Navigating Graduate School:
Insights and Recommendations
for a Productive Degree Path

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ABSTRACT

Beginning graduate school can be an exciting experience; however, given the new social and intellectual experiences, there will be unique challenges that arise during your graduate program. Within this article, the author shares what was useful, helpful suggestions others have offered her, and pieces of advice she wishes she knew going in. In the author’s experience, her lessons learned in graduate school fall under five main categories. These include planning for success, beginning a line of research, writing papers, focusing on learning during coursework, and becoming part of the academic community. In each of these sections she shares with you her experience, as well as the experiences of some peers, so you can learn from some who have already gone through this process. Many of these suggestions come from the author’s experience preparing for an academic profession, but these suggestions can be stretched and edited to professional paths outside of academia as well.

Keywords: Academia, Degree, Experience, Graduate School, Peers, Profession

INTRODUCTION

Beginning graduate school can be a time of anticipation, learning new educational and professional skills, and taking on unique challenges. Graduate school can also be an opportunity for immense academic and personal growth. As a recent graduate, I would like to use this opportunity to share my experiences on what was useful, suggestions that were shared with me by peers and faculty, and pieces of advice I could have benefited from learning earlier.

To offer some background, I graduated from a Human Development and Quantitative Methodology program with a specialization in Educational Psychology in 2013. Upon graduating I accepted a postdoctoral scholarship in Education Sciences and Psychology and am now beginning a tenure track position in Educational Statistics and Research Methods. Although my work has been focused within Education Sciences and Psychology, I have been told that these suggestions also cut across other areas of the social and physical sciences. I should also note that many of my experiences and examples are related to the academic track in which I took, but my suggestions in planning, writing, coursework, and becoming part of a community may likely also be suitable for positions outside of academia.

DOI: 10.4018/IJAVET.2015100102
My insights and recommendations fall within five main categories: planning for success, beginning a line of research, writing papers, learning during coursework, and becoming part of the academic community. In the section on planning I will discuss setting short and long term goals, when to adjust your short term goals to include additional tasks, and celebrating your victories both big and small. Next, I will make recommendations about beginning a line of research and discuss taking initiative, choosing a topic, and developing initial ideas. In the following portion, I will discuss writing papers and discuss dealing with authorship, reviews of your writing and research, as well as the long writing and review process. In the fourth section, I will discuss focusing on learning in your classwork and considering the possibility of taking classes outside of your assigned program trajectory. Finally, I will discuss becoming part of the academic community and give brief recommendations on the imposter phenomenon, being a team player, dealing with conflict, and attending networking events.

PLANNING AND PRODUCTIVITY

As you begin your graduate career, you will likely be invited to take part in many different intellectually challenging activities; this is one of the best aspects of university settings. However, it is important that you are self-regulated in what you choose to take part in and how you break down the task.

In general, my sense is that a productive graduate experience can be summarized by a combination of professional productivity while maintaining a realistic and healthy workflow. For me, this process begins by setting clear goals. In setting my own professional goals, I start with long term goals and break them down into manageable chunks of smaller goals. When I say broad, I mean broad. I begin with the overall goals of how my work can contribute to a greater societal good; that is, an overarching goal that would be my piece to contribute to the larger puzzle of applied research. Next, I make a plan for the next ten and then five years. Of course, one should maintain a flow and be open to new possibilities, but I am convinced that goals are best achieved when knowing exactly where the goal is and planning for success. Not only is it helpful to have a clear path in a career where there are few stated guidelines and individuals supervising your work, it is also good to bait any worries concerning level of productivity. If you make good goals and work to achieve them step by step, those concerns are not on the table. Next consider the goals you would like to achieve in the next year. How many articles would you like to write? Would getting a grant help you to achieve your larger goals? Would a grant allow you access to individuals or money that would support your long term goals? Next create your monthly or weekly goals. This is what has worked for me, but stretch and edit these suggestions as they suit your working needs.

Be careful when adding a new task to your plan. Consider how the task will help you achieve your short and long term goals and how much it helps your CV. In general, say yes to empirical journal articles especially if you are high on authorship. Say yes to chapters or invited pieces if you have time and if someone who is close to you is requesting (e.g., an immediate advisor or colleague). If something is making your CV stronger, try to reprioritize your time to include it. Also, be sure to make your goals achievable and plan for tasks to take longer than you initially expect. As a motivation researcher, I can confidently share with you that nothing can tear down one’s motivation the way unachievable goals can (Zimmerman, 2008). In my short term or weekly goals, I aim to produce something that I can show to a supervisor or coauthor each week. This is difficult to do, but I look for available shortcuts when possible. For example, you can save time creating tables by using macros and code that automate tables from your output. These tasks...
Heterogeneous vs. Homogeneous Groups: Methodology for Class Instruction for Post-Secondary Business Education Courses
www.igi-global.com/article/heterogeneous-homogeneous-groups/62982?camid=4v1a

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www.igi-global.com/chapter/approaching-leadership-from-a-lifelong-learning-perspective/133785?camid=4v1a