

# How to Be a Successful Graduate Student

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## Abstract

Earning a PhD is an exciting but arduous process, marked by an attrition rate of about 50%. In this context, we provide advice—10 lessons—on how students can not only survive but also thrive in graduate school. A core message is that students must understand that doctoral education is a unique social world whose main function is to prepare trained academics. Toward this end, students should not expect to be taken care of but must be the architects of their own professional development. Thus, they need to develop research skills, learn how to teach, use unstructured time productively, and act in ways that will bolster their reputation and make faculty want to collaborate with them. Students' most important challenge, however, is to become an independent scholar—to acquire the depth of expertise and genuine passion for the criminological enterprise necessary for subsequent professional accomplishment and fulfillment.

## Keywords

professional development, criminal justice education, mentoring

In a *Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens (1859/1999) opens with the memorable phrase, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (p. 1). Later in this sentence, he added, “it was a season of Light, it was a season of Darkness.” In many ways, these words capture life in a doctoral program. Reflecting back, most academics—including us—would describe graduate school as “the best days of our lives.” This time offered the experience of intellectual Light, of having the opportunity to explore new scholarly horizons intensely. It offered as well the chance to develop close

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friendships that have persisted into later adulthood—colleagues with whom amusing stories about graduate school can be shared over and over again.

But honesty would demand an addendum: They also were some of the most challenging days, when Darkness seemed to have set in and be insurmountable. In fact, at one point or another, most graduate students wonder why they have voluntarily exposed themselves to the misery they face—unending work day in and day out, always feeling behind—and contemplate quitting their PhD program. As it turns out, attrition rates for doctoral students across disciplines is about 50% (Cassuto, 2013). Not everyone emerges from the Darkness unscathed.

This essay is thus written for students either in, or who intend on entering, doctoral programs, especially those in criminology or criminal justice—our chosen field of employment and from which our experiences primarily derive. Of course, we would also hope that our insights will be of value to faculty members who might advise students as they traverse the rocky terrain of graduate study. Our goal is straightforward: We want to provide students with our best advice on how to succeed in graduate school. This essay is intended not to be a survival guide on how to hang on and earn a degree but a blueprint for maximizing students' potential and enjoyment. Again, graduate school should be the "best days of your life."

Toward this end, we offer 10 lessons that we draw from our collective experiences of being in graduate school and of teaching graduate students. All our advice, however, should be treated with an edge of skepticism, given that it is based on what Robert Merton (1972) calls the "insider knowledge." Such knowledge is insight derived from firsthand experiences from being part of a specific setting, in our case academia. Its claim to credibility—which Merton called the "Insider Doctrine" (p. 11)—is rooted in the assumption that participants who have years of rich and textured observation (of which we have loads!) have a special understanding of their social world. Their lived reality is thus used to assert a privileged knowledge that those "who have not been there" cannot access. But this approach to knowing has a fundamental flaw: Insiders may be wrong. Their advice may be based on personal experiences that do not generalize to contexts beyond their particular location, or their cognitive biases may cause them to selectively perceive, if not misinterpret, reality (see Kahneman, 2011). For those who recall the movie or book *Moneyball*, this was the criticism of baseball decisions, from player drafting to in-game strategy, that were justified by appeals to insider knowledge rooted in tradition and gut-level feelings (Lewis, 2003). By contrast, outsider knowledge is based on statistical evidence and empirical evaluation. In general, outsider knowledge (also called actuarial judgment) outperforms insider knowledge (also called clinical judgment; see Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Ayres, 2007).

So, again, we admit that our advice should not be treated as sacrosanct. Even so, the lessons we share would, we believe, make sense to many scholars who have earned doctorates and now are academics. In short, inter-rater reliability would give our wisdom some credibility. In the least, students are free to consider our 10 lessons and see if they improve their progress in graduate school.

One last point. We offer specific pieces of advice, but running through the 10 lessons is a unifying theme: To succeed in graduate school, students must have an

understanding of how graduate school differs from their years in school up to that time. Yes, some commonalities exist, including taking courses and being graded. But graduate school is a different social environment with its own implicit (some might say “hidden”) rules, stages of development, and ultimate goals (being employable with a specific set of skills). Much of the advice to follow thus is an attempt to introduce students to a world that looks familiar but operates far differently from the educational system that brought them to this point.

