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Maximizing Success in Your Graduate Training



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Self-help books frequently talk about how the key to being successful is to “visualize success.” Although that may or may not be an effective strategy, it is important to know what you mean by *success*, to define what success is in any given context. As an undergraduate, success was pretty easy to define: a high grade point average. As a graduate student, success is defined more subjectively. What makes a successful graduate career for one student may not work for another student. Everyone has different goals for their graduate training, and everyone takes a slightly different path to achieve those goals. To add to the confusion, the keys to success in graduate school are usually unwritten and students are left to figure them out on their own.

One goal of this chapter (and book), therefore, is to articulate clearly what makes a successful graduate student and a successful graduate career. The second goal of this chapter is to help you maximize your success while minimizing the struggles of attending graduate school. The rest of this book will focus on the specifics of success in graduate school, such as how to write and to teach effectively. Indeed, there are very explicitly stated benchmarks, unique to each graduate program, that must be achieved in order for a student to be considered successful, such as defending your thesis and dissertation and passing your qualifying exams. In contrast, the focus of this chapter is more on those implied goals of graduate school—the ones that are critical to your success but rarely mentioned in any graduate handbook or orientation packet.

What Is Success in Graduate School?

Before discussing what makes a successful graduate student, it is important to understand how we *really* define success in graduate school. The orientation packet you received probably stated that the goal of graduate school was to develop a broad knowledge of psychology as well as an expertise in a specific area of psychology and to develop advanced research and professional skills. Indeed, graduate school is designed to help you develop an expertise in your chosen field. This is a very important goal of graduate school. However, in the pursuit of this goal, students can lose their way, following tangent after tangent and getting sidetracked in their attempts to further their knowledge base. Instead of focusing on this broad goal, I suggest there are three different, very specific goals that seem to be crucial to any graduate student's emerging success.

The first sign of a successful graduate school career is that your degree is completed in a timely fashion. For a doctoral program, that typically means 5 or 6 years. Some students hang out in graduate school for 8 or 9 years. That is never necessary. Keep in mind that graduate school is not an open-ended, indefinite time to read and think. Successful graduate students have their time frame in mind as they move through graduate school, they pay attention to deadlines, and they work with purpose.

The second sign of success in graduate school is the ability to get a job upon graduation. This seems like an obvious goal, but many students lose sight of what is necessary to achieve this goal. For academic positions, this means you should have research publications and some teaching experience. All of your work in graduate school should be geared toward meeting these objectives. In other words, you should consistently ask yourself, "Can I turn this work into a publication? Does this add to my teaching experience? Does this provide me with important knowledge or training that I may be able to use in the future?" The chair of our psychology department stated it this way: "Be very planful about how you approach your training and your career—determine your goals, figure out what training experiences will best equip you to meet those goals, and work very hard to gain those experiences and generate research products." In other words, a successful graduate school career is purposeful and goal directed (the goal being a job). To achieve that ultimate goal of getting a job, you must meet the more proximate goals of generating research publications in top journals. For a more detailed discussion regarding applying for an academic job, see Chapter 23. See Chapter 24 for a discussion of applying for clinical or other applied positions.

The third goal in striving for a successful graduate career, and one that is just as important as the others, is to meet the above two goals with your mental health intact. You should emerge on the other end of your graduate career happy, with meaningful relationships, and loving your chosen profession. Otherwise, that M.A. or Ph.D. after your name isn't really worth it. Graduate school can be a fun, rewarding, and stimulating period of your life. As you will see, by being planful, focused, and hard working, you can graduate on time, with a job, and with a wonderful experience under your belt. The rest of this chapter focuses on the best ways to achieve those goals. Also see Chapter 10, which deals with self-care issues during your time in graduate training.

What Are the Most Important Characteristics of a Successful Graduate Student?

