

# If I Could Turn Back Time

March 22, 2005

Hindsight is always 20/20, and it is the lucky few of us who can look back with a confident satisfaction that all our decisions were the best ones to make. I'm a fifth-year PhD candidate in psychology, and though I have many found successes to look back on from the past several years of my academic journey, there are also a number of decisions I would have made differently.

If I could turn back time to the beginning of my graduate career, I'd whisper this friendly advice into my own novice ears:

## **Take Time to Adjust**

Every student will have different paths, but regardless of whether you're making the transition from undergraduate school or work to a graduate program, take the time to adjust. While I don't suggest taking an extended length of time to adjust to a new life in graduate school, it is important to become gently immersed in the environment and to become familiar with the department's research programs and faculty, as well as with your advisor. Finding a thesis topic is very important, which is why you should take the time to formulate an idea thoroughly. Remember that you'll be spending a lot of time on this study, and if you are unhappy with it or haven't properly thought it through, the process will not be any easier.

## **Network Now**

My approach to networking was a broken record replaying the old mantra "I have plenty of time" to wait until I was into the graduate school swing of things before thinking about networking. Many people run out of time or try to network too late in their graduate career. You should take any and every opportunity (within reason) to meet people and network. It's never too early to network. You never know when you shake hands with an opportunity.

## **Start Your CV Now**

Your curriculum vita, or CV, is your life's work. Imagine how difficult it would be to sum up all of your graduate school experience, internships, teaching assignments, and more at the end of your graduate career. Besides, you never know when someone may ask for your CV. Keeping my CV current is probably the best thing I have done while in graduate school — it was vital in obtaining internships and teaching assignments.

## **Attend Conferences**

During my first years of graduate study, I did not attend any conferences that weren't local due to my limited income and lack of funding. For those of you who may be in a similar position, I urge you to try and find alternate sources for funding. Many times, various conferences offer travel funds to students in need. Your University Graduate Association or Council may even offer a travel fund. Attending conferences ties into the networking topic and can be essential for your academic and professional development.

## **Be Proactive**

Graduate students are often hesitant about being proactive when it comes to their graduate careers. Most of us are given an advisor who is supposed to help us grow academically and professionally. But an advisor cannot own all the responsibility in your development. As a student, you need to be proactive. If you want to have a number of publications, you should express that desire. If you want to teach a particular course, you should take the appropriate measures to be qualified to teach that course. Depending on a graduate advisor for every aspect of your development is not fair to that advisor — you're most likely not the only student under that advisor's wing. Fortunately, as a graduate student you only have one person to help shape both academically and professionally — yourself.

H. G. Wells was only able to turn back time through the pages of fiction, and Cher could only sing about it — with debatable success. But the 20/20 hindsight we can gain from those who have gone before us — a mentor, an advisor, older graduate students — can be invaluable. In fact, my first academic advisor probably offered some of the best advice when he said, “Keep your eye on the ball.” So take this advice as a brief glimpse into the future. That way, you might never have to look back.