

Grad School Off-Campus

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As a nontraditional doctoral student, I have had an unusual graduate experience: I attend classes online while still working full-time and raising three teenagers. I also am older than most graduate students. Because of my situation, I have had to think creatively to tackle my research responsibilities. Below, I outline my experiences and practical suggestions for students in similar positions.

Overcoming Stigma

There is a significant amount of stigma surrounding nontraditional students, especially when they study online (Fedynich, Bradley, & Bradley, 2015). Research has found that some people believe nontraditional learning strategies are inferior to traditional learning modalities (Irani, Wilson, & Slough, 2014). Developing a professional attitude and staying current with empirical literature are two strategies that can help combat these biases. In addition, studies have revealed that nontraditional learners often have work experience, family responsibilities, and other mature qualities (Kuboni, 2013) that may enhance their ability to stay organized, make professional connections, and self-advocate. We should emphasize these unique skill sets and how they contribute to learning and development.

Networking

Making social and professional connections often is difficult for distance learners because of geographical constraints. I currently strive to overcome this obstacle by joining psychological associations at the local, state, and national levels. I also volunteer in various capacities to gain exposure, build my professional network, and accrue leadership experience. For example, I actively participate in the student subcommittees psychological associations offer in order to gain the personal peer connections I otherwise would have missed from my online education. Through the APS Student Caucus (APSSC), for example, students can participate in a number of networking opportunities including serving on the APSSC Board, serving as a campus representative of APSSC, reviewing for research awards, participating in the APS Mentorship Program, and attending student events at the APS Annual Convention. If you see an opportunity to help students where no program yet exists, step up and offer to help develop a new program. Nontraditional graduate students also can build connections by presenting at conferences and publishing papers.

Finding a Research Mentor

The mentor–mentee relationship greatly benefits from consistent, face-to-face contact. While this contact is inherent in the relationship at many traditional, campus-based universities, it may be scarce for graduate students who are learning online. For distance learners, much of the mentorship may be conducted over phone calls, video chat, or email. Although working with a mentor may be more cumbersome for distance learners, these relationships still are necessary for building a career in academia.

One of the biggest challenges for any graduate student pursuing a career in academia is finding a mentor who has similar research interests (Booker & Tucker, 2014). Rest assured that many professional researchers remember what it is like to be a student and want to give back (Perry, 2012). To find my mentor, I participated in the California Psychological Association of Graduate Students mentor matching program, for which students and professionals submit academic biographies and are matched according to their needs and locations. I was lucky to find a clinical psychology mentor who actively conducts research (as opposed to only conducting therapy) and is interested in mentoring a student with similar career goals. My mentor and I meet face-to-face on a regular basis, which has been tremendously important for developing rapport.

I find that attending conferences also is helpful for meeting potential mentors. By presenting my findings at conferences, I have been able to delineate my research interests to others in the field. Additionally, attending other psychological scientists' presentations allows me to learn more about others' research.

Conducting Your Own Research

While attending an online university, conducting research can be cumbersome without the aid of a mentor. Be prepared and ask questions when meeting with your advisor face to face. You need to be able to work independently. While traditional students can walk into a professor's office and ask for advice, distance learners often do not have that advantage. Additionally, when your research sample is not easily accessible, you have to be creative.

Thanks to technology, a person can collect data without in-person contact. You can administer questionnaires using services such as SurveyMonkey and conduct qualitative interviews via Skype or GoToMeeting (Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013). I am using these forms of technology to collect data for my dissertation, which focuses on clinicians' perceptions of incorporating the neurodiversity theorem into support groups for adults on the autism spectrum. I plan to interview study participants through GoToMeeting and then use qualitative analysis software, more specifically NVivo, to extract data. I plan on recruiting my participants through LinkedIn.

Once you have collected your data, it is critical that you maintain files in a secure, organized manner — a task that can be difficult for researchers who don't have access to very many university resources. I keep everything in encrypted files and use a secure server when I am dealing with sensitive information. This strategy allows me to ensure that only people with permission can access these confidential files.

In conclusion, conducting research and developing your professional identity can be difficult without the advantages that most traditional students receive in their daily interactions on university campuses. However, it is not impossible to independently conduct research. Use your resources, be creative, and do not rely solely on your university.

References

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