

Graduate Advising Philosophy

Erich J. Sommerfeldt

Undertaking graduate education is a challenging enterprise, and most of us need help and advice along the way—both formal and informal. I am pleased to offer advice to anyone in an informal fashion—my door is always open. In this document, however, I discuss my perspective on the formal advisor-advisee relationship and my requirements for participating in or leading advisory/dissertation committees.

Advising Philosophy

The advisor-advisee relationship is one I take very seriously. An advisor is a guide for students in both the practical aspects of graduate education, such as in program planning and navigating university bureaucracy, as well as for more abstract questions about academic life such as determining career aspirations, solidifying research interests, and understanding the peer-review publication process. As a hands-on and engaged guide, I have a vested interest in seeing that students succeed in their graduate studies and beyond.

That said, the advisor-advisee relationship is definitely not one-sided. The responsibility for a functional advisory relationship lies with both parties, and this relationship cannot succeed without mutual trust and respect. This requires that advisees are honest, prepared, engaged, and willing to take criticism constructively. Further, time is a precious resource, and I value my time as well as yours. I make it a point to offer timely, substantive feedback. Students who come to meetings ill-prepared or who repeatedly miss mutually agreed upon deadlines are not holding up their end of the bargain, and worse, they are wasting my time and their own.

I expect any student with whom I work to be proactively engaged in improving their work and advancing their career, not passively waiting for their advisor (me) to tell them what to do. By proactively engaged, I mean: actively seeking out and reading relevant literature; developing and participating in research projects with me, other faculty or students; preparing and submitting high quality conference papers and journal articles; and participating in department and university-sponsored committees/functions. In all of these things I am willing and eager to *assist* you, but I can only abet and possibly augment your advancement—I cannot help you succeed unless you are willing to help yourself.

To Serve on an Advisory/Dissertation Committee

While I am keen to offer advice to any interested party, in order for me to serve as a member of an advisory committee, there must be some identifiable connection between my research interests or areas of expertise and that of the student's plan of study. Similarly, in order to serve on a dissertation committee, there must be a link between my area of knowledge and/or methodological expertise. I am happy to meet with students to discuss if my joining a committee

would be beneficial. I would not be offended if after meeting with me you decide not to ask me to join your committee.

To Chair an Advisory/Dissertation Committee

In order to serve as the chair of either an advisory or dissertation committee, there must be a *clear and explicit* link between my research interests/expertise and that of the subject to be studied in the student's dissertation. As a further requirement to chair a dissertation committee, the student must have taken at least one course or independent study with me.

My Research Interests/Methodological Knowledge

My primary areas of expertise include public relations, specifically activist group public relations and the role of public relations in civil society—which encompasses many different kinds of social and organizational relationships. I have expertise in related bodies of literature, including that of social capital, public sphere theory, and development communication.

In terms of research methods, I am comfortable with most qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. I also have expertise in social network analysis. In order to chair a dissertation committee, I must be familiar with the specific method(s) to be used in the study.

In short, the best way to determine if I am a good fit for your committee or as a possible advisor is to meet with me. Please feel free to visit my office hours or to make an appointment to discuss possibilities.