## **Lesson I: You Are the Architect of Your Career**

Prior to graduate school, each stage of schooling is in preparation for the next stage of schooling. The goal is to earn high grades so that admission to college and then to graduate school is possible. But being in a doctoral program is different. The next stage is not more schooling but entry into a profession, which for most students is academia. In part, then, becoming employable involves something more than sitting in a classroom chair, doing assignments, and achieving A's in one's courses. It also requires making a cognitive transformation in which students realize that the task is not simply to obey orders from faculty but also to exert human agency and become independent scholars in charge of their careers.

Most doctoral students start to earn A's in elementary school. Endowed with good brains, they had the temperament and the intelligence to sit still, pay attention, and perform well in a structured learning environment. In fact, they are wonderful data points for Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory because their high level of self-control has produced continued success for many years! This propensity will serve these students well in graduate study as well. But, as noted, something else is also needed. To be successful, it no longer is sufficient to be good, docile students who know how to do assignments. After 2 or 3 years in graduate school, students' education changes fundamentally. All coursework is completed, and students are largely on their own to study for comprehensive examinations and to initiate their dissertations. Self-control can assist in these new tasks, but only if it is married to autonomy and not dependency.

Even if they do not say so, faculty members expect graduate students to manifest autonomy. No, they do not like students to be disobedient or deviant, but they do want them to show signs of intelligent life. Put another way, a doctoral program is not a social welfare agency whose job it is to take care of its students. Rather, it is best conceived as a provider of opportunity. Some students take advantage of this opportunity; others squander it.

Of course, some doctoral programs are more supportive of students than others, and within any given program, some faculty members will be more supportive of students than others. So, the choice of which program to attend and which faculty to work with (an issue we return to later) is consequential. Regardless, it is risky to enter any doctoral program with the expectation that the faculty are waiting in their offices in hopes of serving students' every need! In fact, students who feel entitled to attention will be defined as “high maintenance”—or worse—and systematically avoided by faculty. Remember, the three letters after the faculty members' names are PhD and not MSW.

The punch line to this discussion is that students must envision themselves not as dependent wards of the department but as the *architects of their own careers*—in graduate school and beyond. To be sure, academia is a wonderful place in which to work (Cullen, 2002), and many fine people will lend students their guidance and support. But in the end—and as in life—students are on their own. Success is made, not given.

With this understanding, however, the road to success becomes more possible. Bereft of unreasonable expectations, students can avoid waiting for a CARE package that will never arrive. Instead, the task is to understand the nature of the academic world and then to take reasonable steps to maximize their positive, value-added experiences. The remainder of this essay provides guidance on what these steps up the ladder of success might entail.

## Lesson 2: Practice Cumulative Advantage

“Cumulative continuity” is a process in which people remain on a life-course trajectory because prior conduct has consequences that make changing course difficult. The image is much like a snowball rolling down a hill that, as it gains in size and speed, is increasingly impossible to stop. In life, cumulative continuity can work in either a positive or a negative direction. For example, children with calm and happy temperaments evoke consistent parenting, find success in school, easily make prosocial friends, gain entrance into college, and secure good jobs in the labor market. By contrast, children who emerge from the womb with neuropsychological deficits and difficult temperaments evoke harsh and erratic parenting, evidence conduct problems in and fail at school, experience peer rejection and self-select into antisocial peer groups, and have few rewarding job prospects (see, e.g., Moffitt, 1993). As Wright, Tibbetts, and Daigle (2008) note, “behavior is sustained by its consequences” (p. 40).

What does this discussion of cumulative continuity have to do with graduate school? Well, in many ways, a doctoral program is a mini-life course that tends to be marked by cumulative continuity. Negative continuity—called “cumulative disadvantage”—is when students “get off on the wrong foot” upon entering a program, which tends to have the effect of ensnaring them in a trajectory that leads to difficulty if not the choice to depart the program. Positive continuity—called “cumulative advantage”—is the opposite process in which students “get off on the right foot” and are rewarded with opportunities to succeed.

