320. Bad Rules Where No Rules Are Needed

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My department has a small but lively and successful Master's program. Rarely do we have more than one student enrolled in it at a time and only about every three years does someone graduate. And yet our majors and honours students benefit from having a graduate student in their midst and we professors are always keen to work with an advanced student. It would be a shame were budget woes to incline university administrators to close this program, but close it they might.

Last month, I was on the examining committee for a Master's thesis. Its topic was obscurantism and make-believe profundity in twentieth-century continental philosophy. The student's supervisor was a department colleague of mine and I had been the student's advisor. An outside examiner, who had had no contact with the student, completed the committee. The candidate did very well defending his claims and arguments, and the committee members were impressed. A thesis defence is an occasion for academic engagement with an intellectual problem to come directly into contact with disciplinary and institutional standards and traditions, creating a community of minds and aspirations within an institution. It is the sort of thing that gives a university a reason for existing.

I had missed the previous Master's thesis defence in my department, two years ago; the last defence I had attended occurred before the pandemic year. In the seven years since that defence, the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at my university had changed the procedure, and not for the better.

In the olden days, the candidate's supervisor asked the first question, and the unwritten rule was that that question would be an invitation to the candidate to give us an overview of the thesis, to state its main conclusion and central argument, and to tell us something about the motivation behind writing on the topic. Nowadays, it's the chair of the session, not the supervisor, who directs the candidate to give a presentation.

In the olden days, the session lasted about two hours, and the final twenty or thirty minutes was reserved for questions from the audience. Nowadays, ninety minutes and no discussion with audience members.

In the olden days, the chair might begin with an observation or a joke, but nothing was scripted other than the introduction of the candidate and the examining committee. Nowadays, as well as calling the session to order and introducing the group, the chair reads two items from a script. One is a statement recognizing the hard or time-consuming work everyone has put in; the other, as I'm sure you have anticipated, is an official university land acknowledgement.

I'll discuss in the next issue of the SAFS Newsletter the requirement that the chair speak a land acknowledgement. Here I will consider the three other innovations.

Least offensive among them, one might think, is the recognition of hard work. One could suppose that it serves the useful functions of putting people at their ease and indicating the modest grandeur of the occasion. But the statement that we've all worked hard could well be false. Perhaps one or another of the committee or candidate has shirked his duties or cut corners. I would rather we didn't risk beginning with a falsehood. But supposing it is true we've all worked hard, as it likely is, nonetheless the chair has no reason other than its likelihood for thinking the statement true. He's just muttering a formula. So now suppose that it is true and that, in addition, the chair knows it to be true. We have all worked hard and the chair knows we have. Despite her sincerity, the audience cannot know that the chair is speaking sincerely, for she's reading from a script she's required to read from.

My point is that the statement of recognition is but a piece of cant. It's not even politeness. It clouds the room with artificiality.

I'll add that it also constitutes condescension. *Of course* we worked hard. It is our pleasure to work hard on matters of intellectual significance and it is our pleasure to assist the next generation of scholars. If someone wishes to evaluate our efforts, please let them speak to the academic quality of our hard work.

The chair then directs the candidate to give a presentation regarding his thesis work. This innovation expands the chair's responsibilities at the expense of collegiality and mentorship. It is the supervisor who has guided the student and overseen his project. To acknowledge the relation of mentor to student, the supervisor should take the floor after the chair's introductions, so that he may, with pride, invite the candidate he has shepherded to this moment to address the group.

These days, after the second round of questioning from each of the three committee members, the chair closes the session without inviting audience participation, and she retires with the committee to fashion the decision. This is unfortunate not only because members of the audience might want to ask a question or pursue an idea. (At the defence in question, three people told me they would have wanted to engage with the candidate.) It also means that the defence does not serve as an introduction of the candidate as a peer to members of the academic or disciplinary community. Although not yet pronounced a Master, the candidate has no other natural opportunity to take his place publicly as a newly recognized authority on an intellectual matter. The committee (we suspect) will judge him worthy of being engaged by established scholars and members of the public; questions from the audience at his defence would confirm that he has acquired the status of Master of his academic area.

Weeks before the defence, I sent a message with my objections to the new procedures to the dean and the associate dean of graduate studies. I received a formulaic response from the dean (from someone I've known and been friendly with for the twenty-six years I've been at my institution) and nothing from the associate dean. In his response, the dean pointedly declined both to criticize my reasoning and to provide reasons for the changes. He simply and irrelevantly explained that the graduate coordinators in the various departments came up with the rules intending thereby to create a standard procedure for everyone.

So, what might be good reasons for the changes?

