Northwestern | Department of Economics

Advice from Faculty on Committee Formation – May 2020

1. Learn about each other's expectations. Go ahead and ask - "how do you like to arrange consultations? Regular meetings? What do you expect from the prospectus?"
2. Make sure you can communicate with your committee. You don't have to be friends, and you can expect feedback that can be tough to hear from time to time. But be confident that you can talk with them.
3. Ask your primary faculty contact for advice on who else should be on the committee.
4. From my point of view, I don't care who is the chair of the committee. Other faculty might care.
5. Make sure you have at least one person who is sufficiently well-known to help you get interviews.

The most important recommendation would be not to wait until the last minute before the defending the thesis proposal to form a committee, or, at least, pick the chair. The 501 is an ideal opportunity to get some faculty member involved with a student's research. After that, students should continue the "conversation" with some faculty on a regular basis.

- You should plan on meeting with your chair and committee on a REGULAR basis. I ask my students to schedule meetings at least every two weeks, with the understanding that I am available sooner / more frequently whenever this is helpful. Indeed, depending on the stage and pace of research, I meet with some students on a weekly basis. Even if you have nothing to report, just show up (whether in person or virtually). Really, this is important because it creates a sense of rhythm in your research. And, while I personally encourage my students to schedule regular meetings, and I know several of my colleagues do as well, the primary responsibility lies with you.

- Don't be shy. Advising students is one of the most rewarding aspects of our jobs as faculty members. It can be really exciting for us to see ideas develop into high-quality research. So feel free to contact any one of us, no matter how "famous". The most important consideration should be the fit with your interests.

- At the same time, do not expect to be able to just drop in on people---both in the sense of barging into people's offices (in normal times), and in the sense of asking for a last-minute form to be signed or approved. There is one faculty member in the Finance department who has a wonderful sign on his/her door: "Your lack of planning does not automatically constitute an emergency for me." That strikes me as good advice.

- Speaking of finance, keep in mind that you do have access to faculty throughout Kellogg (so not just finance and MEDS, but also strategy and to some extent marketing). We are one big community and everybody is happy to work with a clever student working on interesting problems, regardless of affiliation. Different Kellogg people will have different views on how much time and energy to devote to non-Kellogg students, but by and large, people are happy to serve on Econ students' committees. Also, don't forget CS!

The main advice is to be proactive – meet with faculty early and often. It is a good idea to already talk to faculty regularly in second year. In third year, they really should make use of the faculty – advising grad students at every stages is our job! That means, for example, meeting with a couple of faculty members about your 501 project already well before you actually present it, rather than just getting feedback afterwards. You should be talking to faculty about your work and plans AT LEAST every 2-3 weeks or so – if you don't, you are not really using what the department is offering you. Depending on your progress these meetings don't have to be long, but getting feedback can be very useful particularly in the early stages.

Usually, if you engage with faculty throughout the third year, actually forming the committee will be an easy step. By, say, the middle of winter quarter you should have a good idea of the general direction of your research and of how you feel about different potential advisers (of course, to know this you must have spoken to them more than just once or twice – hence the importance of the first step!). At that point, the most natural approach is to start by asking your prospective committee chair if she/he would be willing to be your advisor. If yes, you can then discuss with this person who else could be a good fit to round out the committee.

What it is like to work with a specific person as a committee chair varies a lot from person to person. Hence, definitely talk to a few current advisees of your prospects to get more information and to see if their approach would be a good fit for you.

Advice from Graduate Students on Committee Formation

What one piece of advice would you give to students who are starting to consider committee formation?
First and foremost, approach faculty that you feel comfortable around and that you like. Beyond research interest match value, a big part of a good advising relationship is based on personality match value.

Can students request to meet advisors regularly, before and after forming the committee?
Yes! This can involve putting yourself out of your comfort zone and requesting meetings where you're not 100% sure what you're going to say, but it is a good practice to force yourself to meet with faculty regularly. Remind yourself that this is part of their job description and they get paid to do it; don't feel bad about taking up their time.

By when should we finalize our committee members?
Things don't have to be "final" until the very end of the year before going on the market, but of course the longer you're getting to know your committee members (i.e., they are getting to know you), the better.

Is there a formal process that the professor and the student confirm with each other that the professor will be on the committee and write a reference letter on the job market? If there is, when would this formal confirmation step happen?
There is no formal process, you just want to confirm in words (verbally or over e-mail) that the person will write a letter for you. Yes, it can be awkward. You don't need to do this until mid-end of the year before going on the market, but probably you'll have it in mind before that, and talk with one faculty member about it before then to confirm that they agree with your plan of action.

How often (say on what regular frequency) would a student need to talk to the professor in order to invite him/her to be on the committee?
I wouldn't say this is the right metric to go by. You have to find the 3 faculty members who (i) know you the best, (ii) are most enthusiastic about you, (iii) who you like the best, and (iv) are closest in research-space to you. That's it.

How to determine who is the committee chair? How does co-chairing work?
The best person to be the committee chair will usually be the most senior person (unless that person has become inactive in the field). You want the chair to be the person with maximum contacts in the profession because that's the point person who will do the most back-channeling on your behalf. If there are two senior people who are both close to your research interests and enthusiastic about you, go ahead and have co-chairs. (If academia is not your target placement, this type of thing matters a lot less.)