Now, from the first day of graduate school, students should realize that faculty expect them to display seriousness of purpose—otherwise, they will ask, “What are you doing here?” Attending graduate school is a choice, not an obligation. Thus, the faculty expect all students to show up to every class session, not to talk or text during a lecture, to have read all assigned readings and be able to discuss them, and to pass in assignments on time and appropriately completed. Faculty as well expect their graduate assistants to ask if there is work to be done (not make themselves hard to find) and to complete their duties competently. They also prefer that students have a happy countenance. They do not like students who scowl and look bored in their courses, who complain about the workload, and who make excuses for why their papers or assistantship tasks were not

finished on time. Of course, faculty look favorably upon students who earn A's. But although grades matter, they take special notice of those students who manifest a genuine passion for learning and appreciation for being in the graduate program.

None of this is rocket science. Faculty like students who are responsible, work diligently, and enjoy the learning enterprise. They avoid students who are irresponsible, lazy, and see learning as a burden. Faculty also gossip among themselves about "good" and "bad" students. Yes, stigmatizing labeling does occur, especially for students who strike several faculty as problematic. For these students, cumulative disadvantage is the likely outcome.

The key point is that students should realize that their behavior has consequences. "Good" students are potentially rewarded with assistantships, offers to join research projects, and invitations to coauthor articles. If their performance remains high, then more opportunities will be offered to them. By the time they depart their doctoral program, they will likely have acquired a supportive mentor, taught courses, been involved in research projects, and have several publications. Their career will be off to a very positive start. They will be on a trajectory of cumulative advantage—of the "rich getting richer."

One last piece of advice. As Sampson and Laub (1993) show, life courses involve not only continuity but also the possibility of change. Students on a pathway of cumulative disadvantage are not doomed to failure. Positive behavior over time can reverse a downward trajectory and enable students gradually to experience success. Indeed, as the architect of their academic lives, students can become passionate about their studies and perform at a higher level. Because behavior has consequences, faculty will take note and, over time, evaluate such students more positively.

### **Lesson 3: Make Yourself Useful (Develop Skills)**

In most doctoral cohorts, one or two students seem to be the "chosen ones"—invited by a number of faculty to work on projects and articles. Envy is an understandable feeling, including the question: Why does this student get all the attention and not me? One possible answer, which is psychologically most comforting, is that life is unfair and the celebrated student is receiving undeserved opportunities. The other answer, which is not so comforting but more often true, is that life is fair and the students in the program—chosen or otherwise—are receiving what they have earned.

Academia is certainly not a pure meritocracy, but faculty have a strong incentive to choose to work with deserving rather than undeserving students. Again, faculty are not in charge of a social welfare agency in which they seek to transform the unskilled into the skilled. Rather, when outside the classroom and administering research projects, they are essentially running a business enterprise for which many tasks must be completed. The incentive is thus to employ doctoral students who have useful talents.

So, what would make a student an attractive employee? First, there is a history of performance, including securing high grades or performing well as a graduate assistant. Second, there are personal qualities, such as being pleasant, diligent, and task-oriented. Third, there are specific skills, especially the ability to write at a high level and the ability to conduct data analyses on statistical packages.

For graduate students, the crucial question is not why another student is accruing cumulative advantage while they are not. Rather, it is as follows: Why would any faculty member want to hire you? What skills do you have to offer? Let us take something as simple as a department copy machine—something that most faculty never take the time to know how to operate fully (especially this essay’s senior author). Can a graduate student make quality copies (not with blurred copies in the margin)? Perhaps know how to copy on both sides or to staple in a particular corner of a landscaped page? Or know how clear up a paper jam? And when seeing a distressed professor flummoxed by the inability to make a copy machine work properly, does the student volunteer to help or scurry away? Something as simple as lending a moment’s assistance might catch a faculty member’s eye and be reciprocated with subsequent attention.

Of course, other skills matter more, such as knowing how to conduct library searches for materials and how to use Blackboard for courses. And most important, students who not only are “good” in statistics but also have learned about SPSS and similar packages are valuable—as are students who know how to download secondary data sets and to get them up and running. None of these skills is beyond the ability of most doctoral students, especially because evidence indicates that complex skills can be acquired by a people of diverse innate talents. But doing so does take effort, including the willingness to engage in what has been called “deliberate practice” (see, e.g., Colvin, 2008; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

Thus, the important insight for students is realizing that these sorts of skills must be learned. It may be necessary to sit down with an SPSS manual and practice data analysis—a process that might be enhanced by attending a seminar on this statistical package. It may be necessary to ask a senior doctoral student to help one learn how to download secondary data sets. Instead of playing video games, a student might even experiment with analyzing the NYS or the NLSY—and know what these acronyms stand for! And so on. These skills are not generally taught, or taught well, in courses. They are “extras” that students must acquire on their own. But they are the very kind of skills that make students useful to faculty members.