Perhaps the statement recognizing everybody's hard or time-consuming work is meant to satisfy the need so many people have today to be acknowledged, recognized and affirmed. Well, if that's the concern behind it, a statement read by the chair about the university tradition of the Master's thesis defence would work much better. All those who contributed to the occasion could hear themselves lauded as contemporary carriers of a long and significant tradition.

Why strip the supervisor of his prerogative to show pride in the candidate by no longer having him invite the candidate to speak of his research? Perhaps today's procedure of having the chair begin the actual defence part of the defence is the result of a supervisor or two in the past having bungled the job. Maybe a supervisor tore into a candidate by asking a tough question, and by asking it even before the audience had a good sense of the candidate's work. One problem with unwritten rules is that not everyone reads them; another problem is that some who have read them don't think unwritten rules are rules one must follow.

Perhaps the rule excluding the audience from engaging with the candidate and, thereby, welcoming him as a Master into the community was also intended to shut down bad behaviour. Questioners can be rude or quarrelsome, or seek to belittle the candidate. Doing away with questions from the audience might therefore be intended to prevent emotional abuse or at least to save decorum.

Bringing the candidate's presentation under the office of the chair and sending the audience away before they can ask a question might, I'm speculating, have been adopted as solutions to problems of bad behaviour. Some evidence in favour of this reading is that the sheet from the faculty of graduate studies that sets out the rules goes on to condemn incivilities like intruding on another committee member's question and arguing with another committee member.

The sort of thing graduate studies is up to, recklessly throwing rules at problems, is not unheard of at my university. Our tendency, and a strong tendency it is, is to react to local difficulties or unpleasantness with university-wide regulations. Departments used simply to vote on the next department chair and then inform the dean of their decision. But two factions in a particular department each conspired to set up their man as chair, and now in all departments, candidates for the chairship are first vetted by the dean and then the dean oversees the election in the department. (That's just one example.) It would be in character for the faculty of graduate studies to respond to isolated minor incidents of incivility with strictures meant to prevent anything untoward happening the next time.

What we need, of course, is not a utopia of rules, but rather administrators willing and able to take miscreants aside and explain to them the anti-academic nature of their behaviour. Administrators—or anyone else who wants to do it. A university would be a better university for having a culture of criticism, one that includes criticism of specific instances of bad behaviour, than to adopt yet another code of conduct. Now, all this would have to be very informal. Criticism must have none of the trappings of discipline. I fear our university culture, though, is too much a work or professional culture these days, as opposed to an academic one, for collegial critical discussion to be possible. (See my essay, "Is Informality Simply Too Dangerous?", https://safs.ca/newsletter/is-informality-simply-too-dangerous/.)

I would say that we lose much more than we gain when, to avoid relatively rare problems that we could handle otherwise, we institute rules and regulations that prevent us from aspiring to excellence. (Another artificial desert we're instructed to call peace.)

What about the drive to regularity, which is the motive for standard procedures all must follow that the dean of graduate studies explicitly cited? We may well want certain regularities when it comes to matters having academic significance. That a thesis examination committee have three and only three members, that the outside reader not communicate with the candidate before the defence but simply evaluate the thesis, that each committee member get two rounds of questioning, first fifteen minutes, then eight minutes…. There's value in having all departments do this sort of thing the same way. (But no exceptions?) There's no value, though, in regulating that which is academically insignificant. The chair of a thesis defence might favour just getting down to business after calling for order and introducing everyone. Or he might pause to recognize everyone's hard work. Or he might take moment to explain the significance of a thesis defence. Or the candidate's supervisor or department might ask the chair to do or not to do one of these things. It really should be up to the people involved in the event.

I've tried to make two points in this essay. The first is that the three new procedures or customs I've discussed are inferior to the old ones they replaced. A chair's welcome that recognizes everyone's hard work is insincere cant and misses the fact that quality is what matters. Having the chair direct the candidate to give a presentation ignores the relationship that has developed between the candidate and his supervisor. Ending the session without questions from the audience fails to honour the new Master's position within the academic community.

The second point, the one I would insist on, is that none of the three customs, old or new, is properly a matter for regulation. Regulations here are impositions that serve to alienate academics from their institution. The matters in question are not proper matters for regulation for they do not involve ensuring the quality of anything of academic significance. No one is better as an academic for following them and following them serves no academic goal. They are not even required to solve coordination problems.

It can and should be left up to chairs, supervisors, committees and departments how the session is run, given the rules to ensure that the thesis and its defence pass only if they meet high standards of academic quality. A thesis defence is less impressive and less true to its significance if the audience is not invited to ask questions, but let us leave it to the people on the ground to decide whether to end without audience participation. Some of us will roll our eyes when the chair recognizes all the hard work that prepared us for this day, but if a committee or department craves that sort of thing, let them have it. Universities should be much more anarchic places than they are, I'd say, but at least we shouldn't be under the thumb of rules for the sake of pointless regularity.

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