Assuming you want to have a successful graduate career, there are specific traits you can foster in yourself to help you work toward those goals. Interestingly, in an informal poll of faculty members in which I asked them this question, not one person mentioned being smart or making good grades. Keep in mind: You made it into graduate school (congratulations!). You are smart enough to be there. That characteristic doesn't seem to be what separates successful from less successful students. Instead, faculty members' responses focused on three themes. First, many faculty members stated that they highly valued intrinsic motivation, initiative, and resourcefulness in their students. As one colleague said, "I want a 'let's get it done now, even if I have to stay late' attitude." Others mentioned that these traits led students to seek out their own funding, to enroll in writing courses to improve their writing, or to work in the lab over the weekend. Related to this, faculty members wanted students who made consistent effort, were persistent, and were always committed to and engaged in research. For example, many faculty members mentioned that they wanted their students to write every day, and that this took serious commitment. Second, many faculty members mentioned that successful graduate students were students who could ask good questions, who strived to gain independence in their thinking, and who were creative. In other words, they want students who can create interesting research projects and go beyond what others have done before. They like students who ask interesting questions in class and who see connections that others may not see. Finally, many faculty members mentioned that successful students are able to set goals and see them through in a timely fashion (as one person said, "with an emphasis on timeliness"), are able to juggle their personal lives with career objectives, and are able to set priorities and organize their activities. In other words, successful graduate students are able to manage their time and priorities.

Taken together, we begin to see a picture of what you should strive for to maximize your success in graduate school. You should want to finish graduate school in a timely fashion, with the ability to get a job and with your sanity intact. To do this, you should work hard by taking initiative and showing resourcefulness, you should strive for independent creative thinking, and you should manage your goals and priorities well. Sounds easy enough, right? This kind of success is attainable by anyone. Unfortunately, many students fall short of these aspirations. Below are some specific tips to help make those abstract traits and objectives more easily within reach.

What Are the Most Important "Dos" to Being Successful in Graduate School?

Manage your time. Most importantly, manage your time well. If you have been accepted into a graduate program—which means you had a high undergraduate GPA, high GRE scores, and a well-written essay—you are smart enough to succeed in graduate school (although you may need to repeat this to yourself over the next few years). Success will largely depend on time management. Why is time management so important? My undergraduate professor (and editor of this book) once gave

me advice about graduate school that I have repeated to my own students many, many times. He said, “The work in graduate school isn’t really more difficult than the work you do here [as an undergraduate]. There is just a lot more of it.” That proved to be true for me as a graduate student and has been confirmed by the graduate students who work with me. Graduate school is difficult because there is a lot of work to do. Thus, managing that workload is key. The main challenge to managing your time well is that there are going to be multiple and mutually exclusive demands on your time. You will have several classes, each with heavy reading requirements each week. You will have to work on your thesis, as well as the work assigned by your advisor. You may also have to coordinate these assignments with duties from a teaching or research assistantship. Juggling these demands involves two skills: prioritizing and planning.

In terms of prioritizing, it is important to remember that coursework is not the only or even the most important thing you are working on. Unlike your undergraduate program, in which your most important goal was a high GPA, your most important goal now is ultimately to get a job. For most people, that means you must conduct research (or help your advisor conduct research) that can be published in research journals. This is critical to getting a job, even positions that will not involve conducting research (such as a clinical position or a teaching position at a small undergraduate college). Thus, in most doctoral psychology programs, doing research is more highly valued than doing your coursework. Don’t misunderstand: You must also do well in your courses. Most programs require you make As or the occasional B to stay in good standing. You should also keep in mind that attending classes is critically important not only for learning material and participating in class discussions but also for establishing relationships with professors and earning their respect. The key, however, is to devote just enough time to classes to do well, but no more. More time should always be spent conducting research. So you should learn how to read the assigned reading for your class quickly, taking only one night instead of one week; you should stop tinkering with your term paper once it gets to the A level instead of pushing for the A+; and, if possible, you should gear your term papers in class toward your own area of research so your reading for class overlaps with your other research as much as possible. If two classes require very similar papers, ask the professors if you can turn in similar papers for each class. It is a constant balancing act, but not keeping these priorities is a common way that students who excelled in their undergraduate programs fail to progress in their graduate programs.

Planning is another skill that helps students juggle the multiple demands on their time. One great way to manage your time effectively is to have a detailed planner or calendar. This will be the most valuable money you will ever spend. You should spend time at the beginning of each semester or quarter, and again each week, accounting for all of your time. Be specific. Write down when you are going to read for class, when you are going to study, when you are going to be in meetings. Most importantly, assign yourself time every day to write. If you have larger chunks of time, devote those to writing the more complex parts of your papers. For example, a typical Monday: 9:00–11:00 am, Statistics; 11:00–12:00, Statistics homework; 1:00–2:00, proctor an exam for my teaching assistantship; 2:00–4:00, work on Introduction of thesis. By putting your writing time into your planner, you make it a priority and respect that time, making it as valuable as your time in class. Furthermore, that writing time should be protected—no e-mailing, no Web surfing,

no students dropping by. This can be harder than you think, particularly if you have family responsibilities. But treat writing time just as you would class time and you will be pleasantly surprised how much you can get written.