## **Lesson 4: Become a Hedgehog With Fox Tendencies**

In his famous essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, Isaiah Berlin (1953) begins by citing a quote from the Greek poet Archilochus, “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing” (p. 1). Berlin suggests that scholarly styles may be roughly placed into one of these two categories. For our purposes, we would see the hedgehog as a scholar who burrows into and thus knows in much detail one research topic (e.g., drug courts) or, across a career, one area (corrections). This person would be the consummate specialist who “knows everything” about a limited sphere of the discipline. In contrast, a fox would be a scholar with diverse interests who spends some time on an issue before racing off to a different area of knowledge. This scholar knows nothing completely but has the breadth of expertise to draw insights that the narrow specialist might never see. Both scholarly styles have merit.

Much graduate education provides breadth rather than depth of knowledge. For example, students taking a course on criminological theory might spend a week on Robert Agnew's (2006) general strain theory (GST), before moving on to cover a number of other theoretical perspectives. But this single week's study is not the same as burrowing deeply into the GST literature, reading everything Agnew has written on his theory and every empirical test of GST published to date. Greater depth of knowledge might be acquired later on when studying for comprehensive examinations and, in particular, when undertaking a dissertation. But many students still enter the job market feeling a bit like a "fraud"—as though they do not really know anything. This feeling is due in part to the understandable sense of insecurity newcomers experience when entering the faculty role. Alas, it also is an empirically accurate appraisal of their level of knowledge. Most graduate students really do not know that much.

To rectify this situation, we recommend that students consider becoming a hedgehog, at least on a temporary basis. What is it that is of special interest and about which a student wishes to be a true expert? The reality is that in many areas of criminology and criminal justice, the extant literature is not extensive. There are exceptions (e.g., social bond theory with more than 200 studies), but most theories and interventions (e.g., drug courts, boot camps) have likely been subjected to no more than 50 tests that have appeared in print. Perhaps there are another 50 or so articles written about the topic—essays of general interest. If so, how long does it take to read 100 works in detail (i.e., taking notes on findings)? Even if a student reads one article a day, the literature could be mastered in less than 4 months. And at the end of this period, the student would be among the most knowledgeable "hedgehogs" on that topic in the world!

Developing expertise is thus not a chance occurrence but rather the product of concentrated study, systematic analysis, and the synthesis of knowledge. It also helps to take the fruits of one's labors and to write up the results for presentation at a conference and/or for journal review (e.g., "The Empirical Status of General Strain Theory"). Articles that organize knowledge, especially when using meta-analysis, are often highly cited (see, e.g., Pratt & Cullen, 2000, 2005).

Across a career, there might well be many opportunities to be a hedgehog and know specific topical areas in great depth. But whether in graduate school or beyond, it also is wise to be culturally literate in one's discipline. In particular, when important books in criminology/criminal justice or the social sciences are published, they should be read and incorporated into one's library. In short, our advice is to be a hedgehog but to do so with fox tendencies.

## **Lesson 5: Prepare for Your Comps From Day 1**

After 2 or at the most 3 years, doctoral students will have completed all of their coursework. Many rejoice at the reality that, never again, will they be required to take another course. But there is a danger in this new-found freedom—that it will be squandered. Until this time in their academic lives, students have been told what to do and when to do it by. Now, however, it is up to them to structure their time so as to study effectively

for a comprehensive examination and then take the test on schedule (rather than postpone it to a later date). This schedule will include concentrated study of 4 to 5 hours a day for 4 to 5 months. Notably, students will face the same challenge at the dissertation stage—structuring their time productively. It is one reason why most students take far longer to finish their comprehensive examinations and dissertations than they ever anticipated. They are not skilled at self-directed, extended academic work.

Comprehensive exams, however, should not be seen as something to be “thought about” only after finishing one’s coursework. In most departments, reading lists and copies of past examinations are available at the time students enter the PhD program (even if these materials are revised a bit over time). Certain courses, moreover, are connected to and thus prepare students for their comprehensives. Students who are the architect of their own careers will realize these realities and start to prepare for the exams from “Day 1” of their program of study. They will secure reading lists, obtain materials, and use free time (especially summers) to start their preparation. When in comp-related courses, they will see the course readings as pertaining not simply to the assignments for that semester but as materials to be mastered for their comprehensive examination.

