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A Guide to Scholarly Advancement for Graduate and Postgraduate Students

Many graduate and postgraduate students may be unaware of opportunities and resources available to them for their own scholarly advancement. In truth, there are varieties of opportunities available to students that can help them gain entrance to doctoral programs, secure funding for their education, increase their value as job candidates upon completion of their academic preparation, and assist them to progress in their vocations. Essentially, this guide is designed to make students aware of important opportunities as they discern and pursue their personal vocational calling. There is, of course, no single definition or formula for “success” in scholarship, except in remaining faithful to the gospel of Christ. An academic vocation in Christian higher education is truly a matter of divine calling to be pursued within the context of the Christian community with prayer and discernment. Every student will move toward his or her vocational goal in a unique manner. It is our hope that this guide will serve to aid students in becoming the best scholars possible in service to the kingdom of God. This brief guide aims to assist students in fulfillment of their vocational calling by discussing how to prepare academically for doctoral work, how to develop a strong application, how to consider funding doctoral work, how to learn about the field and the profession, and how to pursue presenting and publishing opportunities.

1. Vocational Calling

Mentorship

Find one or more professors who can offer counsel in preparation for doctoral work. One-on-one interaction provides an opportunity for the professor to share his or her personal experience. A knowledgeable teacher can also offer guidance during the sometimes difficult process of applying for doctoral studies.

Teaching or Grading Assistantship

Many professors use teaching assistants to read student assignments and offer feedback. Working as an assistant provides experience grading papers

and evaluating student work. Ask the professor for permission to shadow him or her in order to observe daily tasks and routines. Assisting a professor also provides opportunity to get to know him or her better as you work together and is a valuable resource for your CV.

Teaching in the Local Church

The primary way to show commitment to the ministry of the local church is active participation. Some scholarship opportunities and interview committees will look favorably upon evidence of such commitment. So, work with your local pastor or district superintendent and participate in the education of the church. There are many levels of such service: as a pastor, in pulpit supply, Sunday School teacher, Youth Group counselor, special events coordinator, etc. Furthermore, the experience of speaking, preaching, and teaching will likely improve your ability to communicate effectively.

2. Preparing Academically and Financially

Academic M.Div.

Students need to know that the standard M.Div. curriculum may not have the best classes for gaining entrance into a doctoral program. Also, M.A. degrees often do not have enough classes for adequate preparation for doctoral work. Students should ask their advisor about the Academic M.Div. track that allows the substitution of language and other academic courses in place of certain pastoral-vocational classes.

Primary Source Languages

Doctoral programs in theology often require a reading knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, or Latin. In biblical studies programs, the biblical languages are always required. Students should research the specific language requirements for the degree they intend to apply for and begin learning to read them now. Students often advance their knowledge of languages by participating in a reading group with other students or professors.

Research Languages

All doctoral programs require a reading knowledge of either German or French; most require both. Again, students should find the specific language requirements for the schools to which they intend to apply and begin learning the languages now. Language classes can be taken for credit or audited. Some schools even offer intensive courses giving language certification for scholarly purposes. Also, one can find qualified tutors to help in reading proficiency or one can join or form reading groups.

3. Developing a Strong Application

GPA

Doctoral programs often require a GPA of at least 3.7, many require higher.

GRE

Students should prepare for and take the GRE multiple times, if necessary. Programs in theology are most interested in high scores on the verbal and analytical sections of the test.

References

Strong references are very important for applications both to doctoral programs and for financial aid. It is wise to take several classes with a single professor so that he or she will be comfortable giving a strong recommendation.

Writing Sample

Another very important factor in some doctoral applications is the writing sample of an exegesis or research paper. Work with a professor to develop a strong sample which demonstrates skill in research and clear writing.

Potential Supervisors

Learn the names of scholars and potential supervisors in your field of interest. Many Ph.D. supervisors are pleased to meet with prospective students. A potential supervisor can provide helpful information on the specifics of his or her institution and its program. When appropriate, contact prospective supervisors through email and/or arrange for a visit to the school to meet in person.

North American and British Programs

There are significant differences between Ph.D. programs in North America and those in the United Kingdom and the Continent. North American programs usually require a minimum of two years of course work prior to writing the dissertation. In contrast, British doctoral programs are research oriented requiring no further coursework. The student begins work writing his or her dissertation immediately upon entrance into the program.

