Chapter 1: Succeeding in Graduate School

Taking courses, conducting scholarly research, and teaching for the first time—the life of a graduate student is often defined by these diverse and demanding duties. These activities can easily consume all of graduate students’ time, and cause them to neglect other activities critical to their professional development. Alongside your coursework, research, and teaching duties, you should take steps to become part of a research community. Whether by attending or giving papers at professional conferences, serving on departmental and university committees, or preparing works for publication, it means entering the discourse of your profession.

This chapter outlines the process of professional development in academia. Along with your advisor, teachers, and other graduate students, it will help you create an action plan for becoming a colleague, not just a student, in your field of study.

The chapter begins by explaining how graduate students become acculturated to their research communities through professional associations, networking, and conferences. It then focuses on your key relationship in graduate school: the one you have with your advisor. This is followed by sections on teaching, funding sources, and writing dissertations. We conclude with some time management strategies and a list of web and print resources that can help you navigate your graduate school years in a healthy way.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR DISCIPLINE

As a graduate student, you must familiarize yourself with current scholarship and debates in your field, interdisciplinary developments, and job market trends. Obviously, the coursework you complete during your first years of graduate school is the starting point for learning the debates, methodologies, and history of your discipline. Beyond this, you need to look outward to the professional activities that define your field worldwide.

• Professional Publications: Your professors and other graduate students can tell you about the major journals in your discipline. Read these publications, not cover to cover, but selectively, to pick up on key debates shaping your field. Check out the major journals in your discipline to learn how scholars converse with each other and what published research looks like in your discipline. Identify your discipline’s sub-fields and consider which field appeals most to you and why.

• Professional Associations: Your discipline’s professional associations and organizations will help you stay current with developments in your field. Many of these organizations’ websites feature conference announcements, calls for papers, and job listings. Some even offer career resources, including articles on building an academic career in the discipline and going on the job market. Ask other graduate students which organizations they belong to, and find out from your advisors which professional associations and organizations you should join.

• Networking: In all careers, people develop groups of contacts with whom they share information and resources in ways that are mutually productive. Such networks don’t just happen; they are built through extended effort. Graduate students need to make a conscious effort to communicate with other scholars at conferences and over email. Doing so is a good way to begin to participate in your discipline’s discourse and to build professional connections that can last for decades.
The rules of networking vary across the professions, so it’s a good idea to familiarize yourself with the norms in academia. Phil Agre’s “A Guide to Professional Skills for PhD Students” includes a useful chapter on networking. You can download the entire guide at http://vlsicad.ucsd.edu/Research/Advice/network.html. Marie desJardins has advice about exactly how to network at http://www.cs.indiana.edu/how.2b/how.2b.html.

**CONFERENCES**

Attending conferences allows you to become actively involved in your discipline’s debates and to build relationships with other scholars. Whether you are presenting a poster or paper, or simply attending a conference, taking these actions will help you become part of your field’s network.

**Before the Conference**

- Reserve a room in the main conference hotel whenever possible.
- E-mail scholars you know you want to meet. Ask them about a recent publication or their interest in your current research. Sometimes they'll ask to meet you at the conference.
- Prepare a question for someone important who will attend the conference.
- Stay in the main conference hotel whenever possible.

**During the Conference**

- Take the initiative and introduce yourself. Be a good host; introduce others around you.
- Be socially generous. Invite others along, introduce them to colleagues, connect them to someone with common interests.
- Remember, young scholars are important to a conference. They bring cutting-edge research to the field.
- Accept any invitation to eat with a group, especially gatherings of "more important people."

**After the Conference**

- Email new acquaintances to let them know you enjoyed chatting with them.
- Send emails to possible contacts for publications or panel presentations.
- If you were part of a panel presentation, email thanks to panel participants.

**Tips on Conference Papers and Presentations**

Presenting your work publicly generates useful feedback from both young and well-established scholars in your field. Giving conference papers and serving on panels are also good practice for academic job talks and the professional responsibilities of an academic scholar.