We want to warn that preparing for a comprehensive examination requires a different learning style and agenda. Throughout their years of schooling, students receive assignments, study diligently, take exams, and then are free to forget what they have learned. Beyond a mid-term exam or perhaps a comprehensive final exam, there is no later accountability once the semester ends. Many courses can be completed and, still, little can be learned. Take, for example, language classes. It is possible to have several years of French, earn A’s, and never be able to speak the language. This linguistic incompetence occurs because the students’ goal in such instances is to do well on tests—and not to speak French!

The best way to learn a language, we are told, is not to sit in courses but to become immersed in a nation’s culture—preferably by residing in the country. We suggest that students follow a similar approach to learning the knowledge that will allow them to excel on their comprehensive examinations: They must become immersed in their program’s “criminological culture” from Day 1! Although practicalities demand focusing on course assignments semester by semester, the meta-purpose of their studies should be becoming *fluent in criminology/criminal justice*.

We want to emphasize that simply completing all the entries on a comprehensive exam reading list is not all that we have in mind. Again, much can be read and little retained. Rather, the reading list is only valuable if it is a conduit for enhancing the fluency in the language of criminology/criminal justice that a student has already begun to develop. Let us again take the example of Agnew’s GST. Reading Agnew’s writings as well as the existing empirical evaluations of GST is critically important. But, in the end, do students “know” the theory—are they fluent in GST? The litmus test is this: If asked, could these students stand up and deliver a systematic lecture on GST (or some other subject) “off the top of their head”? On the day they sit for their comprehensive examination, they would be advised to be able to answer this question in the affirmative.



## Lesson 6: Learn How to Teach

Ironically, the PhD prepares students to conduct research, even though most faculty members spend most of their careers teaching and not doing scholarly work. Some doctoral programs offer a teaching practicum, but most students learn how to teach on their own—sort of by trial and error. Our advice is to start this learning process while in graduate school. We have three suggestions.

First, and most obvious, if offered the opportunity to teach courses, students should say “yes.” Teaching experience can enhance an applicant’s attractiveness on the job market. The only caveat is that students should not teach courses, even if the pay is lucrative, if doing so will interfere with their preparation for comprehensive examinations or their dissertation progress. Students’ first obligation is to move through their program of study steadily and not to delay any stage of that process.

Second, most universities offer teaching workshops and even certificates. If so, students should consider taking advantage of these options so as to increase their expertise and their pedagogical credentials. If the teaching enterprise is a student’s first love, then also take time to become an expert on college-student teaching. Become a “teaching hedgehog”: Delve into the research on student learning and effective instructional methods.

Third, think about teaching; become immersed in this enterprise from Day 1 of one’s graduate program. Students’ professors can serve as valuable role models—as offering examples of effective ways to write a syllabus, organize course content, and present information. It is also useful for students to make a list of all the things that professors do (or have done) that “piss them off.” Then, do not do these things when the time comes to teach your own courses!

## Lesson 7: Become a Scholar

Williams (2013) has likened student learning to bulimia, in which information is fed to students by teachers and then vomited back up with no enduring intellectual nourishment. This metaphor might strike some as a touch too graphic and hyperbolic, but the point is nonetheless poignant: Much learning is rote, done to earn high grades, soon forgotten, and adds little value to students’ scholarly development.

To an extent, this occurs because it is difficult for faculty to communicate knowledge to a classroom filled with lots of students without using a lecture format. Similarly, the structure of the college course means that knowledge is assessed only for the short period covered by the course. But here again is where students must be the architect of their own careers. It is not the job of professors to ensure that graduate students *learn to know* rather learn to regurgitate enough information to get A’s. At some point, PhD students must realize that they are learning for their own benefit and not for the benefit of professors. If not, then it is their career—not that of their professor—that is compromised.

As noted, graduate school is thus about making a transition from a student in search of A’s to a scholar preparing for an academic career. There are three steps in this

process, which may occur sequentially but can overlap during one's graduate school tenure. First, students should join the discipline's major professional organizations—the American Society of Criminology and the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. A major benefit of these organizations is that their core mission is the production and dissemination of research knowledge. This occurs through their journals (e.g., *Criminology*, *Justice Quarterly*) and annual conferences. Students should begin to read the journals and, when feasible, attend and participate in these conferences.

