

# **Reenvisioning Graduate School**

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The field of psychological science is continually changing. These changes are spurred by many factors, from the development of new methodological approaches to shifts in the sociopolitical climate. For students, this ever-morphing environment can feel exciting, as though we are at the cutting edge of our field; yet it also can feel daunting, as if there is no end to the amount of training we need before we can jump-start our careers. The optimism that initially might have led us to pursue graduate degrees can slowly wear down after spending so much time plugging away at research projects; putting in many hours studying for classes that we often are told do not actually matter; and applying for scholarships, grants, awards, teaching assistantships, and practicum or internship placements year after year. Furthermore, with a seemingly dwindling number of tenure-track academic positions available, feelings of pessimism can easily abound. What can programs or students do to get out of this rut?

The purpose of this article is to envision ways that programs and students can improve graduate training and empower other students. The aim is not to propose a complete restructuring of graduate school, but rather to provide some realistic and flexible strategies for improving the experience.

## **Improving Communication Between Programs and Students**

Free-flowing communication between institutions and students is at the core of a healthy relationship between the two. Communicating clear expectations and feedback to students allows them to set goals, measure their progress, and make adjustments as needed. Information often passes from institution to student through formal evaluations or meetings with one's advisor, but there are other avenues for improving the flow of information. Programs can provide data to current students about norms for students in the program: What jobs are recent alumni getting? How many publications and/or conference presentations do students generally have by the time they graduate? For clinical students, how many hours of hands-on experience do students have on average when they apply for internships?

Transparency about the expectations and norms for students as they progress through graduate school helps students set realistic and productive goals.

Equally important is the flow of information from student to program. Creating a system through which students can provide feedback to the program serves both parties well: It empowers students to get their needs met, and it helps programs prevent problems from occurring later. One helpful way to facilitate this process is to implement an annual student survey to evaluate students' career goals, satisfaction with different areas of the program, departmental climate, and areas that need improvement. Faculty then can use this feedback to make adjustments and monitor the needs of students. In addition, programs can invite students to serve on various committees. At my home institution, the University of California, Los Angeles, a student representative from each cohort attends a monthly area meeting and is invited to voice concerns and provide feedback.

## **Reducing Student Debt**

Funding and debt are major sources of concern for many graduate students. The National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates (2012) estimated that approximately one third of doctoral students in the social sciences take out loans to support them during their graduate studies. While eliminating student debt completely requires systemic changes that are beyond the scope of this article, there are certainly ways that programs and students can start addressing this issue now. First, programs can support graduate student associations and/or unions that advocate for students. Second, programs can admit fewer students. Though this is a controversial topic, it is one that deserves attention. If programs only have the ability to fund a certain number of students, requiring others to take out loans or work while studying, this creates an imbalance among students in terms of financial stress and time available to dedicate to research. Third, programs can find creative ways to help fund students. Perhaps there are available positions in other departments that students can take or paid clinical positions for students who need to gain clinical hours. Finally, a major step that students themselves can take is to choose their programs wisely. Does the program provide funding? Will you be guaranteed a teaching assistant position that covers tuition and provides a stipend? What percentage of students in the program obtain outside funding? If you do not receive any funding, how large of a loan will you need to take out, and how long will it take you to pay it off? Is there another degree (Master's vs. PhD) that would help you reach your goals but would do so without forcing you to incur a large amount of debt?

## **Supporting Individualized Career Paths**

Programs often are put in the difficult position of needing to support students' grand ambitions while also encouraging realistic goals. For example, though many students enter PhD programs with ambitions of academic careers, the number of graduates from doctoral programs greatly exceeds the number of tenure-track faculty positions that are available each year (Schillebeeckx, Maricque, & Lewis, 2013). Furthermore, career goals are likely to change over the 5+ years that a person is in graduate school. Integrating a dialogue about changes in career goals throughout graduate school and normalizing this for students will help students find the path that is right for them. One way to facilitate this process is to integrate professional development into the grad school curriculum. For example, in response to student feedback at my home institution, our program invited local alumni and others working in various fields within psychology to participate in career panels that students could attend. Programs also can facilitate the creation of alumni networks that would allow current students to contact previous graduates who have gone on to interesting and fulfilling careers. In addition, students can help each other by fostering peer support systems such as the PhD Career Ladder Program, a student-developed program designed to help students identify and prepare for their career goals. APS also has [helpful resources](#) for students looking for additional guidance outside of their home programs.

## **Maintaining Flexibility**

Adapting to change is a crucial element of success for both individuals and programs. The ability to be flexible is one major advantage that we, as students, have over later career psychological scientists. For example, students can take advantage of graduate student resources to learn how to utilize the most state-of-the-art quantitative methods. Additionally, since students are expected to be in the learning stage of their careers, faculty are likely more open to acting as consultants and advisors to students than to nonstudents. However, in order to foster student flexibility, programs also must adapt to change by

keeping up with the changing scientific, political, and funding climate and by encouraging students to respond to change as well. One way programs can do this is by offering training in areas that have large potential for future job growth. For example, programs can offer more courses and training in geropsychology and health psychology, two areas predicted to have significant growth; provide opportunities for students to work in integrated health care systems during graduate school; and help students connect with businesses or government organizations to solve real-world problems as part of courses or research projects.

Finding and creating ways to improve communication, reduce students' financial burdens, support diverse career paths, and encourage flexibility will benefit both institutions and students. Just as the field of psychology is constantly evolving, so too must the institutions that foster its study. æ

## References

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