

Date: July 19, 2012

To: All Members of the Stanford Academic Council and Emeritus Faculty members

From: Richard Roberts

Subject: Identification of University Oral Examination Chairs

Dear Colleagues,

In response to widespread complaints by both faculty and students concerning the practice of downloading the principal or sole responsibility for finding a Chair for the University Oral Examinations to the student, I am writing to clarify University procedures.

In 1992-93, the Faculty Senate stated that “Responsibility for appointing the out-of-department oral examination chair rests with the candidate’s major department. Many departments invite advisers to participate in the process of selecting and contacting potential chairs. The department **should not** require the student to solicit the out-of-department chair, although the student may participate in selecting and contacting potential chairs.” (See <http://gap.stanford.edu/4-7.html>)

This year, the Committee on Graduate Studies (C-GS) clarified the definition of “department.” Most departments have delegated the responsibility to the student’s primary dissertation advisor. On occasions when it proves particularly difficult for the advisor to find a Chair, then responsibility rests with the department chair.

Let me reiterate that students may not be expected to be solely responsible for this task, although many graduate students believe this to be the rule. Such an assumption inappropriately shifts the burden to the person who has the most at stake and cannot very well refuse if asked to perform this role. Of course, these procedures do not prevent students from participating in the process. Nor should staff be expected to perform this job.

A final exhortation: the University Oral Examination Chair’s role is important precisely because the examination itself is a tremendously important, hence highly stressful, personal and professional rite of passage for each student who takes it. To participate either as an examiner or as a Chair is a chore, but also a privilege and, very occasionally, a challenge. On every occasion, the Chair’s role is part of our responsibility as University citizens and as educators.

Many thanks for your help in these matters.

Sincerely,

Richard Roberts

Professor and Chair, CGS