

Seven Things Learned in Graduate School

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Work hard, publish, fill the CV, be exceptional, and prepare for the next stage of your career. These are goals to strive for in the often uncertain and isolating marathon that is graduate school. In comparison, undergrad education, with its final exams, is a communal sprint with a clear finish line, distinct knowledge of where you rank, and shared celebration times. Graduate school is a time to dig deep into a field of study, as well as to discover what success looks like for you!

The literature on graduate student success (e.g., George E. Walker, Chris M. Golde, Ann E. Austin, Barbara E. Lovitts, Donald H. Wulff, Pat Hutchings, and Lee Shulman, to name a few) highlights the paradoxes, differing paradigms, and multi-directional pulls of graduate school. Each path to success is shaped by the context, goals, and opportunities, so decide *why* you want to be here (and post it on your wall for the hard days), identify *what* you need to succeed (and ask about opportunities), and *see* what is possible (and what plans require revision). Graduate studies are a time to learn about your discipline and about being an (sort of) independent scholar. Here are seven lessons we learned during graduate education:

1. No one is going to tell you to take a break or to celebrate - so dance at the milestones and breathe deep.

Once the course work is completed, and the communal triumphs of a final essay or exam are behind you, the explicit opportunities with a clear sign saying “Completed, now celebrate” are far and few between. Of course we all defend proposals, receive ethics approval, and submit articles, but we do it on individual timelines. My milestone might be June and yours May.

And they are milestones, not finish lines. The day we defend a proposal might be the key time to finalize ethics or prepare for a conference. Yet it is essential to raise a glass, burst out into song, hug, jump, eat, photograph, and shout...your success. Even when no one is watching! Have a happy dance whenever you submit a manuscript, finish a draft, or otherwise make that next goal.

When you relax, really relax. Leave behind the “I should be...” and focus on reconnecting and re-energizing (especially when it feels guilt-inducing). See the world through fresh eyes and get excited. Breathe deep, enjoy life. Whether it is the 15-minute walk, a dinner, or a trip you booked months in advance; remember to truly relax when you are “relaxing.”

Balance is key. Know when your prime time is to get work accomplished. Know how long you can effectively work on something. Know the environment you work best in. Know when to give yourself a break – a guiltless break to increase efficiency rather than slogging onwards. When possible (and it always possible) plan breaks for when the workload is low so you’ll be primed to work when a heavy load arrives. Shift your brain, including mood and attention, through mindfulness, exercise, movement and more. Find out what re-energizing means to you.

The goal is to be a scholar who is independently self-regulated.

2. No one is going to tell you what is good enough – so find out what is essential and what is sufficient.

Submissions of drafts for review or publication will never be perfect. You may receive multiple corrections, recommendations, suggestions, alterations, and amendments, but rarely does a draft come back without multiple comments for improvements. Ultimately, you must rely on your previous experience and knowledge to make many of the decisions pertaining to your work. While there may be many opinions and recommendations, rarely is there a supervisor or editor who says, “Yes, this is 100% perfect.” Because it will, in all reality, never be perfect. The hope rests in knowing that you are not alone. If you review any university published dissertation, you would find at least one typo, one missing piece of literature, or more. The key is to reframe what excellence means from a ‘perfect paper’ destined to be a well-polished draft left in a drawer to that of an article that is submitted and published. With each round of feedback, address the major limitations and directions. Avoid the temptation to second-guess and worry about the what-if’s and may-that-too, etc. It is impossible to hit the bulls-eye on a sometimes-invisible and always-moving target.

Seek out information about requirements. Leave the uncertainty about margin widths, minimal requirements, and maximum length to those who know better. Identify what are the weakest points and seek feedback for them. Reviewers, well-meaning collaborators, and even sincere committee members offer contradicting advice across each other and time itself. With reviewers, read closely any editor comments, for they ought to be followed. Where reviewers disagree, respectfully offer a middle-ground in your response to the editor (e.g., added a limitation line), or politely present a concerning contradiction as a question with options.

The goal is to be a scholar who sets priorities and knows expectations to reach their goals.

3. No one is going to tell you’re right – Decide what is reasonable and articulate why.

Research is not like writing a multiple-choice exam – there is no right answer. A single analysis could be performed with several different approaches, lenses, cut-off scores, or statistical tests – each leading you in a different direction and in pursuit of a different question. When a conference attendee or external examiner asks why you chose _____, what will you say? The best answer is well-reasoned and articulated in the manner of your discipline. Its basis might lie in the theoretical framework, methodology, context, or respect for participants etc. The worst answer is a toss up between “because my supervisor/collaborator said...” and “because it was what I learned in course xyz.” Both can prompt doubt in your ability to come to your own conclusions and make decisions.

