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# THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE & WORLD LITERATURE

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## ADVICE & FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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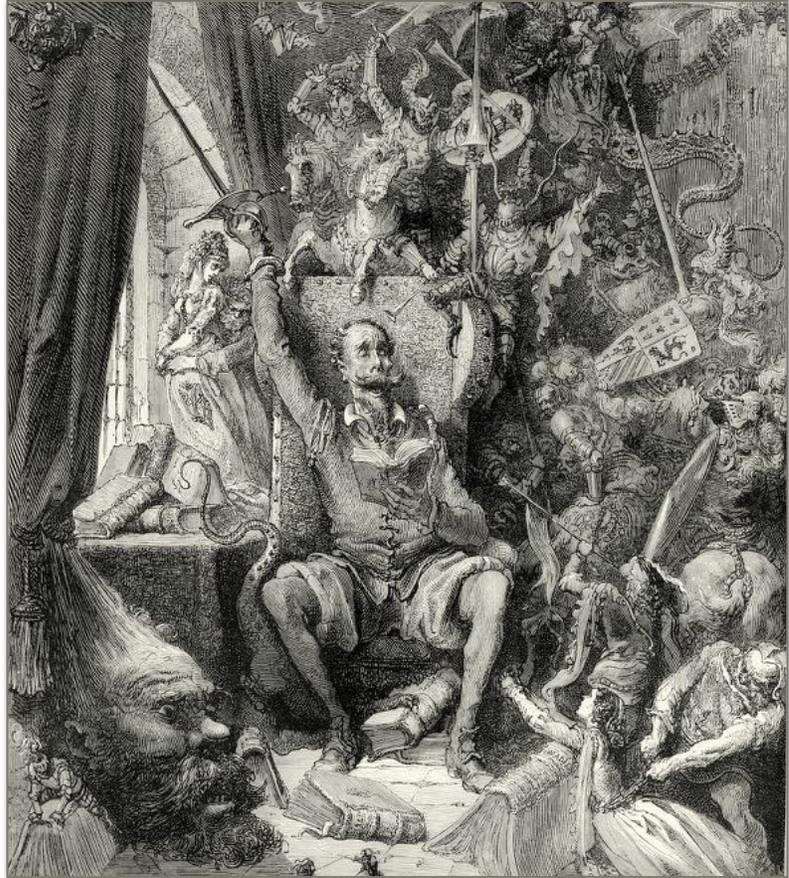
### How do I ask someone to be my advisor/on my committee?

A lot of students find this scary and intimidating, but to faculty, being asked is flattering, so there's no real reason to feel nervous. If they say no, however, it's not out of dislike or a low regard for you, your intellect or your worth — it's because they know the profession really well, and they've already understood that they wouldn't be much help for you. And, of course, some professors are popular enough that they just can't take on an additional student, no matter how extraordinary. Almost everyone will happily talk you through some alternate possibilities on campus. This is one conversation that's best not to have over email,

however, so do make sure to make an appointment. “So, Professor, I wanted to say how much I enjoyed your seminar last semester; it influenced my thinking a lot, and I was wondering if you'd be willing to be on my committee/serve as director for my dissertation.”

### How do I get a fellowship?

The Program has limited funds that it uses to provide research assistantships and fellowships when possible, but these funds are not automatically renewed or renewable, so we are pretty cautious about handing them out, but we do when it seems like it's particularly deserved (a student who's done tons of teaching, and who has made a good faith application for external fellowships but come up empty); let the DGS and the director know, and make your case. Send them a one page explanation of why this is the



year/semester that you really need departmental support. That said, your best chances are from *outside* the department, including the annual competition for fellowships from the Humanities Research Institute (**HRI**), which funds a number of graduate students in the humanities and arts each year, organized around a broad theme. In preparation for their final year in Stage Three, all students should also apply for a **Dissertation Completion Fellowship**, offered both through the **School of Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics**, and through the **Graduate College**.

### Can I teach my own class?

Maybe. Students who are at Stage Three and who have a really good idea to teach CWL 151 (look it up) should write up a preliminary syllabus (2-3 pages) for what they would teach, at least a full semester before, and submit it to the Director. The course will need to fulfill two requirements that are sometimes hard to square: (1) it should be a class that will help you on the job market by really showcasing what a part of your dissertation project does, but (2) it should absolutely look like something that will be exciting and compelling for undergraduates. If it gets approved, you will need to make flyers, advertise it on Reddit, go to some of our large classes to promote it, etc., in order to help guarantee that it finds enrollment.

### What do I do? There aren't any classes in my area!

There will be semesters when it seems like all the good classes are gone, all the good professors are on sabbatical, etc. This is a chance to look farther afield than you might otherwise; look into departments and programs outside of your normal purview; check with the Unit for Criticism to find graduate seminars that are taught all around campus on topics (like theory), that aren't confined to one national area (Gender and Women's Studies also fits the bill, as do some other interdisciplinary units around campus). Make sure that you're not falling into a trap, as well. Sometimes when students say "there's nothing in my area" it turns out they mean ("there isn't a graduate seminar on the role of the female voice in 19th century French and German literature"). There will virtually never be a graduate seminar on the exact topic of your dissertation, and that is to be expected—even celebrated.

