

How to Survive Graduate School

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For many graduate students, grad school is their first brush with natural selection. Every person brings a different set of skills and problems to meet this challenge. But there are some universal issues that unite all grad students in a common cause. The notes and references below emerged from a seminar presented to grad students in Tulane University's Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology by Dr. Fleury.

- [Be Visible](#)
- [Be Involved](#)
- [Make Friends](#)
- [Get A Life](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [So Where's That High Paying Job?](#)

Be Visible

Attend Your Departmental Colloquium, Journal Clubs, Etc. on a Regular Basis

Read the paper assigned for these meetings, and one or two related papers. You might end up being the only one there (other than the speaker) that understands what this topic is all about!

Attend Seminars

Get there early and sit up towards the front or with other faculty. Ask intelligent questions.

Attend Conferences off Campus

Your mentors will help you determine which meetings are the most important in your field. This may mean a big commitment of time and money, but the rewards are significant. You'll be mingling with your future colleagues, and have a chance to meet the greats and near-greats in your field. When the time comes to apply for a job at their institution, you will be more than just another faceless applicant.

Make Contacts of All Kinds

Don't restrict your activities to the local and departmental community. You never know who will be helpful down the road. Such contacts could lead to good research ideas and research sites, as well as prospective employment when you (finally!!) graduate.

Be Involved

Present a Paper on the Early Phases of Your Dissertation Research

This could be your baptism of fire, but it will also highlight problem areas that might haunt you during your defense, and it will give you the opportunity to see what professional life will be like in your chosen specialty.

Subscribe to the Relevant Journals

Yes, they're expensive, and yes, you can get them from the library, but your membership in the primary professional organizations in your specialty shows that you are committed to your profession, and support the work of these organizations.

Help out the Department Wherever and Whenever you Can

I don't mean suck up to the departmental chair (although it can't hurt!), but be aware of departmental problems and needs and do whatever you can to help. Lots of small favors add up to a big commitment in the end, and your contribution will be noticed.

Treat the Secretary and Administrative Assistants as Goddesses

They hold the keys to the kingdom in the most literal sense of the word. Don't make their job any harder than it has to be. A kind word, a morning smile, the occasional box of chocolates or small bags of cash, these small kindnesses will smooth your path in many unexpected ways. Heed this advice wherever you go in your future career!

Be a superior T.A.

Don't treat your assignment as a gift or a scholarship, or even as a job. Treat it as an opportunity. This is your big chance to develop your teaching skills, and these skills will be invaluable when it is time to rejoin the real world and apply for jobs. Don't blow off any aspect of your assignment. Even those off-the-wall assignments you may occasionally draw, the ones that are totally outside your immediate specialty, are an opportunity to expand your horizons. The course materials and experience you acquire and develop as a T.A. will prove invaluable when you have to develop your own courses farther down the road.

Make Friends

Grad School Can be a Lonely Business

Don't make it worse than it has to be. The temptation to isolate yourself can be overwhelming, but if you wall yourself off, you are severing your most important emotional lifeline. Your family and friends may wonder why you are putting yourself through the ritual ordeal of graduate school, but if you keep those lines of communication open, they will support you when you need it the most. The biggest victims of graduate school are your significant others, especially your immediate family, and most especially if you are a married student with small larvae. Try not to bring into their lives too much of the frustration and depression that you will inevitably feel along the way. Find someone you can talk to, and get together on a regular basis. You are not alone, despite the way you may feel.

Your Fellow Grad Students Are Not the Enemy — They Are Your Future Colleagues, and Your Best Allies

Be nice to one another in every way possible. You may be bucking for that lone A, and the competition for grades can seem overwhelming, but classes are soon over and mostly forgotten, whereas the slings and arrows of un-collegial behavior can fester for years, and come back to haunt you later on. Connect with grad students in other departments. They may not understand your immediate course and faculty-related problems, but they are all dealing with the same fundamental issues of surviving the process.

Get A Life

All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy, and Might Even Tempt Jack to Leap From the Top of Tall Buildings

Eventually you will have to reenter the real world. Don't come back to it as a stranger. Find the time for concerts, plays, a game of Frisbee, have lunch with friends, travel, etc.