Second, students must become skilled consumers of research knowledge. The purpose of courses in statistics and methods is not to inflict anxiety and pain but rather to equip students with the skills needed to separate information that should be believed (produced according to scientific standards) and that should be rejected (flawed claims based on shoddy methods). A common saying is that there are “lies, damn lies, and statistics.” But this message actually is faulty. It should read that there are “lies, damn lies—and only those who know statistics and methods can tell the difference!”

Third, the hallmark of a doctoral program is training students not just to consume knowledge but also to independently produce knowledge. Indeed, PhD programs end with the writing of a dissertation in which students must demonstrate the ability to advance knowledge. But along the way to the dissertation, students should take advantage of opportunities to write and submit articles to journals. Course papers might be written for publication. It also might be possible to collaborate on projects with fellow students or with faculty members. Being a published author certainly enhances a student's job prospects.

Much more could be said about how to develop the skills to publish research articles, but this is beyond the scope of our essay. Still, we would like to share a final consideration. Some graduate students will embark on a career in which they publish tens of peer-reviewed articles, whereas others will pursue a career more oriented toward classroom teaching. Both paths have merit (though those who publish tend to have better working conditions and earn more pay). Regardless, the challenge for all academics is to have all aspects of their work reflect scholarly integrity. For the publishers, this means ensuring that they are equally committed to teaching and bring the best of their scholarship into the classroom (Robert Merton told the senior author of this article that he viewed his teaching as “oral publication”!). For the teachers, this means ensuring that they do not simply base courses on textbooks and use the ancillaries that publishers create (i.e., power-point lectures, test banks). They also need to remain scholars—to read widely and continually to deepen their knowledge. What should bind all members of the discipline together is a sense of a calling to be scholars who find various ways—whether teaching, research, or service—to disseminate their knowledge.

## **Lesson 8: Mate (Not Literally) With Your Advisor**

If students are fortunate, they will link up with a faculty member who will not only supervise their dissertation but also mentor them during graduate school and then into the initial stages of their career. To be sure, all doctoral students who arrive at the

program's end will be assigned an advisor. Disreputable students will have faculty who work them on a pro bono basis—out of the goodness of their heart or because it is their turn to take on a problem case. But students' goal should be to secure an advisor who wants to guide them and to care about their long-term well-being. How can such a wonderful mentor be secured?

Hooking up with a good advisor is similar to any other mating process. It is not enough to want to work with a faculty member; this scholar must also want to work with you. There must be a mutual attraction to have a fruitful advisor–advisee relationship. Sometimes, this connection unfolds naturally, such as when a student is assigned as a professor's graduate assistant and has sufficient contact to build a relationship. Other times, students work on a research project and then are allowed by a professor to use the data for a dissertation—an offer that usually is accompanied by the faculty member's willingness to advise this research. But if propinquity is not an option, how might a student worm their way into a professor's life?

Although exceptions exist, one prerequisite is that the student be in the professor's area (e.g., corrections, policing, theory). Faculty feel some obligation to supervise students who share their realm of expertise—if for no other reason than that they do not want to be stuck advising other students whose interests lie outside theirs! But something else is involved: They want to see that their investment of time and energy will be appreciated and be rewarded with a high-quality dissertation. Indeed, in most departments, faculty advise dissertations for free. They do not receive extra pay or release time. The main payoff is in seeing their mentorship make a difference in a student's academic development—of helping an advisee mature as a scholar and person. Such doctoral students become, in essence, their academic children. And, as might be imagined, they want children about whom they can be proud parents—showing them off to others in the field!

Understandably, faculty are attracted to a program's “best” students—those with high GRE scores, who have earned all A's, and who have demonstrable skills (e.g., SPSS). But two other factors increase a student's attractiveness. The first consideration is passion. Thus, is the student “going through the motions” or truly committed to the research enterprise? Does the student love the subject matter so as to be highly motivated to learn more? The second factor is work ethic. Faculty simply avoid students, even those they might like personally, who whine and always seem to have an excuse for why a task is not done on time. They invest in students who manifest a seriousness of purpose and who strive diligently to complete their tasks in a timely and thorough way.