The nature of academic conferences varies greatly, from smaller graduate student conferences, organized and run entirely by graduate students, to major professional conferences consisting of several days of simultaneous panels. Be sure to think about the kind of venue at which you want to present your work. If it's a rough draft, you may wish to present at a graduate student conference or at a smaller regional conference, before polishing the talk for a major conference.
The kinds of presentations you may make at an academic conference also differ. You may give a short 15-minute paper as part of a three- or four-person panel with a moderator. You may be asked to give a longer talk. Or, as is common in the Sciences, you make be asked to submit a "poster." Look at conference call for papers carefully to determine what kind of presentation you'll be asked to make, since the nature of the presentation will determine the parameters of your talk.

- **Learn by observation:** Attend other people’s talks, and take note of qualities of talks that you like, as well as things that bother you. Model yourself after someone whose style of presentation you admire.

- **Know your audience:** You'll have to give more background to a general audience, and more technical detail to audiences familiar with the field of research you're discussing.

- **Practice your talk:** Give a practice talk to an invited group of people who will give you constructive feedback. Ask them to identify what works well and to help you identify any verbal tics or body gestures that get in the way of your message.

- **Make visuals readable and relevant:** Most people put too much information on their powerpoint slides. The other common mistake presenters make is to read their slides. Your audience can read; if you use visuals, they should point to key ideas that you elaborate on in your talk. If your presentation includes powerpoint or slides, allocate 2-3 minutes per screenshot or slide.

- **Fit your talk to the allocated time:** It’s rude to go over your time limit, and rushing through the end of your presentation is ineffective.

- **Try to relax:** Don’t read from a script, and don’t talk too fast. Be confident: you know more about your work (flaws and all) than anyone else.

**Online Resources: Conference Presentations**

- Advice on giving different kinds of academic presentations, from a conference paper, to a poster, to acting as a discussant on a panel can be found at: [www.cgu.edu/pages/861.asp](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/861.asp)

**Tips on Preparing Posters (adapted from Sven Hammarling and Nicholas J. Higham)**

- A poster board is typically 4 feet high and 6 feet wide, but the reverse orientation (tall and thin) is also seen. Double-check beforehand on the size of the boards that will be available to you.
- In preparing a poster, simplicity is key. A typical reader spends only a few minutes looking at a poster, so minimize clutter. Use attractive graphics to call attention to pithy, informative statements.
- Sentence fragments may be easier to comprehend than complete sentences. Bulleted lists are effective. Consider breaking text into chunks.
- Prepare drafts in advance and ask others to provide feedback on how easy it is to read and understand.
- If the work presented in the poster has been described in more detail in a paper, make a handout that summarizes your work and includes the URL from which it may be downloaded.

**Discipline-Specific Advice on Poster Presentations**

- Association for Computing Machinery [http://xrds.acm.org/article.cfm?aid=332138](http://xrds.acm.org/article.cfm?aid=332138)
MENTORING AND ADVISING

A good advisor can make all the difference in the quality of your graduate school experience. A respected, capable advisor can help you navigate qualifying exams and produce a quality dissertation on time. Your advisor will not only train you in the arts of your discipline, he or she will also provide career guidance and write letters of recommendation for you as you’re finishing your degree. Your advisor, in other words, is not just a person to fill out forms and serve on committees; he or she needs to be a mentor.

Graduate student advisors vary in style and substance, so it’s important to do some initial investigation before choosing one. Some advisors prefer to act as strong shapers of their students, asking for routine meetings and research updates. Others expect their graduate students to assume responsibility for directing their own course of study and research. The key to choosing the right advisor is knowing what kind of student you are and what kind of advising you need to reach your goals. Consider the questions below as you make your choice.

Advisors’ Scholarship

- What are their research interests? How do these interests relate to yours?
- What is their research methodology? How does it relate to your preferred methodology? How does it relate to methodologies you wish to acquire?
- What current research are they pursuing? If the research involves lab work, how much time do they spend "at the bench"? How much time do they invest in administering the laboratory?
- What is their scholarly reputation? Are they actively involved in scholarly networks?
- What responsibilities besides research do they have? Do they have time to mentor you?

