

An Open Letter to New Doctoral Students Regarding Informal Elements of Achievement

Dear Students,

An important part of your initial experience in our PhD program will involve apprehending how to meet an imposing set of requirements and expectations. You will have to choose courses wisely, learn some advanced statistical techniques, figure out how to prepare for exams, develop teaching skills, arrive at a dissertation plan, attend various presentations and workshops, and more. These are among the formal requirements for success in graduate school. Student handbooks and written guides of various kinds, as well as the advice of more experienced students, will go a long way toward helping you master these aspects of the program.

It should come as no surprise that success in graduate school also entails meeting some informal requirements and challenges. These are rarely written down or spelled out, and they sometimes escape students' notice. In some kinds of institutions, informal requirements are not so important. Undergraduate education is a pretty good example, and it is typically one relatively fresh in the minds of people who are starting a doctoral program. Take the required classes, accumulating units in the proper distribution, and one will earn a bachelor's degree. Conveniently, the GPA provides a formal measure of success. Perhaps a list of extracurricular activities enumerated on the resume rounds out the picture of how well one did in college. Doctoral programs are very much unlike this – and not just because no one will care about your GPA after you have finished.

To be successful in a doctoral program, especially if your goal is to be a professor, you will need to thrive at a set of activities and practices that are not formalized. To learn about these, you will need to be observant and self-reflective.

If you inquire about what informal goals and qualities your professors believe to be associated with success in graduate school, you will likely receive a variety of answers. Professional styles and understandings of success vary among faculty. Here is a lesson. You are preparing for a career in which there are different views of what the goals are and how to achieve them. For instance, when you try to publish, one reviewer may think highly of your manuscript while another disparages it mercilessly. In department meetings, there will sometimes be no consensus about whom to hire or what changes should be made to the curriculum. When you teach, some of your students will appreciate a particular classroom technique while others are disdainful of it. Bear in mind that some scholars thrive in such environments and are spurred to be creative and energetic by these challenges; others are frustrated and in the worst cases even become embittered. It's not a bad idea for you to reflect on this at the start of graduate school.

My own answer to the question about the informal requirements of excellence in a doctoral program is fourfold: autodidacticism, entrepreneurship, relationships, and citizenship. My advice is to approach these as equal in importance to the formal requirements before you.

Be an Autodidact

Autodidacticism is an aspect of graduate school that is non-obvious to some students at first. It can seem ironic: Achieving the highest certification for accomplishment offered by a university depends on how well you can teach yourself. Do not think of your PhD as a signal that you have learned a lot in the classroom. It is more properly a signal that you can teach yourself the most demanding material in your field. If that is not obvious to you at this stage, consider that

ten years after graduate school, a good deal of what you will be teaching in your own classes will not be what we have taught you here. Rather, it will be new material produced after you left graduate school. Twenty years after you complete your PhD, when you are in the middle of your career, little of what you read in graduate school will matter any longer, except as the foundation for your new knowledge.

So while you are here, we expect you to demonstrate that you are prepared to learn on your own in a way that will sustain your career. This will be more overt at some times than others. For instance, when preparing for your qualifying exams, you will find that we expect you to know material that was not in the courses you took. So, be ready to be an autodidact, despite the fact that you are immersed in an environment of formal teaching and learning.

Be Entrepreneurial

In a PhD program, entrepreneurialism leads to excellence more often than passive approaches to opportunity. To return again to the comparison with the undergraduate experience, in college one can succeed by following the directions of others, meeting requirements in a timely fashion, and overcoming a set of well-defined obstacles placed in the way by the school. By contrast, as a PhD student you should expect to have to make many of your own opportunities. This means taking the initiative to find sources of funding and applying for them; it means going to conferences and introducing yourself to people from other institutions; it means letting our faculty know you are looking for a Research Assistantship, rather than expecting one to be handed to you as a matter of course. It might mean developing an internally marketable skill – like outstanding ability with statistics, data-mining or visualization, or content analysis – so that you have something concrete to offer others. It may mean finding a course in another department that would round out your training or fill in a gap.

You may be relieved to know that you will enjoy a grace period on entrepreneurialism for

your first year or two. During that time, simply taking classes and following the formal program will be sufficient. Then as you move into your third and fourth years, the situation should change as you take on more responsibility for your opportunities. If you are still satisfying yourself by your fourth year to wait for professors to tell you what to do next, your chances of a distinguished doctoral experience will be fading.

I recommend a self-assessment now, at the beginning of your studies. Ask yourself candidly how entrepreneurial you are - how ambitious you are about making your own opportunities and pursuing them rather than only responding to the directions of authorities. If you are someone who needs to compensate or develop in this area, the time to recognize this is at the outset.

Cultivate Relationships

You undoubtedly know that it will be important to establish good relationships within our department. This means reaching the point where many faculty know you and understand your interests and skills. Taking seminars will bring some of this familiarity, as will working as a Teaching Assistant. But you should plan to take extra steps on your own that will help you become acquainted with the professors in our department.

What may be less obvious is that it is also important to get to know faculty at other universities, especially if you aspire to a career in research. As a researcher, you will be part of a profession that is defined by national and international networks. Join those networks. Resist the temptation to think of your own department as the entirety of your professional world. And be aware that we as your professors will not automatically connect you to that larger set of networks. We can open a few doors and make some introductions, but the responsibility in this arena is chiefly yours.

How does one accomplish this? When visitors come to our department for presentations, you should attend their talks, ask questions, introduce yourself. Go to lunch or dinner with

visitors if you can. You should attend as many conferences as is feasible and when at them you should introduce yourself to people who work in your area. (It's a topic for a different discussion, but do not think about giving a paper as the goal of going to a conference; giving a paper is the price of admittance, where the main purpose is to interact with others in the network.) In whatever ways are open to you, find the people who are prominent in your intellectual area outside your department and try to let them know who you are.

In every organization I can think of, people who are well-liked personally tend to have more opportunities than those who are not so well liked, or are just not well connected interpersonally with others. Being liked does not substitute for substance and skill, but it certainly adds to the picture considerably. It may again be useful to undertake a candid self-appraisal. If you are not comfortable initiating new professional relationships, or are not reliably able to sustain positive relationships within a professional network, then you may need to mount an extra effort in graduate school.

Be a Citizen of the University

Being an academic is not simply a job, it is something closer to a lifestyle. I have heard it described as a calling, because it entails such an intensive commitment to a set of institutions and because it tends to shape people's personal lives well beyond the regular workday. The wearing of medieval robes on ceremonial occasions is just one visible reminder of the fact that working at university is not like being employed by a corporation or NGO. While you are acquiring your PhD, you should take it upon yourself to learn about the customs and practices of universities beyond the confines of your department. Know the names of university administrators and what major issues face them and your institution as a whole. Meet students in other programs. Take courses and go to lectures in other disciplines. Become involved in student governance. When you are finished with your PhD, you should feel like a citizen of your

university as well as of the larger academic universe, rather than just the recipient of a degree from a department.

Another way to put all of this is the following: When you have completed your doctoral studies, we on the faculty will certify to anyone who cares that you have fulfilled our formal requirements and that you are expert in your field. But that is only going to go so far. The rest is up to you as you construct your own professional identity that is rooted in your ability to figure out what you need learn, that involves opportunities you have created for yourself as well as the professional network you have cultivated, and that involves your practices of citizenship in the larger environment of the academy.

Do your best for the next five or six years or so to keep in mind that excelling in graduate school takes more than ticking off the check-boxes of all those formal requirements that we place in front of you.

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