But mating is a two-way process. Admittedly, for some students, finding any advisor seems better than having no advisor. Still, being stuck with an incompetent or difficult mentor can create a purgatory from which escape is not feasible—especially if a dissertation is well under way. So, although choices may be limited, it is unwise to jump into an advising relationship without a good sense of what the faculty member will be like. One option is to rely on one's own observations; another option is to investigate potential advisors by asking trusted older students for a scouting report. Thus, does the faculty member have a track record for moving students through

dissertations at a reasonable pace? When chapters are submitted, does the faculty member read them quickly or only after a month or two? Does the faculty member offer to collaborate with the advisee on articles drawn from the dissertation and is this desired? Similar to any other relationship, love at first sight is not enough; make sure that you are mating with a professor who is a decent person.

## Lesson 9: Work on Your Dissertation

A graduate career is divided into three stages: coursework, comprehensive examinations, and doctoral dissertation. After completing the first two stages, students claim the status of “ABD”—All But Dissertation. This achievement is monumental because it means that the finish line to their degree is within sight. Truth be told, nearly all students who become ABDs earn their degree. Still, most students struggle to complete their dissertation and, in doing so, take far longer than they ever imagined. Those who start academic jobs without their PhD in hand are in for a particularly unpleasant first year as a professor. They will be greeted daily by colleagues with the question: “Are you done yet?” Or, “When are you defending your dissertation?” Overwhelmed with the demands of preparing and teaching a full load of courses—and with all the other duties of academic life—they will cringe, feel guilty, and wish that they had followed their mentor’s advice to “finish your dissertation before taking a job.”

The main reason why students do not finish their dissertation is that *they do not work on it*. Huh? Really? The answer is that this claim is absolutely true. After completing comprehensive examinations, many students experience emotional relief and delay the start of their dissertation research. They also are faced with the necessity of supporting themselves. They work on assistantships and funded research projects; many teach extra courses to make money. They must also initiate the process of applying to academic positions (that will start the following Fall). If fortunate, their lives will be interrupted by travel to job interviews and, in the summer, by a move to a new location. Tired of working nights and evenings, many students also believe that, in the post-comprehensive examination period, it is finally time to live a normal life, especially if their spouse and family expect them to do so. Furthermore, they fool themselves into believing that they can work on their dissertations once they have finished their daily tasks. Truth be told, such tasks tend to be endless and, like a black hole, can expand to take up all of one’s time each day. Evening arrives and the dissertation has gathered more dust. Alas, there is never a good time to work on a dissertation. As a result, many students simply do not do so—at least not until some sense of acute panic sets in!

Here is way to determine if a dissertation will be completed. Create a work log for a week. For each day, record the number of hours spent on the dissertation. It should say at least 5 hours a day and 30 hours a week (take 1 day off). If the computation is not 30 but “0,” the dissertation will not be finished up any time soon!

One other factor thwarts progress on the dissertation: The enormity of the project causes students to feel overwhelmed. With so much to do on this project, they do not know where to start—so they avoid starting at all. We can share one comforting thought: This is a common experience, and thus those anxious about the task they are

facing should realize that they are normal, not pathological! In the end, necessity (the project must get done) and misery (an unfinished dissertation is a source of pain) leads most students to find a way to complete their dissertation research. Still, we can offer three pieces of advice on how to move forward more rapidly and with a sense of self-efficacy.

First, make a detailed outline of each chapter, including headings and subheadings. This outline might be revised as the writing moves forward, but it should be comprehensive enough from the start to provide a clear road map through the dissertation.

Second and most important, *divide and conquer*. Do not see the dissertation as a single huge document to be written holistically. Rather, as just suggested, use a detailed outline to divide up the whole of the dissertation into its component parts. Then, envision each section as a short article to be written—as a series of 5-page to 10-page articles. Such articles can be researched and written in 1 to 2 weeks. When working on one section or subsection, do not worry about what is to come. Finish the current part and then move on to the next. Finish that part and then do the next. And so on and so on. Eventually, the pages will mount up and the dissertation will seem quite doable.

Third, purchase a smallish binder and a ream of three-hole paper. After writing one section of the outline, print it out on the three-hole paper and place it into the binder. At first, the pages will seem skimpy, but in time the thickness of the dissertation materials in the binder will grow and grow as section after section is completed. This binder will thus be a concrete reminder of the progress that is being made. It also is a document that can be reviewed and edited in one's spare time, perhaps while sitting in bed or while watching a television show.