Advising Style

- Talk to the faculty members’ current advisees. What is their advising style? Do they supervise students closely, or adopt a more "hands-off" approach to mentoring?
- ‘Do their advisees tend to write dissertations closely related to the advisor's research interests? Is this the kind of project you want to do?
- How quickly do their students progress toward their degrees and research goals?
- What are their former students doing now? What is their record for placing students in academic employment? non-academic employment?

Online Resources: Selecting Your Advisor

- Suggestions for choosing a dissertation advisor: www.pitt.edu/~graduate/advisor.html
- Choosing an advisor in the laboratory sciences: www.psywww.com/tipsheet/insider.htm
- Choosing the Right Research Advisor: http://chronicle.com/article/Choosing-The-Right-Research/46388/
Online Resources: Selecting Dissertation Committee Members

• Choosing dissertation committee members: www.h-net.org/~grad/fyi/choose.html
• Avoid Graduate School Hell: Select your advisor and committee wisely: http://www.experience.com/entry-level-jobs/avoid-graduate-school-hell-select-your-advisor-and-committee-wisely/
• Getting the most out of your committee: www.rackham.umich.edu/downloads/publications/mentoring.pdf

FUNDING

Most students need funding to conduct dissertation research and to finish their degree programs. Brown’s Graduate School offers guaranteed funding for a designated number of years to all doctoral students. Many graduate students pursue outside fellowships and research grants as well, for various reasons: to complete longer research projects, to conduct research in a foreign country, or to demonstrate their ability to secure funding from external sources. Be sure to familiarize yourself with Brown University’s incentive policy which rewards those who win external awards. The policy is described in detail at: http://brown.edu/gradschool/financing-support/phd-funding/external-funding/incentives-policy

The resources listed below are far from exhaustive, but they offer a place to start looking for funding for research projects. Many organizations that offer grants and research funding also contain guidelines for writing proposals for their particular awards.

Brown University Funding Resources

• The Office of Sponsored Projects at Brown University (OSP)
  Their website (http://research.brown.edu/rschadmin/osp.php) maintains a listing of funding resources and upcoming deadlines. Students can also search the Sponsored Programs Information Network (SPIN), GrantsNet, and Grant Advisor through the ORA web page.
• The Graduate School at Brown
  Provides tutorials on applying for funding and extensive lists and databases for discipline-specific funding sources. From the Graduate School homepage, under "Financing and Support" click on "PhD Funding," and then “External Funding,” or follow this link: http://www.brown.edu/gradschool/financing-support/phd-funding/external-funding

Online Resources: Funding for Humanities and Social Sciences

• H-Net’s lists funding opportunity’s in the Humanities & Social Sciences at: http://www.h-net.org/announce/group.cgi?type=Funding

Online Resources: Funding for the Sciences
Online Resources: General Funding

- Database of funding opportunities for biomedical research and science education
  http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/funding
- Southwestern Medical Center list of grants
  http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/graduateschool/financialsupportadditional.html
- The NSF website has a list of funding opportunities and a guide to writing grant proposals at:
  http://www.nsf.gov/funding/index.jsp
- The Community of Science (CoS) Funding opportunities is a frequently updated database of
  announcements for funding opportunities, including grants, fellowships, and awards from governmental
  agencies, private foundations, and international sources: http://fundingopps.cos.com/.

Online Resources: General Funding

- Michigan State University’s library website provides links to funding sources and allows you to search the
  database by level of study (doctoral, postdoctoral, etc.) or field of study:
  http://staff.lib.msu.edu/harris23/grants/3subject.htm
- A list of targeted funding announcements is at http://rac.berkeley.edu/ra/announce.html.

**TEACHING**

Becoming an academic involves more than conducting research and writing articles. It also entails learning to
teach. Standing in front of a classroom full of eager Brown undergraduates, you will quickly realize that
teaching can be an exciting and challenging experience.

Questions about pedagogy, potential course designs, and syllabi form crucial terrain of the academic job
interview, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. You can enhance your standing as a job candidate
if you can talk about your pedagogical choices and your achievements in the classroom. This is particularly true
for positions at smaller liberal arts colleges, which often involve heavier teaching loads.

