The Honors Thesis Defense

Speaking at your honors thesis defense is your chance to explain, clarify, and take ownership of the ideas you’ve spent so long developing. Approach your panel with confidence that you are conversing with colleagues in the field about a topic on which you are now an expert.

1. **Prepare, Prepare, Prepare**
   You might not know the specific questions yet, but you do already know the answers—that is to say, while the examiners will push you to think beyond what’s on the page, you should be able to draw your responses from what you’ve already written and learned. So you can begin to prepare your responses before you’ve ever entered the room by writing out—and then rehearsing aloud—answers to some general questions:

   1. What is the overall argument or problem addressed by your thesis?
   2. What does your research contribute to the field?
   3. What scholars/theories/texts/experiments have been most influential on your work, and why?
   4. What was the most surprising thing you found while researching?
   5. What would be three challenges readers might make to your work, and how would you answer them?
   6. What do you consider the flaws or limitations of your research or experimental design?
   7. What leads does this thesis give you for future research?

2. **Plan a Response Strategy**
   Talk with your advisor about the general tone of departmental defenses, as well as the particular scholarly interests and questioning styles of your examiners, as you consider different strategies for your side of the conversation.

   Some **basics**:
   - Pause before you begin to respond; don’t feel that you have to rush
   - Take notes while questions are asked, and while you collect your thoughts
   - Acknowledge your panel throughout (thank for good ideas, make connections between one person’s question and another’s)

   To begin **any response**:
   - Paraphrase the question
   - Begin talking about information you know well
   - Whenever possible, draw connections between the points you’re making and another point you make in the thesis, or a key term, theory, or scholar in the field

   To answer **objections**, use this “formula”:
   - “That is a good point because _____.” (Concede the worth of the objection.)
   - “However, ______.” (Explain the strengths of your work.)

   To answer a **tough or puzzling question**,
   - Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know” (without saying “I don’t know”)
   - Say why you can’t quite answer it as asked (don’t have the data, explored a different angle)
   - Answer the question you wanted to get
   - Strive to make connections and to bring in points you haven’t yet been able to

*Writing at Bates*