

Talking to Faculty About Committee Membership?

How to Meet Faculty

Sending an email to a person you've never met might seem awkward. Suggestions for how to make this easier include:

- If you have a principal supervisor or at least one committee member, discussing other possible committee members with them is an excellent starting place. You can enlist that person's help in contacting other faculty, or cc them on your efforts to contact others.
- Checking the Program's regularly-updated list of faculty members' availability for supervision to see who might genuinely be available to join a committee.
- Attending Monday Workshops or talks given by faculty members in order to meet more of them face-to-face. Joining a Program/Departmental committee can also give you more contacts.
- Finding out faculty members' office hours for undergraduate teaching, and dropping in to introduce yourself.
- Making it clear whether you are looking for a possible principal supervisor or a committee member, and whether it's for an RRP, a thesis, a comprehensive, or a dissertation.
- Including your *cv* and a short sample of written work, e.g., your most recent OGS proposal, as something the faculty member *might* like to have a look at to get a sense of your interests.
- Trying again if you don't receive a reply to an email. Mailboxes can get full; messages can unaccountably wind up in spam folders. Include in your 2nd message something like, "If I don't hear from you within x weeks, I'll assume you're not available to meet," so that you don't end up feeling stuck waiting.

Possible Topics to Discuss

Asking questions early in the process helps to avoid big problems later on. When you meet with a potential supervisor or committee member for the first time, think about raising some of the questions below. What you ask will depend on what's most important to you and on what you already know about a person.

Committee Style and Expectations

- What role do you see yourself playing as a supervisor/committee member? (e.g. academic sage, cheerleader, drill master, financial assistance provider via RA positions)
- Are you a 'hands on' or 'hands off' type of supervisor/committee member?
- How often should a committee and student meet? How should meeting times be used?
- Whose responsibility is it to coordinate and to set agendas for student/committee meetings?
- Who should be the first reader of written work: the supervisor or the whole committee?
- How should disagreements between committee members be resolved?
- How should disagreements between a student and committee members be resolved?
- What's your perspective on mentoring? What do you think it means to be a mentor?
- What would totally irritate you?

Contributing to Your Academic Progress

- What theoretical perspectives do you generally use?
- What methodological approaches do you generally use?
- What kind of information about my work and me would it be helpful for you to see?
- Will you contact me regularly, or do you generally wait for students to contact you?
- How long does it usually take you to provide feedback on written work?

- Do you write detailed letters of reference for scholarships and job applications?
- How much advance notice do you need for writing reference letters?

Potential Conflicts

- Which faculty members do you work well with?
- How do you feel about students working with different faculty members for each stage of the degree process, e.g., courses, comprehensives, the RRP, thesis, or dissertation?
- How long do you expect students will take to complete a M.A./Ph.D. degree?
- Will you work with students who plan on other timelines for their degree?
- How many Sociology M.A./Ph.D. students are you currently working with?
- What other time commitments do you currently have? How do you think those commitments will change over the next ___ months/years?
- Are you available to meet during Summer terms?
- Do you have a sabbatical or other commitment planned which will take you away from the university during the next ___ years?

Following Up

At the end of the meeting:

- Make sure that the faculty member and you both know when the decision about committee membership will be made. In short, you should both know who will be contacting whom when with that decision.
- Send a follow-up email thanking the faculty member for *and summarizing* the meeting. This message can reiterate what the specifics are of the commitment being discussed – e.g., for PhD students, faculty members sometimes think they’ve been asked to sign on for one comp, whereas the student might in fact be looking for a supervisory committee for the dissertation.

When you have formed your committee, it’s helpful to revisit these issues during committee meetings and to continue to send email summaries of what’s been discussed for future reference.

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