### I'm having a conflict with someone. How do I handle this?

Talk to your friends and peers first, and see if they have any suggestions; they often will, especially graduate students who have been around a little longer than you. But if that doesn't work, try talking to the DGS, the Director, your advisor, or another faculty member in the program. I give a bunch of different people as options because, of course, the person you're having a conflict with might *be* the DGS, or the Director, or your advisor, etc. Sometimes, it'll look like you're just blocked. You're having an issue with a faculty member, but they're married to the DGS, and both are good friends with the Director — it doesn't feel like there's any "safe" place in the department to complain or talk. It might seem a little scary, but you could talk to the Director of the School to see where you could go for advice that would be safe and neutral; likewise, you can contact the Graduate College, giving just a general outline of the problem, and asking for their recommendations about who you can talk to. Almost all problems can be resolved at

the level of the Program or below, so we *really* encourage you to start there, but you should know that there are a lot of options outside the Program as well.

### **I'm having an issue with unwanted attention, sexual harassment, and/or an unspoken but increasingly palpable and uncomfortable tension. Help!**

Happily, this is *not* a frequently asked question. The Program won't tolerate this, and you shouldn't either. Still, there complex interplay of power that can inhere in academic relationships that are personal, intellectual and professional all at once. To start, read the section above ("I'm having a conflict with someone"), since if the person who's making life unpleasant for you is a faculty member, the DGS, your advisor or the Director, it can be a little hard to know where to go for help! You should be aware before you talk to anyone that all faculty (and graduate students who are teaching) are legally designated "responsible employees," meaning that they are required to report any harassment and assault, including names, to the University's Title IX coordinator. That's actually true of graduate student employees as well. There is, however, a list of confidential advisors that you can speak to as well. Check out <https://wecare.illinois.edu/resources/students/>, and <https://wecare.illinois.edu/resources/employees/> for the resources available to you, and talk to someone outside your "chain of command." This campus has not always been a leader in this area, but is making more forceful efforts now, and the Program is 100% behind that new drive. And if you ever feel unsafe, we encourage you to call 911 straight away.

### **It's not going so well with my advisor. Can I change?**

Obviously, this calls for some delicacy and tact, but it happens from time to time, and usually the transition is perfectly amicable and smooth. Talk to the DGS and/or the Director and they will help you through the process.

### **I feel really alone now that I'm in Stage Three/Two/One/in grad school. What can I do?**

It has always been the case that grad school had moments of great satisfaction, but also periods of anxiety and loneliness, especially during the final phase. This seems to have greatly intensified in recent years, for everyone—faculty, grads, undergrads, society at large. Everyone reports higher levels of stress and anxiety now. I think there are a number of reasons for it, and some of them are beyond your grasp: national trends away from the humanities, increasing costs of higher education and a contraction in the academic job market. (For the record, the move away from the humanities has stopped and even sluggishly started to reverse, and that contraction should do the same in the next several years.) But much of it actually *is* in our control. The reason *everyone* feels anxious and lonely is because we are spending far less time face to face than we used to. Get away from your screens and set up a weekly game session; a writing group; a reading group; a book club; find something you want or need to do anyway and make it a group thing (CWL gym rats! CWL bar crawls! CWL street runners! The CWL rock band! CWL community access radio!). Two hours of real face time every week will make the hours of writing fly by, and you'll be continually reminded that what you are doing and who you are matters to people, really matters. I think this is an area where the grad students need to be active and proactive, however (do you really want the

faculty to be part of the band? Probably not). Don't forget, as well, that 4072E is now designated as a grad student lounge for cross-departmental socializing.

## **I feel like I'm not being treated fairly: so-and-so gets all the good teaching and funding.**

We are generally a pretty happy bunch, and we've had very few issues with grad student morale and cohesion over the years. Still, it's actually pretty hard to get through graduate school without feeling this way at least once. As always feel free to talk to the DGS, the Director, your advisor, or another faculty member in the program, remembering from above ("I'm having a conflict with someone") that there are also avenues you can pursue outside the Program if things get too complicated. In my experience, most concerns about bias can be mitigated by making procedures transparent whenever possible (i.e., have a call for fellowship proposals, don't just award them apparently at random). That said, there are reasons why the process isn't and can't be completely transparent: each student's academic progress and standing is confidential and can't (and shouldn't be!) be shared, the Program's finances are not (and shouldn't be!) an open book, and other factors that influence how we award teaching and fellowship support also need to remain confidential. It may look arbitrary at times, but we are always doing the best we can with relatively few resources (this is a public University, after all) and a lot of moving parts.

## **How do I balance teaching and coursework, research, life?**

Much as in the answer to "I'm feeling alone," above, this is in *some* ways a false dichotomy. Very often paying attention to your teaching helps with your coursework or research, and making sure that you do have a real life outside of academia actually means you go back to work energized. (A study of extremely productive figures in history showed they had only two traits in common: they drank coffee and took a long walk every day.) But sometimes there are just so many hours in a day and you may have to cut back somewhere. There is no magic formula for where to cut, however: your students will put up with an assignment or two returned late, especially if you're generally a caring and flexible teacher; your professors will usually be willing to extend a deadline or two; but be sure to spread the delays around, lest that professor who's so patient and understanding all the time snaps when you turn in the nth assignment three weeks late. The one area that won't give is your health and sanity, however. You can't really take care of *any* of the other things if you're out of your head or running on no sleep.