Be able to state your reason for the approach or claim. New techniques, lenses, data, voices will emerge that may contradict or challenge your statements and decision, but be clear about your reasons and claims. Why did you select person A’s theory and not person B’s? What is the strength of what you did (and limitations, too) and why did you not do more/different/less? A thesis or dissertation usually has space to describe the selection process and/or rationale. An article manuscript might have less explicit statements included, but thinking through your rationale in advance provides solid ground for later discussions.

The goal is to be scholar of informed, thoughtful, and well-reasoned work.

4. No one is identical to you - Find out how big your plate is and how you percolate...and stick with it.

Think of the analogy that the size of a plate represents the workload you typically carry. What size is your plate? A dinner plate? A dessert plate? A serving tray? Find the right size of plate that you are comfortable in managing. Learn how to say no to requests. Learn how to divide up your time and tasks so that you can reduce the content of your plate and easily reload. Ever wonder how some people can carry a “serving tray” of work all the time? What is sometimes invisible is that they are constantly emptying their tray and returning to the buffet table of “jobs” to refill it with just a few chosen items at a time.

Sometimes it is not the amount but the monotony or type of work that matters. Completing a dissertation could be seen as three categories of tasks (big picture/deep thinking, step-by-step doing tasks, and monkey work). At any given moment, you might be in the right frame of mind for one, maybe two of them, but rarely all three. Prioritize – check if you could do the big picture/deep tasks; if not, maybe it is time for step-by-step transcribing, analyzing or converting notes to sentences. If the brain is too full or the time too short, there is always monkey work (e.g., citations for the obvious, reformatting tables, finding synonyms for “including”).

Figure out how you percolate to think deeply about issues and ideas to arrive at solutions, themes and options. One example approach: Load your mind with a big question (e.g., what is my main storyline?) and then putter with a mundane task or exercise while ideas percolate.

Code tasks. When revising, do the quick edits first, and color-code anything that takes longer than a minute. Twenty pages of edits can become much less with the small bits cleared out of the way. This trick also works in later years for reviewer comments and article writing. But what matters most is what works for you!

The goal is to be able to recognize what moves you forward and plan ahead.

5. No one can do it for you - Take charge

These are your studies; you are responsible for them. In addition to seeking out mentors and supervisors, become your own mentor.

Learn the policies, requirements and deadlines. These can shift over time and can surprise even seasoned veterans. Find out what is myth and what is policy – including funding for conferences, how teaching positions are assigned, or required/needed grade averages. Seek informed sources just as you do in your disciplinary field, including what makes a good scholarship proposal, what are expected publications counts upon graduation, or what is the length of time to acquire publication or ethics approval. Seek out and double-check timelines for funding and possible opportunities to apply for.

Few people, if any, are putting their life on hold until you finish your thesis. Plan out your research timeline with careful attention to committee members’ availability, university seasonal fluctuations, and posted deadlines. Double check for sabbaticals, summer breaks, conference commitments, participant or partner timelines, or ethics board deadlines that have the potential to delay research and progress. If working with community members, recognize their schedules and timelines are likely not the same as the university’s and yours.

Don’t put your productivity on hold while waiting for feedback or approval; make the best use of your time. If you are waiting for a draft to be reviewed, use the waiting period to accomplish

other tasks, write other sections, update that literature review, or take that break mentioned at the start.

Reach out. There are many people who have signed up (or have been signed up) to help you! Librarians are impressive in their “locating” abilities; mentors (formal and informal) help us see possibilities and identify the solutions we may need; committee members place their reputations on the line as they judge the caliber of the work we place before them; friends and family care enough to ask after us and offer a synonym to help us along our (often ill-understood) goals.

Recognize that while graduate programs often have explicit (and sometimes even enforced) goals of timely completion, the nature of research and academic institutions can create contrary demands. A good graduate student is worth their weight in gold to an institution and to faculty members – they can publish, work efficiently as a TA or instructor, require minimal training and even train others, are pleasant to work with, etc. There are often opportunities for work that can provide important experience in addition to money, while taking away time. The pressure to work can be increased at institutions and jurisdictions where funding per student is reduced after set number of years in an effort to reduce time to completion. Although tuition is waived in some schools, graduate students at many institutions continue to pay in, while working in roles requiring graduate student status. Work can provide tremendous opportunities in addition to funding, at the price of some service and all-important time – decide what a feasible and beneficial accounting balance sheet looks like for you.

The goal is to figure out how to work within a system in a (hopefully) mutually beneficial way.

6. No one (or very few) is actually hurtful – so see the nugget, say no and say thanks (with real feeling)

Regardless of the philosophy or rationale that underpins the stinging comments, the ill-fit advice, or a constructed obstacle course, recognize that in most cases there is some underlying belief that you might even agree on (e.g., preparation for the future, improving credibility). Everyone involved in a graduate education might disagree on what that future is, the path for getting us there (see Wulff, Walker, etc.), or the value of existing paradigms (see Shulman’s intro to Walker et al.’s book), but in the end, the guidance is analogous to the wisdom and opportunity handed down by a (disciplinary) family who want what is best* (*With best defined differently by each person).

