a comment like that, judges on cooking shows give important clues about their personal preferences to competitors who continue to the next round. Faculty members, likewise, discuss their individual responses to a student's paper. Committee members share their views with the student directly or through the student's adviser. Their comments suggest how the student might please the committee members at the next phase. They also help colleagues better direct a student's project in the future.

**Don't serve us truffles.** Don't try to buy the favor of expert judges with sweets. They recognize and sometimes punish an eager cook who has played to the idea of luxury rather than concentrating on a result that is deeply pleasing. Sometimes graduate students make the same mistake. In an effort to please the all-powerful committee, students can overreach with their evidence or sycophantically cite a faculty member's marginally relevant scholarship. You're not fooling anyone when you do that. Although you must win the approval of your committee members, faculty members may also remind you that your scholarship needs to work for a wider audience as well.

**The food is delicious, but the plating doesn't appeal.** Cooking shows teach us that we eat with our eyes as well as our mouths. Similarly, excellent scholarship works on multiple levels. Faculty members may conclude that your hypotheses are provocative but your writing leaves much to be desired, or that your conceptualization is excellent but the research methods are weak. Dissecting a student's strengths and weaknesses may seem like so much petty commentary, but its purpose is to help your adviser understand what you need to do to move forward in your work. Such guidance may also help you understand what kind of job would be most appropriate for your skills.

**You are clearly a fine cook; you just ran out of time today.** Cooks and students are sometimes asked to perform under artificial and unrealistic time constraints. Students writing preliminary or general exams are expected to produce high-quality results in a few hours or weeks. Faculty members (and food judges) can often see when the results might have been better, given a bit more time, and will explain that in their comments. Depending on the rules of the game, that kind of statement may bode ill or well for the student's (or cook's) ability to proceed.

**You're a really good cook, but not today.** A dissertation or thesis defense is not usually a zero-sum game, like a cooking show. But some students do defeat themselves. Faculty members can see in a proposal that you have great potential but have not produced the results that mean you are ready to move on to the next step.

Of course, the cooking-show metaphor breaks down if you push it too far. Here are some of the remarks that faculty members sometimes make in our closed-door meetings that are unique to academe.

**You're really smart, but you should not be in the academy.** Sometimes the thesis committee concludes, as a result of the thesis defense, that a master's student should not pursue the Ph.D. Faculty members use the time behind closed doors to figure out whether and how to break the news.

By contrast, unless the cooking judges think that the contestant is running the risk of poisoning the people he feeds, politeness demands that they simply suggest that this particular contestant would be better off cooking in a less high-pressure venue than in front of cameras. After the show ends, no one is going to stop contestants from cooking in their own homes or returning to their restaurant jobs. But a defense committee has the ability to end a student's academic career.

**We gave the wrong test.** The judges in a cooking show would never tell a contestant that she might have won that round if only she had been told to barbecue in the park instead of feeding an impatient crowd from a taco truck. The winner is determined by who performed best at the assigned task.

But faculty members do some-times realize, after the fact, that the exam they wrote did not stretch the student in all the right directions, or that they failed to ask the right questions during the dissertation defense. We may admit that to one another, but we (or at least most of us) spare the student the agony of redoing the exam or the defense because of our misjudgment.

**The student's problems are due to poor advising.** Behind closed doors, professors do tell one another point blank about what they did wrong in bringing a student to the moment of defense.

Faculty members whose egos are not too affronted by such comments can use the advice to be better mentors. By contrast, on few, if any, cooking shows do the judges admit that their own assessments were wrong or take responsibility for contestants' failures.

**The student is a pain in the rear.** Because relationships with graduate students last so long, part of faculty deliberation at an early hurdle of your training, like the prelims or a proposal defense, can be how to cope with your less endearing personality traits.

Celebrity judges on a cooking show may well think that a contestant is a big pain and might even say so during the judging. But the director usually leaves such comments on the editing-room floor or puts them in the mouths of the other contestants, allowing the viewers to see only the professional, impartial side of the judges. Difficult personalities make a TV show more entertaining but do not matter to the final decision, because the judges do not have to live with the winners or losers for the next several years.

Professors, on the other hand, may have to work out a strategy for containing a student's anxieties or arrogance—or even find a pretext to avoid continuing to serve on the student's dissertation committee.

For most of you, of course, exams and thesis defenses are more serious business than a cooking contest. They determine both your future and the new knowledge you may create. The more that you and your adviser can do to avoid some of the pitfalls I've outlined here, the less stressful you will find those moments waiting outside the committee room for the results.

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