Brown’s Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning supports all teachers at Brown who aspire to teach
effectively: http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Sheridan_Center/. The Sheridan Center offers certificate
programs as well as workshops and individual consultation on all aspects of teaching.

Certificate Programs

- **Sheridan Teaching Seminar**: Certificate I Program – a year-long series of seminars and workshops
  on basic pedagogical issues and practices.
- **Classroom Tools Seminar**: Certificate II Program – a year-long multi-session seminar exploring
  advanced pedagogical tools for reaching the broadest possible learning population.
- **Professional Development Seminar for Advanced Graduate Students**: Certificate III Program
  – a year-long multi-session seminar focused on key elements of preparing a Teaching Portfolio and other
  critical aspects of professional development that help prepare participants for the academic job market.

Workshops, Individual Consultation, and Resources
• Seminars including the Brown-Wheaton Teaching Laboratory in the Liberal Arts, teaching in Summer Studies, and creating and grading meaningful writing assignments across the disciplines.
• Individual consultation on course design, syllabi development, and teaching
• Pedagogical Resources including electronic pedagogical workshops on syllabus construction and cognitive diversity, teaching handbooks.

Online Resources: Teaching
• Richard Reis surveys teaching opportunities available to graduate students at http://chronicle.com/article/How-To-Get-All-Important-Te/46358/
• Tips on being a TA from the perspective of a math student: http://mathgradblog.williams.edu/?p=22

**Writing a Dissertation or Thesis**

Conventions for writing a dissertation differ dramatically from field to field, but they share one common feature: the process is a daunting one. For humanities and social science dissertators, the dissertation is probably the most comprehensive and lengthy scholarly project you’ve yet to complete. In the sciences, the writing process might take place over a few months and entail a collection of shorter papers. Talk to people in your field early on to get a sense of the process in your particular field.

Going through the sometimes lengthy and often isolating process of writing a dissertation can be made easier by communicating clearly and frequently with your principle dissertation advisor and with other members of your dissertation committee. The particulars of your dissertation – its methodology, argumentation, and contribution to your discipline – should be worked out in close consultation with the members of your dissertation committee.

The resources listed below also offer advice on how to weather the process of writing a dissertation: from handling committee members, to devising a schedule and sticking to it, and finishing the project.

**Brown University Dissertation Resources**

• **Dissertation Discussion Group**: A monthly meeting sponsored by the Office of Student Life. All levels of dissertation writing and all fields are welcome. Meet other graduate students in the throes of writing, get some helpful advice, exchange procrastination techniques (always good for a laugh), and learn how to avoid writer's block! Contact Dean Maria Suarez at Maria_Suarez@brown.edu.


**Online Resources: Dissertation**

• Richard M. Reis offers sound advice on how to pick a research problem that can be parlayed into a meaningful thesis at http://chronicle.com/article/Choosing-a-Research-Topic/45641/.
Print Resources: Dissertation

- *Write your Dissertation in 15 Minutes a Day* by Joan Bolker (H. Holt, 1998.)

**TIME MANAGEMENT**

How can graduate students stay sane when they're overloaded with courses, research, teaching, and a life? Effective time management can make the difference between a job well done and a job done half-way or not at all. This section explains how to set priorities, time limits, and other boundaries around your work. By implementing some of these tips, you will increase control, reduce stress, and accomplish more every day.

- **Use a calendar:** It’s critical to keep a calendar if you want to stick to your schedule. Whether you’re using a paper calendar, your smart phone, or the calendar linked with your Brown email, color coding helps you to keep track of different obligations and to deal with time conflicts when they arise (e.g. red for their own course activities, green for teaching assistant tasks, and blue for personal appointments).

- **Go with your flow:** Think about your biological peaks and lows. Are you a morning person? Do you work best at night? Plan your day accordingly. Save your most difficult work for the times when you’re at your best. Identify the length of time you can typically maintain optimal concentration—say, 3 hours—and schedule your tasks as sessions instead of number of hours.

