

The Non-Traditional Transition to a Phd

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***Editor's Note:** This past June members of the APSSC completed our annual student survey. One of the most requested Student Notebook items was the inclusion of non-traditional students' points of view. To address these concerns, two authors were contacted specifically for their non-traditional status, opposite genders, and opposite family situations. Both are currently master's students in the process of picking a PhD program, however. The authors discuss their upcoming transition to the doctoral program world in their own way and in light of their own life situations, but ultimately, both end up more focused on the choice that lays ahead of them than on the obstacles in their way. After reading, please feel free to share your thoughts about the pieces. Would you tell a different story? Have age, family status, or gender affected your academic and career decisions? Do you feel that these things have held you back, propelled you forward, or made no difference? Send your thoughts and stories to apsstded@gmail.com.*

She Said: The Lone Scientist

By Kim Thomas

My fascination with solving humanity's statistical mysteries began early and never stopped evolving. I fell in love with statistics immediately — the freshly sharpened pencils and white paper covered in calculations that provided insight into something few understood was eternally engrossing. I had always dreamed of being a scientist. Biology was my first love. Much to my mothers' dismay, dissecting frogs in my backyard filled me with questions about life at a very early age. I grew up in the lower middle class world. Although some felt disenfranchised and unable to prosper in this home environment, I never lost my sense of amazement at life's treasures. I used to agree with Juan Carrillo's statement that he would complete his degree, but would not choose to give up his family and continue in academia once the degree was obtained (2007). Now I find myself holding on tightly to my own master's while looking for the door to return.

Self-discovery is an integral part in the process of education. I began to tutor others in statistics and learned that helping them understand was of immeasurable joy to me. My love affair with statistics set me apart from other students in my counseling-based program. In my mind, that knowledge and passion would be enough to carry me through to my new career in science. I knew I would complete my bachelors in psychology and struggled with whether to even continue on to the master's program due to my non-traditional status as a wife and mother, in addition to student. But I continued and received my master's degree in experimental psychology last year. I knew that with this degree I could finally become the scientist I had dreamed of. Unlike my peers who were looking for jobs, I was headed for a career. I had always been convinced that I did not need a PhD. It didn't seem necessary or practical given my family and age. I had my master's in hand and thought I had reached the end of my long academic journey. I was confident that I would be able to find my place in the scientific world.

But, I had dreamt of my future rather than planned it. I was too busy with day-to-day school and family issues and too sure of the path I was on. I was more focused on the good of my child, my spouse, and my transcript than on any future goal for myself. According to Cassin, Singer, Dobson, and Altmaier (2007), I am in good company. They suggest that, due to their increased family responsibilities, women who have children are less likely to make it through graduate training than are men or women without children.

Upon graduation, I tried to find research-related work, but my first attempt at dealing with a private, for-profit company was disastrous. They liked my ideas, but they weren't sure how to implement them into their research. I began to understand that their plan for me to secure all of the needed grant funding involved signing over of all of my own intellectual property. I decided to dissolve the relationship. Another problem with trying to pursue a scientific career with only a master's-level education is the inability to secure grant funding without a PhD and/or an institution with which you may collaborate academically. Although there are grants available for PhDs working independently, they are not easy to find. I have discovered no such grants for the master's-level researcher, and the grant vision of labor always requires more than one lone scientist.

My next option was self-employment. I had been told that research consultants are in great demand, if you can find the right opportunities. When you do find them, you will be extremely fortunate, with just a master's degree, to be offered any research autonomy or respect as a colleague. Businesses will love you and your master's degree because they can pay you less and make a better profit. It is possible to prosper greatly in the many aspects of the business world with only a master's, but it is harder as a researcher. So, you must ask yourself if you want to be a researcher or a businessperson. If the answer is "a researcher," than, as I have learned, you may need the PhD.