Get a Hobby, or Breathe New Life into One You Already Have

It doesn't really matter what it is — music, poetry, painting, sculpture, building with Legos, hacking into federal computer systems...Whatever you're good at, and like to do, try to become the very best at it that you possibly can. This takes time, but it will be time well spent. Those hours will be a pleasant relief from the endless work and worry of grad school. This advice may sound trite, but I received it from one of my profs in my M.A. program, and thought well...what the hell, maybe she's right. And she was! I devoted a chunk of my precious free time in grad school to learning to play the autoharp, an instrument I'd carted around and fumbled at for years. Developing that skill into a fine art has brought peace of mind many times over the years.

Know When to Cut Your Losses and Walk Away

There are two schools of thought on proceeding directly to grad school, and both can result in short-term disaster. Some faculty maintain that immediate enrollment in grad school is the best thing you can do. Sustain the momentum you've built up over the past four years, keep your study habits and your intellect alive and healthy, etc. There are many good arguments for this position. But your academic momentum can also hurl you into the brick wall of academic burnout, making your first year of grad school an absolute (and expensive) disaster. And a few years in the real world cannot only add a hearty portion of maturity to your ultimate application, it can also heighten your motivation. You'll have a much clearer picture of what it is you are striving to accomplish with your degree program, and the kind of life style you ultimately hope to enjoy. Be sure to get your letters of reference on file in your department or dean's office when you graduate, and memories of your performance as an undergrad are still fresh. A few years and several hundred students later, your profs might not remember what an outstanding student you were.

Be Prepared for a Little Ecstasy and A Lot of Misery

As Sternberg counsels in his excellent book (cited below), grad school is a series of waves. Sometimes you are riding high on the crest, like when you get a viable topic, an approved prospectus, or complete your data analysis, or win approval for complete chapters of your dissertation, or (finally!!) survive your dissertation defense. But it is also a roller coaster ride into the trough of those waves, what Sternberg calls a voyage through "dissertation despair, doubt, or desperation." Enjoy the peaks, but be prepared for the valleys, when your prospectus is returned in little pieces, when your data doesn't support your initial hypothesis, when committee members leave or scholarships or grants go belly up. If this were an easy thing to do, everyone would be a Ph.D. Grit your teeth, hitch up your britches, and climb back on your surfboard to catch that next wave.

Life is Long — Longer Than You Might Think!

The road to grad school can have many twists and turns, so NEVER give up on your dreams. I ended up taking a seven-year break between my first (failed) and second (successful) graduate programs. Always keep your eyes on the prize.

Resources

Wow, just what you needed — more stuff to read! These books are part of a large and growing literature on surviving college degree programs. They helped me out in various ways, so I'm passing them on to you.

How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation

STERNBERG, DAVID
N.Y.: ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 1981

This is absolutely the best book I've ever seen on this topic. The title says it all. Get it. Read it. Read it again. It saved me from many common pitfalls and snares along the way, and reminded me that no matter how bad things got, I was not alone. Sternberg provides superb practical advice for avoiding the curse of the ABD. The book focuses on organizing, researching, writing and defending a dissertation.

Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or Ph.D.

PETERS, ROBERT L.
N.Y.: FARRAR, STRAUSS & GIROUX, 1992

Covers some of the same turf as Sternberg, but on a much broader canvas, including advice on selecting a grad school, getting financial aid, surviving comps and prelims, and managing your time and stress levels. A very useful and practical addition to your grad student survival shelf.

Acing College: A Professor Tells Students How to Beat the System

HALBERSTROM, JOSHUA
N.Y.: PENGUIN, 1991

Although aimed at undergraduates, there is much sound advice here for students of all ages and GPA's. I learned most of this stuff the hard way, but there's loads of common-sense advice for every student. The chapter on the "Adult Student" is especially relevant for many grad students.

On the Market: Surviving the Academic Job Search

BOUFIS, CHRISTINE, AND VICTORIA C. OLSEN (EDS.)
N.Y.: RIVERHEAD BOOKS, 1997

A useful compendium of short essays covering every aspect of job seeking. The emphasis is on first-person accounts of successful and unsuccessful job searches. Though most of the contributors are in English or the Arts, their tales are universal. My personal favorite was "The Gypsy Scholar — Making a Living as a Full-Time Adjunct". A word of caution — like many such books in this genre, these tales of academic anguish can be both inspiring and extremely depressing.

Job Search in Academe: Strategic Rhetorics for Faculty Job Candidates

FORMO, DAWN M., AND CHERYL REED
STERLING, VA.: STYLUS PUBLISHING, 1999

Packed full of sound advice for the prospective job seeker, including the intricate art of packaging and selling yourself. Covers resume writing (with sample CV's), writing a good application letter, preparing for and surviving interviews, and (the science fiction part of the book) negotiating a good contract.