Breathe, seek advice or perspective, and recognize when a comment or situation requires addressing to move a project forward, to provide a safe and positive working environment, or to repair a professional relationship. There will be plenty (definitely plenty) of moments asking to be addressed and you may even have the tools to do so. Decide what is your role, who are you there to teach, and if the teaching is feasible. There will be moments in which you were proud to have spoken up and those moments in which you realize the greater tact and perspective will lead to better teachable moments.

Finally, say thanks. Not just in the acknowledgement section but in the moments of life where paths cross. Others will learn from you, and perhaps you will learn from others and then we will continue carrying a piece of each other with us. We are the kaleidoscope of all we have interacted with and view the world through the mosaic.

The goal is to learn how to work with people, to respect our colleagues (in at least some small way) and to maintain the humanity within and around us.

7. No one else creates your reputation – Be known to your advisors as an intelligent contributor and an interesting presence, not simply an annoyance.

Advisors often have their plates full with their own research work and teaching duties, in addition to student supervision. Their job is to guide you in the right direction and mentor you, not direct every action of your graduate program. Find out early your advisors' expectations and then take the initiative, thinking in the long-term while not losing sight of the short-term. Don't wait to be told what to do—figure out what you should be doing, and do it. Keep your advisors informed of your progress, but avoid plaguing them with questions that can just as easily be answered on your own with some research. One professor used to say to his students, "Don't email me any question that you are able to easily look up yourself." Develop relationships with other faculty members, students, and colleagues to acquire a different perspective. Talking with others is an invaluable resource that can often lead to funding opportunities, research ideas, and occasions for learning. Moreover, widening your circle of support and professional connections will foster relationships that will be of great assistance in the future should you require letters of recommendation.

You have made it to grad school on your academic merits – believe in yourself and your abilities. Your advisor would likely much sooner see you take the initiative to write and present an outline for a research proposal than to come to him/her with a blank page and ask what you should write. When seeking help for a problem, come prepared with a few solutions of your own as an active contributor to the conversation. Your advisors will appreciate that you have put some thought into finding a solution, even if your solution is not viable.

If you feel you do not deserve to be here, that admissions made a mistake, take comfort that you are not alone in that thinking, for imposter syndrome is not uncommon. Find the support you need to see that you are indeed admitted on past merit and can work towards future success.

The goal is to demonstrate yourself to be worthy of recommendation and opportunities, through showing initiative, collegial independence, and being open to the insights, experiences and guidance of others.

Overall

The goal is to be your own project manager of your graduate studies: To be assertive enough to voice your opinion confidently, yet be open to guidance and instruction; to be in charge of your well-planned and realistic milestones, but flexible enough for changes when needed; and most importantly, to take the initiative to follow the path through grad school and not simply rely on others to lead you. To figure out how you work best and make the most of it, all while maintaining respectful engagement.

Each journey of graduate studies is as unique as the combination of program, supervisor, and you. Each of us will earn our own lessons, while building on the lessons of others. When we finish, we leave behind the shared insight that carries on the scuttlebutt that Lovitts (2004) found to be so important to success.

Literature worth reading:

Golde, C., & Dore, T. (2001). At cross purposes: What the experiences of doctoral students reveal about doctoral education. *Report prepared for the Pew Charitable Trusts*. Retrieved from <http://www.phd-survey.org/report.htm>

Golde, C. M., & Dore, T. M. (2004). The survey of doctoral education and career preparation: The importance of disciplinary contexts. In D. H. Wulff, A. E. Austin, & Associates (Eds.), *Paths to the professoriate: Strategies for enriching the preparation of future faculty* (pp. 19-45). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Lovitts, B. E. (2004). Research on the structure and process of graduate education. In D. H. Wulff, A. E. Austin, & Associates (Eds.), *Paths to the professoriate: Strategies for enriching the preparation of future faculty* (pp. 115-136). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Shulman, L. S. (2008). Foreword. In G. E. Walker, C. M. Golde, L. Jones, A. Conklin Bueschel, & P. Hutchings (Eds.), *The formation of scholars: Rethinking doctoral education for the twenty-first century* (pp. ix-xiii). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Wulff, D. H., Austin, A. E., Nyquist, J. D., & Sprague, J. (2004). The development of graduate students as teaching scholars: A four-year longitudinal study. In D. H. Wulff, A. E. Austin, & Associates (Eds.), *Paths to the professoriate: Strategies for enriching the preparation of future faculty* (pp. 46-73). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Author notes:

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