

March 24, 2010

To: Executive Committee and other faculty colleagues  
From: Hester Eisenstein  
Re: Proper Role of the FMC

I want to argue in our meeting of March 26, 2010 that the FMC should revert to its traditional role of advising the student on dissertation proposals, with final authority over the satisfactory quality of the proposal resting with the faculty advisor and the other members of that student's committee.

Some of my considerations, based on recent experience with the current FMC, are as follows:

**Ideological narrowness: one-size-fits-all**

The insistence on a classical sociological format (hypothesis/evidence) does not suit the variety of sociological approaches in the department, among both students and faculty, which range from empirical investigations to theoretical and philosophical writings. The range of approaches in the department, which is one of our strengths, is thus watered down.

**Lack of specialized expertise leads to mistakes/misunderstandings**

The committee cannot possibly reproduce the range of specialties represented by our faculty and sometimes the comments from FMC members reveal this, in that the questions raised show a lack of understanding of the particular area under discussion.

**Fetishization of the proposal**

Given the nature of our student body, students in the department often come to write their proposals at many different stages of their research. They should therefore not be slowed down with the requirement that the proposal have the sophistication of the final project. Writing and rewriting the proposal is a waste of time when often students are ready to begin writing the actual dissertation, which is the point of the exercise.

**Uneven application of the rules**

There is a differential in the perceived power of the advisor on the part of the FMC committee. This can affect the outcome of their decision-making. This is an uncomfortable issue but it needs to be addressed.

**Undermining the authority of the advisor and the dissertation committee**

The current procedure creates anger and disaffection and fault lines within the department.

### **Lack of transparency**

I was disturbed to read in John Torpey's memo to Phil Kazinitz of March 22, 2010 that in the case where the FMC decides that a proposal is not acceptable then they "go around the room" and make the decision *prior to the arrival of the candidate and his or her chair*. [My emphasis.] One obvious problem with this arrangement, he notes, is that the discussion is "awkward" for the members of the FMC because in fact it is "something of a charade:" the decision to request a revision of the proposal has already been made. Prof. Torpey doesn't mention that this is equally "awkward" for the candidate and the dissertation advisor since they have been made to sit through a farce of defending a proposal which has already been rejected without their knowledge

Like many of you, I have been thinking long and hard about our dissertation proposal review process, and how it can be improved.

At the open meeting last Friday, I offered a suggestion. Since then, I've talked to a number of people, and am increasingly thinking that this might actually be a solution to our current impasse, and an improvement on our current system.

As a background, let me state that I've really appreciated how well the formal committee proposal meetings that we have instituted in the last few years have worked. We sit down, the entire committee and the student, and have a serious, thoughtful discussion of the proposal. I just did one this afternoon, and really value the way these meetings work.

What I am suggesting is that we make that just a bit more formal than it is now, and include within that process the departmental review that we are currently seeking from the FMC.

As it stands now, the committee gets the proposal, usually after the student and the chair have gone over it repeatedly, and at the meeting all are able to offer their comments and suggestions. If these are minor, the student may make some changes, and the chair signs off and the proposal moves forward.

My thought is that rather than send the proposal before the entire overworked FMC, we choose two people from the EC or the FMC, (that is two 'representative' and elected members of faculty) and have them join the committee in that meeting. These two outside members will also receive the proposal ahead of time, and have a chance to make suggestions before the meeting or 'proposal defense.' At the meeting there will be the student presenting the proposal, the committee of three and the two outside members. In most cases, there will be a consensus, and mostly that will be favorable. (We actually do pretty good work most of the time!) In some cases, one or both outside members will not be happy with the proposal. If it comes to a vote, they may well be outvoted (3 committee members to 2 outside reviewers) But if indeed both of the outside reviewers are able to persuade even one committee member that the proposal needs more work, the proposal will be voted down. A majority, 3 out of the 5 total faculty members, will have to approve the proposal for the student to advance to candidacy.

When a proposal does not pass this review, we can do what we now do with dissertation defenses -- if the revisions are understood to be 'minor,' then the proposal need only go back to the chair before it is accepted; if the revisions are deemed to be 'major' then the full committee of 5 will have to reconvene to review the new proposal.

Unlike some of you, I am not troubled by the fact that some proposals only come up after the student is well into the project -- some of our students walk in the door on Day 1 of their graduate career with a dissertation project in mind, and all of their coursework is geared towards that project. Others finish coursework and then 'propose' a dissertation. These are different but I think equally acceptable ways of working. With a serious, one or two hour discussion at a proposal defense, the context of the proposal can be understood in ways that it simply cannot be in a ten or fifteen minute appearance before the FMC.

I am suggesting that this committee of 5 serve ONLY to review the proposal. I am NOT suggesting any change in the way we handle dissertation defenses.

This is not a perfect solution to our problem -- I don't actually believe perfect solutions exist to most problems -- but I think this approach, a deeper review by a smaller number of people, could serve us well.

I look forward to your thoughts on this.

Respectfully and appreciatively yours,  
Barbara

March 22, 2010

To: Phil Kasinitz, Chair, Executive Committee  
Fm: John Torpey, Chair, FMC  
Re: Reform of the FMC

I regret that I am away and therefore unable to participate directly in the Executive Committee's overdue discussion of the practices of the FMC with regard to the review of dissertation proposals. I did participate via Skype in the recent open meeting with students in which the role of the FMC had a prominent place. Some of my comments are responses to that discussion, some to Juan Battle's entirely appropriate concern about process in the FMC, and some to Barbara Katz-Rothman's reform proposal.