4. Funding for Doctoral Work

- Schools with doctoral programs will offer a limited number of “full rides” with tuition waivers and teaching or researching assistantships to pay for (some) living expenses. Some schools will only accept as many students they can fully fund; others will accept others.
- It is very unwise to accrue large debts in pursuit of doctoral degrees. It is important to know that a professor’s salary is not comparable to a medical doctor’s. One fellow student of mine in a Ph.D. program (late 1990s) unbelievably had accrued \$90,000 in debt!
- One should ask professors and mentors for ideas and ways to pay for doctoral work. For example, the idea was presented to me to buy

a duplex, living in it and renting out the other flat—this worked for us in downtown Milwaukee. We sold the property after I graduated.

- Save and be frugal. If your spouse is able to work, be sure to praise and thank him or her continually! A former student of mine recently asked me for a letter of recommendation; I learned that he worked while his wife finished her doctorate, and now he is starting his.
- Check for scholarships within your denomination. For example, for United Methodists there is the John Wesley Fellowship. For information, see the website of AFTE (“A Foundation for Theological Education”) at <http://www.johnwesleyfellows.org> which is further described at <http://www.catalystresources.org/fellowship.html>.

5. Learning the Field and the Profession

Professional Associations

Become a member of the professional associations in your field (see list below). Student memberships are almost always discounted. Becoming a member will often allow one to receive email notices to publications, professional matters, and forums, some of which treat selecting academic programs and finding jobs. For instance, an SBL forum recently posted, “Why I Chose a German Ph.D. Program” at <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=780>.

Attend Professional Meetings

Attendance at annual and regional meetings provides opportunities to make valuable contacts and to stay current on research in your field.

Reading Lists

Ask a professor where you can find a bibliography for the field of your interest and begin to read and familiarize yourself with historical and current literature.

Journals and Book Reviews

Read journal articles and book reviews to stay up to date in potential areas of specialization. This will help you hone your research interests, observe current issues and trends, and gain exposure to a variety of writing and argumentation styles, from which you can begin to develop your own.

6. Pursuing Presenting and Publishing Opportunities

Paper Proposals

Submit paper proposals to be read at conferences. Many professional associations hold regional meetings and welcome student participation. Some

meetings even hold competitions for the best student paper. These meetings provide excellent opportunity for feedback on your work which may help prepare the paper for publication.

- Society of Biblical Literature
(www.sbl-site.org)
- SBL Central States Region
(www.sbl-site.org/meetings/rm_central.aspx)
- SBL Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society
(www.jcu.edu/bible/eglbs/)
- SBL Midwest Region
(www.sbl-site.org/meetings/rm_midwest.aspx)
- SBL Southeastern Region
(www.secsor.appstate.edu/)
- The Evangelical Theological Society
(<http://www.etsjets.org/>)
- ETS Southeastern Region
(<http://www.etsjets.org/?q=regions/Southeastern>)
- Wesleyan Theological Society
(<http://wesley.nnu.edu/wts/index.htm>)

Book Reviews

One of the best ways for students to begin publishing is by writing book reviews. Some journals accept reviews from graduate students. Even more accept reviews from postgraduate students. Frontal matter in the journal may explain procedures for submissions, or e-mail book review editors about potential opportunities. Seminary operated journals sometimes accept student submissions.

Catalyst – A journal of “Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives for UM Seminarians” (<http://www.catalystresources.org/issues/331Sanders.html>).

Koinonia — A journal operated by Ph.D. students which only accepts submissions from postgraduate students (<http://www.ptsem.edu/koinonia/index.html>).

Religious Studies Review – A scholarly journal that accepts submissions from postgraduate students. For a list of available books and instructions, see <http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/RSR.htm>.

Review of Biblical Literature — A scholarly review journal which accepts

postgraduate students as review volunteers (www.bookreviews.org/).

The Princeton Theological Review — A journal operated by M.Div. students which accepts submissions from graduate and postgraduate students (www.princeton theological review.org/index.html).

Wesleyan Theological Journal — A scholarly journal which accepts submissions from graduate and postgraduate students (<http://wesley.nnu.edu/wts/journal.htm>).

Journal Articles

Some journals accept paper submissions from graduate and postgraduate students. Begin with the journals listed above. Some denominational journals and magazines also accept student writing submissions. Frontal matter in the journal will often explain policies and procedures for submissions. For a more complete listing of Biblical Studies journals, see David Bauer's *An Annotated Guide to Biblical Resources for Ministry* (Annotated Guides 16. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003).

Critical Note or Short Notes

Akin to the above, some journals occasionally include “critical notes” (*JBL*) or “short notes” which are brief articles (2-5 pages) making observations or raising questions on a specific exegetical or interpretive matter. These are not as thoroughly presented as a typical article. Submitting a “short/critical note” may be more feasible than a complete article.

Other Publishing Opportunities

Ask professors and other professionals about other publishing opportunities (e.g., short entries in dictionaries, editing, creating book indices).