Our advice is that completing a dissertation requires placing one's rump in a chair in front of one's dissertation (and computer screen) every day for a certain number of hours. Still, such work should be undertaken strategically so that the task at hand becomes manageable and progress is certain to occur. Dividing and conquering is one such strategy that we have seen work with a number of students. It is worth a try.

## **Lesson 10: Always Have a Plan**

Graduate school is not a place where students can just bob along like a bottle in a river and hope that the current somehow carries them to the end. Indeed, this is a grown-up world in which students are expected to take control of their destiny (the architect thing again!) and act in mature, responsible ways. Underlying this general admonition is the advice to approach each stage of a doctoral program with a plan. Thus, students should know what their degree requirements are, when courses will be offered (just ask the graduate director), and how to sequence their classes so as to finish expeditiously. They should know when comprehensive examinations are given and then design a study plan to ensure that they are adequately prepared. And in the dissertation, we have given the components of a good plan: outline, divide and conquer, and establish a systematic work schedule.

But there is one other plan that students should devise: A transitional plan that they can follow as they prepare to leave graduate school and enter academia (or some other

position). Students simply cannot imagine how inundated they will feel in their first year or two as a professor. When in graduate school, they tend to witness faculty lounging in their offices or standing in the corridor chatting while drinking coffee. In reality, most professors face work overload and a constant conspiracy by others to rob them of every ounce of their free time. Or so it seems! When doctoral students arrive on their first faculty job, they will see the reality of this portrayal. It is instructive that as newly minted professors, they will receive a “teaching schedule” but not a “research schedule.” They will soon discover that free time for research is in short supply.

To initiate a productive research schedule, students thus must start to plan, *while in the final stage of their graduate career*, what they intend to publish in their first 2 years as a professor. Ideally, they should have a schedule that includes authoring at least two articles each year. A good idea is to present one paper at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology (usually in November) and a second one at the annual meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (usually in March). If written as final drafts, these two articles can be submitted for review. Of course, this research plan should include works from the students’ dissertation research that might well involve collaboration with their advisor. But other projects can be under way—whether single authored, with faculty, or with fellow graduate students.

This research plan is not meant to be etched in stone. Once in a new academic environment, other research ideas and opportunities are likely to arise and be worth pursuing. When this occurs, the research plan should be revised accordingly. Importantly, under no circumstance should this document be filed away and ignored. Especially in the pre-tenure years, having a plan that is followed systematically is essential. Those bereft of such a road map are likely to conclude their first year or two as a professor wondering where the time went and how they have submitted nothing for journal review. Nobody wants to find themselves in that unfortunate situation—but many do.

## Conclusion

When the PhD is completed, students are expected to be able, by themselves, to produce research articles, to teach courses, and to organize their academic lives appropriately. In essence, schooling has ended and a professional life has begun. It is important for students to remember that upon taking their new position, *nobody will really mentor or care about them*. Those wishing to be mentored should stay in graduate school.

We are being realistic, not harsh. Most faculty will greet newcomers warmly and offer to help in “any way they can”; they do not really mean this. These faculty, many of whom are 10 or 20 (or more) years older, will make a socially acceptable promise of assistance, and then will turn around, return to their daily routines, and become preoccupied with all the personal and professional exigencies that drain them of their time. They will not see it as their obligation to invite newcomers to lunch or dinner more than once or twice—if at all—and they will not believe it is their job to publish with them (unless newcomers have data or skills that they might need) or to help them

to earn tenure. If they have worked at the university for a while, they have seen many faculty, just like the present newcomer, come and go. They are unlikely to invest in someone who is unlikely to stay around for long. Furthermore, if some faculty members drop by a newcomer's office a great deal, it is wise to be a touch wary. They may offer good advice, but they also might be faculty who, because they are unproductive, have too much time on their hands and whose suggestions should be ignored. When such advice is given, just smile a lot.

This need to have the ability to perform the faculty role effectively is precisely why it is so important for students not to squander their graduate student experience. In many ways, academia is a craft for which graduate school offers an invaluable apprenticeship. Yes, the primary goal is to earn a PhD—the union card required to work in a university. But the broader goal is to become an independent scholar who has acquired the training to excel in a new job right off the bat. Alas, cumulative advantage is essential to success not only in graduate school but also in one's career!

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