Let me begin by saying that I think the FMC generally plays a positive and constructive role in insuring that our students get off to a good start as they embark upon their dissertation projects. Needless to say, they and we all have an interest in producing the strongest dissertations possible. Excellent dissertations enhance the reputation of the program and the prospects of PhDs in a very tough job market.

Concern has arisen about the "regulatory" role of the FMC and its supposed departure from a) past practice and b) its authority as outlined in the Student Handbook. As to a), it does not seem to me that the recent couple of requests for re-writing proposals -- which comprise some considerable part of the anxiety about this issue -- are dramatically out of line with my recollection of previous practice. That practice has been that, on very rare occasions, the committee (unanimously) does not believe that a project is ready to go forward, based on the proposal. There is no departure in that regard. With regard to b), the "legislative authority" of the FMC: as I indicated in an e-mail some months ago, it seems to me that -- garbled though the language is -- the FMC does have the authority to "turn back" a proposal, as per the relevant passages in the Student Handbook. (As I understand the garbled language, the dissertation committee can also overrule the FMC and sign off on the proposal if it chooses to do so, but to my knowledge that's not something that anyone has actually done.)

Concern has also been expressed about the supposed biases of the FMC in favor of "positivistic" (pardon my French!) work and against (*soi-disant*) politically or intellectually "avant-garde" work (a term that came up in the recent open discussion with students). I think this is false -- and indeed demonstrably so, on the basis of empirical evidence. First, as to the politics: the authors of the last two proposals that were turned down were hardly likely to be supporters of the Tea Party movement, arguing as they did for efforts to mitigate violence against women, on the one hand, and in strenuous support of racial equality, on the other. With regard to their intellectually avant-garde quality or otherwise, however, I would think that these proposals would broadly be characterizable as "positivistic." (It might be worth saying here that the term "positivistic" in these contexts generally lacks any philosophical content and is just a way of saying that the speaker doesn't regard the work as intellectually "avant-garde.") In both of the recent cases, however, the FMC unanimously felt that the proposals were not up to any reasonable standard for dissertation-level work, and said so.

That reaction was in keeping with my general experience of the judgments of the members of the FMC, an experience that now extends backward across almost the entire time I have been at the Graduate Center: namely, that the committee is unusually ecumenical with regard to the types of work that it will find acceptable, and that you really have to go out of your way to make all of its members (N.B.: including students!) sufficiently unhappy that they feel the need to take the extraordinary step of requesting that the proposal be revised.

It seems to me that this is where we need reform – in the realm of procedure. As Juan well knows in the case of his advisee, due to a lack of any formalized procedure, I as FMC chair expressed the committee's sentiment, ascertained in discussions before the dissertator came into the room for the discussion of the proposal, that the document needed to be "re-cast." This was as awkward for me as it was for him and his student, because I was flying by the seat of my pants. What we need to do, it seems to me, is formalize a procedure.

For purposes of background, what we have been doing of late is as follows: when the committee has gathered but before the arrival of the proposals' authors, we go around the room to see whether anyone has serious doubts about whether a proposal should be approved. If there is general agreement that a particular proposal needs to be revised before the FMC will regard it as acceptable, we agree that the chair will inform the candidate about this judgment and discuss some sort of procedure for re-submitting the proposal at a reasonably near-term date. One obvious problem with this arrangement is that the discussion is awkward for the members of the FMC, because in fact it is something of a charade: the decision to request a revision of the proposal has already been made.

While I appreciate Barbara's effort to contribute to a resolution of our impasse about the practices of the FMC, I don't think her proposal is viable. Interpersonal dynamics being what they are, it seems to me that the outside people would always be inclined to be deferential to the student's dissertation committee. Two flies on the wall in the "proposal defense" are not likely to try to overrule a committee that is supportive of a student's work. The advantage of a "free-standing" FMC is that the members are not caught up in those dynamics and can thus render a relatively independent judgment about the quality of the proposal(s).

One solution might be to have the FMC hear out a student before rendering a decision *in camera*, along the lines of what happens when a student does an oral comprehensive exam. This of course will lengthen the amount of time required for FMC meetings, which may not be desirable. But there is no doubt that, if the FMC is going to continue to find the rare proposal wanting, it needs to be able to proceed on a transparent and clearly specified basis. All concerned rightly desire no less.

Please share these thoughts with the Executive Committee. I look forward to hearing about the outcome of your deliberations.



February 26th, 2010

To: The Faculty of the Sociology Program  
From: The Students of the Sociology Program  
Re: Proposed changes to the Faculty Membership Committee

The students of the Sociology Program have met and discussed the issues surrounding potential changes in the power of the FMC to turn down proposals. Our decision is that the FMC should remain as an advisory committee and we do not support the recent rejection of proposals. We trust you as our faculty to regulate the quality of our proposal and our dissertations but through your capacity as our chairs and other committee members. As students we look forward to the advice of the FMC, we respect it and take it seriously and trust that it will make us better sociologists. But we feel the responsibility for regulating the proposal and dissertations should be within the faculty on our individual committees. We encourage the Executive Committee to implement procedures and resources that facilitate our successful completion of the proposal review. We would welcome the opportunity to share and discuss ideas to this end.