- **Break large assignments and tasks into their component parts:** Any project becomes more manageable when broken down into its constituent parts. If you’re writing a paper, for example, devote clearly defined segments of time to each of these activities: finding a topic, conducting literature searches, gathering articles and books, reading and taking notes, writing an outline, writing the first draft, and revising. Set realistic deadlines for each stage of completing a major assignment (e.g., an article).

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- **Schedule time to organize and evaluate your time management plan:** Designate a day and time each week to review your calendar. Sunday afternoon is often a good time to do this. Note upcoming assignments, adjusting times and task priorities as appropriate. This one step will go a long way in enabling you to stick to your schedule.
• Take advantage of free time: Commuting, standing in line at the grocery store, waiting for appointments—we all spend time waiting for something or getting somewhere. These spots of time can be used to take a mental break, to chat with others, or to fit in small bits of work. Carry work with you that you can focus on in such circumstances. Or use the time to write in your planner and organize yourself. Whether you use the time as a refreshing break of to get work done, it is time well spent.

• Reward yourself: As you meet discrete goals that move you toward the completion of a larger objective, reward yourself. Take a bath, go to a movie, have dinner with friends, or engage in some activity that you consciously use to mark your achievement. These little rewards will motivate you to accomplish smaller tasks and therefore stick to your schedule.

Online Resources: Time Management

• “Academic Scientists at Work: Where'd my Day go?”
  http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/2940/academic_scientists_at_work_where_d_my_day_go/

• The Five Virtues of Successful Grad Students: http://chronicle.com/article/The-5-Virtues-of-Successful/5060/

• Succeeding in Grad School: http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/grad_school.html

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites

• The National Association of Graduate-Professional Students website has links to graduate student resources on the web: www.nagps.org/

• The Chronicle of Higher Education is a great source for familiarizing yourself with debates in academia at large. The "Career Network" section of the website offers helpful advice on professional development for graduate students: http://chronicle.com/section/Home/5/

• Useful advice on everything from choosing a graduate program to tips on writing and presenting your thesis or dissertation: www.phds.org/

• Keep abreast of developments in the Life Sciences through articles and blog posts, as well as search for career opportunities: www.sciencemag.org/

• Advice-filled articles, contacts for counseling, and freebies: www.gradresources.org/index.html.

• Ten things I wish I’d known before starting my dissertation: http://www.theguardian.com/education/mortarboard/2012/may/02/dissertation-top-ten-tips


• The Secret to Writing your Dissertation: http://scienceblogs.com/startswithabang/2012/10/20/the-secret-to-writing-your-dissertation/

Online Forums and Listservs

• Ask for advice, participate in the discussion forum, or send your own column submissions about the job market using the Chronicle Career Network at http://chronicle.com/section/Jobs/61/. Check out their “Advice” section as well.
• A moderated listserv for graduate students worldwide covering a variety of topics, from working with advisors to getting a job: www.asgs.org/best_dt.html

• Use the link for Versatile PhD found on the “Resources” section of the CareerLAB website to find a forum for graduate students in the Humanities, Education and Social Sciences to discuss non-academic career concerns, featuring periodic guest speakers.

• Discussion networks centered on specific fields of study in the Humanities & Social Sciences, plus conference listings and announcements: www2.h-net.msu.edu/

• This unmoderated discussion listserv for graduate students covers such topics as teaching methods, job search tips, and how to maintain a love life. It includes conference notices and job postings: www.h-net.org/~grad/

• Discussions ranging from pedagogy and the state of the academy to the pragmatics of research and the job search at “Tomorrow’s Professor:” http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/postings.php

General Print Resources


• Cracking the Academia Nut by Margaret L. Newhouse (FAS Harvard University, 1997)

• Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or Ph.D. by Robert L. Peters (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, revised edition 1997)


• What They Didn’t Teach You in Graduate School: 199 Helpful Hints for Success in Your Academic Career by Paul Gray, David E. Drew, Matthew Henry Hall and Laurie Richlin (Stylus Publishing, 2008)