With a PhD, one may still be a serious scientist and administer research outside of the academic arena. Kincaid (2007) is quick to point out that though many psychology students see a tenure-track job at a university as the only form of success, success comes from doing what you love. It is up to each of us as individuals to struggle to achieve our own potential as scientists. The education you seek should be tailored to your individual and family needs. Whichever path we choose — self-employment, business management, institutional, administration, or tenure track within an institution — each of us must answer one question: Is this really what I want to do? A job is easy to find but a career in science is a life choice that takes time. Be careful to plan and properly prepare for the one you want.

References

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Cassin, S.E., Singer, A.R., Dobson, K.S. & Altmaier, E.M. (2007). Professional interests and career aspirations of graduate students in professional psychology: An exploratory survey. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 1, 26-37.

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He Said: Confessions of a Non-Traditional Autodidact

By Harold S. Jenkins

I was approached to present a view of a non-traditional master's student. In my case, "non-traditional" means that I am an older student who lives alone. Thus, my view of graduate education and the transition to a PhD program is qualitatively different from that of both my young, single colleagues and my colleagues with a spouse, children, a dog, and a mortgage ("the full catastrophe" per the classic movie *Zorba the Greek*).

Any story needs context, so here is some more for mine: I'm writing about events that transpire in a medium-sized commuter college embedded in a high-end community adjacent to a metropolitan area in the Bible belt. My system of social support (thin on family, both extended and immediate) leans heavily on those who populate my academic universe. I have been a life-long autodidact (independent scholar) and, on campus, am not motivated primarily (or even secondarily) by grades but rather by the enriched and uniquely stimulating experience of the classroom. I've had multiple "careers," and I'm braced for another once I've earned my ticket to teach.

Relationships built around shared classes are different for someone who has been around a generation longer than the youngest of the younger set. It's the nature of education for the shared life of college courses to pass quickly, and perhaps all the more rare for intergenerational relationships to abide beyond a few months. The circumstance of having fewer friends makes the passing of those one enjoyed all the more poignant. What are you to do when your peers (in age) are the older professors?

As an undergraduate, I remember observing how decidedly odd the roving clusters of graduate students behaved. They seemed edgy and neurotic (to use the archaic term). I took some measure of amusement from these observations. In turn, I imagine current undergrads now find me and my behavior a source of similar amusement — perhaps progressively so, as I feel increasingly unhinged while navigating the labyrinth that leads to a doctoral program.

In any discussion of non-traditional students, discrimination is an unavoidable topic because, in modern society, it's visible everywhere. It's racial, and gender-based; we are class-conscious and elitist or exclusionary in a multitude of ways. You may get a bit of a bump in the ratings if you're male. You're not likely to win any points for being "non-traditional." If you're non-traditional, you may have the privilege to know one way or the other that bias is in play in a given circumstance. You may not. Consider this possibility as all the more reason to cultivate options.

When looking into prospective doctoral programs, the typical position for a traditional student allows for significant latitude in shopping around various educational options. In my case, we could speak of judgment skewed by extraordinary latitude. I've felt too little sense of time pressure and have overemphasized current obligations at the expense of both planning and investigating options for the doctoral degree. (But, to give it a positive spin, isn't free-spirited absentmindedness a stereotypic representation of an older professor?) I can't know how readily that particular foible generalizes to non-traditional students at large, but the take-home messages here are legion. Foremost, though goal clarification may seem imposing, there's no excuse to neglect refining so critical a task. Take whatever time management skills you have to the next level (and then the next).

As with all things, some aspects of one's character, choices, and circumstance will tend to benefit and others won't when in graduate school. It's probably less important to note the strategic differences

between the young and not-so-young players than it is mandatory to use one's common sense, wits, and experience to size up personal assets and liabilities, cultivate strengths (and allies), and keep those eyes on the prize. At the end of the day, though my version of the task may seem different, it yet remains the same. And though the field is competitive, there are varied ways to stand out as a contender. It isn't a flat landscape, and any one of us can learn to navigate with the best of them.

Oh, yeah and remember... Ask for help and *kill your television.* ?