You should also use your planner to make deadlines for yourself, and keep the deadlines. Another common way graduate students struggle in graduate school is by falling behind on the many small deadlines, eventually adding years to their graduate careers. As a graduate student, you must make your own deadlines and find your own discipline to stick to those deadlines. Give yourself coursework deadlines, such as what day you will start writing class X's term paper. Even more importantly, give yourself broader deadlines. You should write down which component of your thesis should be done by October, which by December, and so forth. Work out a timeline for all your major projects and plan accordingly. Use that longer timeline to work out your daily goals.

Work hard. Another important “do” for success in graduate school, to directly quote my colleague (and head of the social psychology area), is “Work your butt off.” You should always be doing something, as there will always be something to do. Even when you have no looming deadline and you think you have nothing to do, make sure you are writing, reading (especially new journal articles), thinking about possible research ideas, or coding data. As a graduate student, I made a habit of always having research articles with me to read whenever downtime presented itself—waiting for the bus, at the doctor’s office, or before class started. Keep in mind when you work best and be sure to fill up those times first. For example, during the middle of the day, I can stay pretty focused. So if I have unexpected downtime at 1:00 p.m., I try to catch up on reading journal articles or grading a paper. I know that I will also have downtime at 8:00 p.m., but by then, I am going to be much more interested in watching television with my family and unwinding (just as important for keeping the mental health intact). In other words, make sure your day is filled with doing something—anything—to move you toward your goals. Then, when it is time to unwind, you can completely relax because you know you were productive that day.

In addition to working hard on what someone tells you to do, take initiative. Bring research ideas to your advisor, propose a new grant application, or find funding sources for yourself. As one colleague stated, “Assuming they are smart enough to get in, I think the individual difference that has the biggest impact in determining grad school outcomes is how hard a student works. The people putting in 70-hour weeks get a lot more publications and end up with better jobs than the ones who are nowhere to be found on Friday afternoons and take weeks of vacation during the summer.” No one can keep up 70-hour workweeks all the time, but remember that graduate school is a finite period of time. Hard work now will lead to a big payoff later.

Related to this idea, be visible. Some students disappear at home or the library, only to emerge 3 months later with a thesis in hand. Graduate school doesn’t work this way. First, you should be in contact with your advisor regularly, getting feedback on ideas, outlines, and drafts of your paper. Second, you not only need to work hard, you also need to make sure others *know* you are working hard. You should regularly be working in your lab office or stopping by to see if your advisor needs help working on anything. Basically, be around. Keep in mind that graduate school success is often subjective, and perceptions are important.

Keep negative feedback in perspective. Another important key to being successful in graduate school is to learn to cope with constructive criticism and negative feedback. Most students who begin graduate school are used to earning very high grades and receiving positive feedback on their work as undergraduates. Your strong academic background got you into graduate school. For many students, it is difficult to cope with the negative feedback that is a part of academia. For example, many students are upset when they turn in the first draft of their thesis to their advisor and it is returned covered in corrections. Similarly, it is hard to submit your first paper to a journal only to have it harshly rejected. It is important to keep in mind that negative feedback is the nature of graduate school and academia; it is not personal. Your advisor has probably gotten so used to it that he or she will not think to focus on the many things you are doing right. Don't be discouraged. The quickest way to improve is to be told what needs to be improved upon. Know that your advisor had the same experience as a new graduate student. If you submit papers to journals, anticipate bad reviews and brace yourself. I frequently let my own new students read the very bad reviews of papers I have submitted to journals in the past. I remind them that everyone gets harsh feedback, and yet the papers eventually got published. In other words, the criticism helped me revise and improve and wasn't a reflection of my eventual abilities.

