

Time-to-Degree: Some Suggestions for Keeping on Schedule as a PhD Student

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A key measure of both successful graduate students and successful graduate programs is whether students make timely progress through the program and receive their degrees (de Valero, 2001). Successful progress through PhD programs involves making effective use of your advisor; forming productive relationships with peers; and maintaining your own persistence, focus, and motivation.

Relationships With Your Advisor

Just like having a genetic resistance to disease is related to having “picked the right parents,” a great deal of your graduate school progress depends on having picked the right advisor. Our genetic resistance to disease is beyond our control; however, we can make ourselves resistant to obstacles in graduate school by choosing our advisors carefully. Although it is important to choose someone who is interested in the same research area as you, your progress depends a great deal on your advisor’s willingness and ability to meet with you regularly and to effectively communicate with you (Pratt, 1997).

Near the beginning of your relationship with your advisor, find out about his or her working style: that person’s desired frequency of contact, feedback delivery preferences, and expectations from students. Consider whether this is likely to fit with your needs, and ask him or her if you need more or less structure. (desJardins, 1994).

Regular meetings with your advisor make you accountable to someone other than yourself and provide feedback that may be critical for self-correction, both of which are important sources of social support for your progress. Pratt (1997) suggests being very purposeful about these meetings to make the best use of them. Prepare for the meetings by organizing your thoughts, generating goals for the meeting, and bringing something on paper to consult your advisor about. E-mail follow-up summaries of the meeting and to-do lists so that everyone is clear about responsibilities. As important as your meetings with your advisor are, Pratt (1997) points out that you shouldn’t simply mark time waiting for the next meeting; rather, you should take the initiative to do what you can without your advisor’s help. Your advisor may prefer to comment on work that is already started, rather than starting from scratch.

Wrangling Committee Members

In your thesis, examination, and dissertation activities, your advisor will be the head of a team of other faculty members, some of whom will be from outside your area. Sometimes coordinating expectations and help from these members can be a sticking point. You will need to arrange meetings and other logistics. If you find yourself being bounced back and forth like a ping-pong ball between committee members who disagree with one another, your advisor should help by meeting with them and negotiating a mutual understanding as well as a division of responsibilities within the committee.

Sending Manuscripts and Scheduling Defense Meetings in Time

Your committee is there to help you produce the best thesis work that you can. You need time to solicit

their feedback and make appropriate changes. In practical terms, if you intend to graduate at the end of a given semester, your real thesis deadline is well in advance of that date. More than six weeks before the end of the semester you want to graduate in, send a draft approved by your advisor to the committee and start work to schedule a defense meeting about two weeks later. That will allow you two weeks to make changes before the graduate school will want an official copy of your approved final version, which will be due perhaps as much as two weeks before graduation. Think through the timing, be aware of holidays and breaks and remember that your committee will want a minimum of 10 working days to read your paper.

Sometimes it happens that, despite your best efforts, your relationship with your advisor is not working. desJardins (1994) suggests that you should consider switching if your advisor gives constant negative feedback or is harassing, chronically disinterested, or absent. If your advisor is distant, but not to the point that you are thinking of switching, desJardins suggests seeking help from other sources, like making use of multiple mentors for multiple purposes (e.g., having both a teaching mentor and research mentor). Administrators and online resources also can be helpful. Don't overlook peers as a potential resource, which brings us to the next topic.

Relationships With Peers

As important as your faculty members are, peers are important as well. A common barrier to connecting with peers among first-year graduate students is finding yourself to be "average" again. Comparing yourself to senior graduate students or faculty is probably not appropriate... yet. Other new students may make a more suitable reference group with which to gauge your capabilities and progress. They may all look cool, calm, and confident, but they are working hard to adjust to this new setting, just like you are.

Peers are much more useful as resources and guides than as competitors. Get a sense of the expected timetable and blueprints of your future achievements (e.g. theses, exams, publications) by asking successful, experienced students. Other students in your advisor's lab can be incredibly valuable to help you learn not only techniques, but also the professional skills you will need to succeed (desJardins, 1994). This advice may be especially important for members of underrepresented groups. Fields (1998) cites Howard Adams, the former director of the National Consortium for Graduate Degrees for Minorities in Engineering and Science, Inc., who says that minority students have so often been the "only one" that they try to do it all themselves. Instead, he advises students to build relationships with other team members.

Persistence, Focus and Motivation

Graduate school priorities and values are different from your undergraduate days. Before, school and work filled your time; now, school is work. Self-regulation becomes more important than ever. Only class meeting times are set by others. Other responsibilities are negotiable or self-set. This means that you must balance time within schoolwork, prioritizing classes versus lab time, while leaving room for thesis progress.

Time management becomes especially important when teaching a class for the first time. This can be an unbelievable time commitment each week. The draw of teaching is strong. Leave room for your other commitments, as well as time to play. One way to save yourself a great deal of time is by not "reinventing the wheel." Resources to help you teach are plentiful. McKeachie's text, *Teaching Tips* (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2005), not to mention Teaching Tips columns in the *Observer* and the *Lessons*

Learned book series published by APS, are guaranteed to help you make those first steps into the classroom. Ask a faculty member or other graduate students how they handled their first teaching experience. Their wisdom will likely be your best resource.

For most PhD students, major degree milestones involve completing a thesis and dissertation. It is critical to keep these projects moving along in a timely fashion if you are to complete your degree, despite the many other claims on your time. To get started, desJardins (1994) and Pratt (1997) recommend keeping a journal of research ideas that you review from time to time. Reading broadly at first is helpful, but you need to be efficient in this phase, scanning and paraphrasing to give yourself a quick overview of the article. Also, when considering thesis topics, instead of trying to do too much, see the thesis as training for your future research career. Once you get a topic, break your project into reasonable chunks and write on it every day. Finally, one way for students to be efficient in completing the three major milestones of doctoral study (thesis, comps, and dissertation) is to see them all as connected projects building on a theme: plan backward from an end goal and set proximal goals with that end in mind.

You can't win if you don't stay in the game. Persistence and motivation can make the difference between finishing your degree or not. desJardins (1994) points out that a major pitfall here is the "shoulds." She says,

Assessing your progress on the basis of what you 'should have done' doesn't take into account your efforts, obstacles you've encountered, or your enjoyment of the process. This perspective may lead you to push yourself too hard while simultaneously limiting your self-satisfaction to those brief moments when you finish something. Doing what's possible and comfortable, as well as what feels productive, promotes happiness with the process of study itself. This intrinsic sort of motivation will keep you going in the rough times.

Remember, too, that although grades are important, they are not the primary focus of graduate school. Instead, remember to grow your strengths and competencies in the areas you aim to be involved in after graduation; to this end, and with desJardins's message above in mind, get involved in groups and projects that both support your goals and capture your interests. Finally, desJardins's 1994 article offers an excellent and sensible reminder that is well suited as a closing statement: "All work and no play" is neither expected nor healthy. ?

References

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Cecillia Shore is a professor of developmental psychology at Miami University (shorec@muohio.edu). **Zachary Birchmeier** is a senior research analyst for the Institute of Public Policy at the Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri (birchmeierz@missouri.edu). **Marie desJardins** is an associate professor in the computer science and electrical engineering department at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (mariedj@cs.umbc.edu). **Wanda Pratt** is the Graduate Program Director for Biomedical & Health Informatics and associate professor in the Information School and Biomedical & Health Informatics, School of Medicine at the University of Washington (wpratt@u.washington.edu). **Hugo Schielke** is a doctoral student specializing in clinical psychology at Miami University (schielhj@muohio.edu).