

Lonely Work

At the time of this writing it's mid-April; according to most traditional university calendars, the Spring semester is just a few weeks from its end. Students everywhere are working hard on their final papers; or, at least they soon will be (procrastinators, you know who you are). There's nothing quite like the feeling of finishing your final paper at the end of the Spring semester; the sense of accomplishment is undoubtedly amplified by the realization that you're on the cusp of several months of summer—no assignments, no classes, no work. It sounds glorious, right? But is this *actually* how things are?

For most students of graduate liberal studies programs, this scenario is (sadly) a far cry from reality. Without exact data to back me up, I'd bet the Journal that the average GLS student is working at least a half-time job (but likely full-time) and may have a family; that is, for most students their work in a GLS program is just one thing among many that constitute the full range of their responsibilities. Whereas the completion of the final paper or project of the Spring semester may provide a momentary elation at successfully sloughing the shackles of academia, the typical GLS student is quickly grounded once again by the myriad other responsibilities that define "regular" life. Even for the students who are not enrolled in summer courses, the reprieve earned by a successfully completed semester is woefully short lived.

Anyone who has ever done work in a GLS program—as student, faculty, or administrator—knows first-hand just how demanding and exhausting it can be to be a student. On top of the rigor of top-level graduate work, most students have the aforementioned additional responsibilities competing for their

limited time and energy. GLS students are easily some of the hardest working people in academia; I challenge anyone to change my mind on that score. But for my purposes here, I want to focus on a particular segment of GLS students: those who are beginning, who are completing, or who have just competed a capstone project or dissertation.

There are few things in the world, inside or outside of academia, that compare with the staggering amount of work, intellect, energy, and endurance required to complete a capstone project or dissertation. Whereas the average seminar paper may be the culmination of a few months of in-class work, a typical capstone project entails at least two semesters of dedicated work while a dissertation likely requires at least three semesters and often more. Further, in each case these projects are intended to encompass far more than a single semester's worth of study; often these culminating projects are expected to cultivate, unify, *and go beyond* all of the work done throughout one's time in a GLS program. This task is enormous, and it's made infinitely more so by the very nature of the task itself; it is, at its heart, a solitary endeavor.

By definition, a capstone project or dissertation is intended to contribute something new to existing scholarship; to complete such a project necessarily entails exploring—and authoritatively and comprehensively reporting on—previously uncharted territory. You may perhaps have a vague map, and you'll likely have the accounts of those who set out before you in slightly different directions or on oblique paths. You will almost certainly have an advisor, or perhaps even a small group of advisors, who will do their (hopefully) earnest best to encourage and guide you along the way. But you will *not* have a clear idea of what your destination is, nor will you have anyone to truly accompany you on this journey. In contrast to the seminar paper, you are fully going this one alone. In this deeply solitary endeavor, no one but you truly understands the depth and breadth of the work to be done; what's worse, no one truly understands just how alienating that can be.

If you're lucky, maybe you are a part of a peer writing group comprising other students from your program who are likewise undertaking a similar project. It's unlikely that any of you are writing about something similar, but at least you're all equally undertaking this project and can therefore commiserate about some of the larger common challenges. Outside of academia, however, the prospects for understanding and empathy are far worse. No matter how many times you explain to friends and family the content of your project,

you will still regularly be asked what you're working on. Worse, you will likely often be asked why it's taking so long, why you're not finished yet, why you're reading so much and not writing yet, why you're still writing, why you need yet another visit to the library or the archives, why you can't just finish up already. Worse still, you'll likely even find the value of your intentions questioned. Why are you even doing this? Seems like an awful lot of time and effort; will this get you a raise or a better job or something? *What's the point?*

If you've done a project like this, or if you're doing one now, you know how discouraging and wildly infuriating questions like these are; what's even more disheartening is that you also likely know how pervasive and persistent questions like these are. In some ways, it may be this kind of questioning—this kind of implied disregard and doubt—that makes capstone projects and dissertations so alienating. It's difficult enough to take on and complete a solitary project of this magnitude; to be regularly confronted by seemingly innocent questions that ultimately only serve to belittle and undermine your work is enough to make you wish you *could* just be left alone to do the work. But to endure—to ignore the questions and doubts, to persist in the work, to see the whole thing through—there is no greater scholarly achievement.

And you do endure. You endure because you care deeply about the work. You endure because there is tremendous value in the work itself—not just in the possible finished product but also in the *working*, the long, circuitous struggle with words and ideas. You endure to experience—and to *continue* to experience—the profound joy of not just determining, finally, what you want to say but also of finding the right way to say it; the beautiful confluence of form and idea, realizing the capacity to say something new and important with authority and precision. These are the moments that make you pound your fist on your desk or shout “Yes!!” in an empty room; the fact that there is often no one there to share your joy does nothing to diminish its intense value. You endure because you are carried by these interim moments of elation, without which the solitary work would be crushing. You endure because you have something of immense importance to say; something that only you can say.

If you know a student who is working on a capstone project or dissertation, I hope that you will find ways to encourage and support them as best you can, even if merely by acknowledging the hard and lonely work they are doing. If you are working on a capstone project or a dissertation, please know that, although no one can truly

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understand precisely all of the challenges and toils and highs and lows that you are enduring, there are many of us who can at least begin to understand; more importantly, although we cannot share in your struggle, we recognize just what a momentous struggle it is. If you know a student who has completed a capstone project or dissertation, I hope that you will find ways to celebrate and honor this tremendous achievement; in the world of academia, there is no greater individual accomplishment a student can hope to attain. And finally, if you have just completed a capstone project or dissertation, I sincerely hope that your pride at having successfully completed the project is only superseded by your recognition of the importance and value of the work you've done. You have contributed something profoundly meaningful—new scholarship, a new way of looking at and understanding things, new knowledge—to the world, both for academia and beyond. No one can *ever* detract from or diminish your achievement; nothing can ever change the fact that you have undertaken and completed one of the most rigorous, demanding, and solitary intellectual projects imaginable. And although you completed that work largely alone, I am certain that I am not alone in my firm belief that you have accomplished something truly worthy of awe and amazement.