

Making the Best of Graduate School

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[I am grateful to my advisors, Barbara and Irwin Sarason, and the faculty and my peers at the University of Washington for making sure I did what I was supposed to do. Thank you. – *A.R.G.*]

Are you optimizing your time in graduate school? Graduate school can be and often is a rewarding experience whether you are researching or teaching or both. Beyond getting a PhD, however, there are many other tasks one has to master. The challenge is to do it all while still retaining the fascination with the topic that brought you back to school. In this article I discuss some things to keep in mind to help you succeed in your program (see also Mitchell, 1996).

Take the Initiative

Most graduate programs have structured courses that methodically help you learn what it means to be a competent academic: how to do valid research, the important theories in your area, writing grant proposals, reviewing manuscripts, and the elements of teaching (see McKeachie, 1990). You should assess the structure of your own graduate program (i.e., graduate handbooks, course catalogues, upper level students), and if the program is deficient in these elements, take the initiative to make some changes. Mobilize yourself. Try to collaborate on articles, proofread drafts, look at grant proposals your advisor is working on, try to review manuscripts. On a larger scale, get involved in the department: organize visiting speakers, conferences, join committees. Identify the many grants and funds that you can apply for as a student and get started on them early.

Communicate With Your Advisor

Your relationship with your advisor defines the quality of your graduate school experience. Make sure you have a good idea of what your advisor expects from you and try and let him or her know what you expect. Even though personalities sometimes do not mesh, many experiences work out well and can become wonderful sharing experiences.

Explore Options

Fortunately, you do not have to pay allegiance to your application research statement for the rest of your academic life. Expose yourself to as many different topics as possible, take as wide a range of classes/seminars as possible. Even if you think you have settled on a dissertation topic from day one (see Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 1993), take classes in related areas and topics. It also will help to know what other faculty in that research area are doing. Make use of them. Take a class from them, arrange readings or even try and work on a project with them, if it interests you and if they are accommodating. Allow yourself time to get a good strong background in your area and a sense of what is out there.

Be Social

As awkward as it may feel, hang out with faculty, do not skip out on department/faculty hosted social

events. They present a wonderful opportunity to get a better sense of the world of academia. Furthermore, to many faculty, your attendance may even be seen as an implicit indication of your interest in the program. Social gatherings are also “anecdotal heaven.” You will hear behind-the-scenes stories that will give new life to the names that you read about in journals.

Connect and Network

Part of being a good academic is knowing who does what in the field and establishing a good network. While this sets the stage for later collaborations and increases your knowledge of job prospects, faculty and students at other institutions also provide good bench marks to compare your own experiences. If someone’s work interests you, contact them. Go to conferences; they can be wonderful opportunities to share ideas, visit fun locales, meet people, and get a sense of cutting-edge work that may not otherwise make it to a journal for another year or so. If you can, present a poster of your work or something from your lab.

Write, Write, Write

You can be someone with a lot of potential for only so long, then you have to start producing. Getting ahead in academia necessitates getting published. First, ask yourself why what you want to do is important. What will it contribute? How does it take our knowledge beyond where it is? If you were presenting your idea to someone, is there a clear take home message?

Answering these questions galvanizes the writing. If you think you do not write well, there is no better way to improve than to get it critiqued. Do not be overcritical of yourself and thereby blunt your creative edge. To do creative work you must take risks (see Sternberg, 1992, for a great article on writing). Most advisors have ample supplies of red ink and are very willing to edit and provide suggestions. They can only help you if pen has been put to paper. If you do not have a study to write up, write a summary/criticism of a section of the field that interests you. It may grow into something you can submit later on.

Persevere, But Take Time to Relax

Remember that work and research are like a gas, they will expand to take as much space as you provide. Take time off every now and then. Know your limits and pay attention to your own personal rhythm. There will be many times when you will feel like you do not want to go on. Nearly everyone who has made it through graduate school has felt like that at one time or another, and most of your peers around the country probably feel like that right now. If the feeling does not pass, reassess how you are doing things, talk to your advisor, your friends and family. A major contributor to disillusionment is that most of the time rewards are too far in the distance. Set proximal goals, so you will get proximal rewards.

Conclusions

There are many ways to enrich your years in graduate school. Keep your fingers on the pulse of your experiences, assess your goals and needs and modulate yourself. Take time out when you need it, choose your battles well, get help when you need it. Idealistic outlooks are great (academics can make the world a better place), but at least a modicum of realism is essential to make it through a program (academics

must navigate through hoops and red tape). Graduate school will be over before you know it!