Persevere (and then celebrate). Just as important as taking the criticism in stride, continue to persevere, and celebrate the small victories. In graduate school, as in life, things don't always work out. Your thesis may not work as expected; your ideal committee member may back out at the last minute; your most important paper may be accidentally deleted from your computer. These types of things will no doubt happen at some point. The key to success in graduate school is to persevere despite the obstacles. My own graduate advisor, a highly respected researcher on children's gender and racial attitudes, once spent 12 years getting a single paper published. She would revise and resubmit, and get negative reviews. She would again revise and resubmit, and get additional negative reviews. She would again revise and resubmit. She had to deal with a lot of criticism but kept working on it until it was published. That paper is now a highly regarded publication cited by many other researchers in her field. Similarly, a successful colleague down the hall impresses the graduate students with his 20 publications a year. Students have made comments to him about how fantastic it is that he never gets his papers rejected. He then laughs and informs them that for every one publication he has, he has three rejections. In other words, he actually gets more rejection letters than anyone. He just perseveres and, undaunted, continues to send out new papers.

With all of your perseverance, you will have successes. Some will be small—turning in the first draft of your thesis to your advisor on time—and some will be big—successfully defending your thesis in front of your committee. Because you will be spending plenty of time working hard and coping with criticism (see above), celebrate those successes. Not every celebration needs to be extravagant, but treating yourself to a fancy coffee at the coffee shop, buying yourself a new book, or taking the night off when you normally work can do wonders for keeping your motivation and morale high. Graduate school is a marathon, not a sprint. You have to stay motivated to keep going despite the obstacles and long hours. It is important to embrace the positive moments and enjoy them.

Celebrating your successes can sometimes be a challenge because you are entering a profession in which the successes are not always easy to mark. You won't be making

a big sale or getting a new customer; you will not have a profit margin at the end of the year. Our successes are often less obvious. For example, it can be easy to overlook that you successfully taught an undergraduate student the value of experimental design or that you wrote a letter of recommendation that helped a student get a prized internship. But these are successes nonetheless. So when you have a success, pay attention! At a minimum, pat yourself on the back. Take a moment to refuel. Even today, I take my family out to dinner when I have a paper published. Indeed, it is less about celebrating the actual publication and more about rewarding myself for persevering through three rounds of negative reviews. I know a new set of negative reviews will be coming soon, and I want to savor and enjoy the good moments.

Seek out others. Finally, as quickly as you can, make contacts with the professors in your department. If there are faculty members in other departments doing similar research, make a point to meet with them as well. Send them an e-mail and introduce yourself. Faculty are more than willing to set up a 30-minute meeting with you. Having relationships with faculty members is important for several reasons. They will be good sources for letters of recommendation for fellowships, they can be possible committee members, and they may have the answers to your questions about research or data analysis. This will also help you become familiar with other labs and open up paths for future collaborations.

Seeking the advice and support of faculty members is also important if things begin to get overwhelming. If this happens, first seek the advice of your advisor. This is helpful because he or she can help you get the support you need. You are likely new to the area and may not know all of the available resources. This is also helpful because it lets your advisor know that you are struggling, not just slacking off and being irresponsible. If your advisor is part of the problem, seek the advice of another faculty member you trust or the chair of the department. Remember that the faculty members in your department highly value the graduate students. They took great efforts to select you from a large group of applicants. They want you to be successful, and they believe that you can be. If you are struggling, seek their help or advice. Importantly, seek their help early, before you are years behind deadlines, have alienated your advisor, and have come to hate graduate school.

What Are the Most Important “Don’ts” to Being Successful in Graduate School?

Don’t get overburdened. As there are things to do, there are also things to avoid on the path to success. First, do not take on more projects than you can handle. As you get acclimated to graduate school, you will notice many opportunities for research and group activities. Graduate students who share an office with you will have great ideas about new research projects you can collaborate on together. You will receive e-mails about the Graduate Student Council needing a new treasurer. You will want to actually do the project you proposed in one of your class term papers. These are all excellent ideas—in theory. After all, you were heavily involved in extracurricular activities as an undergraduate. You spent 10 hours a week volunteering the summer before graduate school. Plus, if research is valued, isn’t doing extra research projects a good thing? The answer is no. It may seem like you will have time to spare, as you

are only taking two or three classes and you have 2 years to write one thesis. However, as you will quickly learn, that extra free time is an illusion. In reality, your days will be very busy with your existing commitments.

To better understand the importance of time constraints, pretend you are a typical graduate student in social psychology enrolled in your second semester of graduate school. You recently read about the department's need for a graduate student representative, and your officemate wants to collaborate on a new project idea that you two would do on the side. Both are great ideas. But, before you write that IRB application or nominate yourself to the council, think through your schedule. For example, you are taking three classes: the Statistics course required for all first-year students (meets Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:30 to 11:00), the Social Psychology core course required for social psychology students (meets Wednesdays from 12:00 to 3:00), and an additional core course in Cognitive Psychology (meets Tuesdays from 1:00 to 4:00). You are the teaching assistant for Introductory Psychology, which meets Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9:00 to 10:00. Because you are a teaching assistant, you must also hold office hours, which you hold Mondays from 11:00 to 2:00. Your department also requires that you attend the weekly colloquium series held Fridays from 12:00 to 1:30; you have a weekly meeting with your advisor on Mondays from 2:00 to 3:00; and you have lab meetings on Fridays from 2:00 to 3:30. You are also collecting data for your thesis, which means you are administering questionnaires to participants in the subject pool from 12:00 to 5:00 on Thursdays. Every evening after dinner, you spend 2 to 3 hours reading for class, writing a term paper, or working on your thesis. This schedule is conservative and assumes you only attend one weekly colloquium, are not supervising undergraduate research assistants, and do not have to help your advisor with other writing assignments. As is hopefully obvious, this schedule leaves very little room for anything extra. Remember, you may have a family that needs attention, and your friends will occasionally want to see you!

One trick that seems to be used by successful graduate students is to think about graduate school as a full-time job (one that easily takes 50 hours a week to do the work required of you) and *not* an extension of undergrad life. Thinking about graduate school as a full-time job is helpful because it reminds you that taking on extra commitments means adding hours into an already full schedule. It will cut into meal times, time with family, and much-needed time off. It is also helpful because it keeps you from feeling overwhelmed by your schedule. Most people, including your friends from high school or college, work that many hours per week in regular jobs. Students tend to take on too many extra commitments and then feel overwhelmed and fall behind, because they try to fit an undergraduate template (in which you filled your extra free time during the day with extracurricular activities) onto their graduate school life. Graduate school is much more similar to your chosen profession (i.e., balancing research, teaching, and possibly clinical hours) than it is to your life as an undergraduate. This is purposeful; we are training graduate students to be professionals. This will require you to shift your identity, however, and make the hard decisions about what you are able to commit to and when you need to say "No!"

Don't procrastinate. Yes, the thesis is due 2 years from now. Faculty set that deadline for a reason; it takes 2 years to do! One way to keep from procrastinating is to break the larger projects into smaller chunks and set deadlines for those smaller

chunks. Put those smaller deadlines into your planner and stick to them. For example, in your first semester, you should develop a thesis topic and an outline and establish your thesis committee. Early in your second semester, you should give a first draft of your thesis proposal to your advisor and submit your project to the IRB. During your second semester, you should defend your thesis proposal to your committee, obtain IRB approval, and begin the process of data collection. Early in your third semester, you should complete data collection and begin analyzing your results. During your third semester, you should write a rough draft of your final thesis. During your fourth semester, you should refine and defend your thesis. Even those smaller chunks can be broken down further. For example, your planner should say, “Monday: Write consent form for IRB,” or “Tuesday and Wednesday: Write Methods section of proposal.” In other words, there is a lot to do, so start now.

Don’t take too much vacation. Don’t assume summer break means you can take 3 months off. Again, that was your life as an undergraduate; it is not your life now. Summers are ideal times to get a lot of work done without also having to juggle coursework. You can collect all the data you need for your thesis in one summer. Or you can spend the summer analyzing the data you already collected. In addition, summers are a great time to get teaching experience as either a teaching assistant or an instructor. Even if you take an outside job, you should spend some time writing every day. This doesn’t mean that you can never take a vacation or take a week off. But treat those breaks just like vacation days you would have accrued at a job, not like summer breaks from high school where you can lounge by the pool all summer. Remember that working through the summers in graduate school adds up to an extra year of work (i.e., 3 months of work across four summers), and most people agree that finishing school in 5 years is preferable to 6.

Don’t compare yourself to others. If you do (and sometimes it is hard not to), find an appropriate comparison. My students in developmental psychology, who spend an entire year individually interviewing 200 third graders at their elementary schools, often compare themselves to our social psychology graduate students, who can run 200 undergraduate subject pool participants in one week of mass testing. No wonder the students sometimes feel inadequate and behind. This is not an appropriate comparison. Also, the student who collects and analyzes her own data shouldn’t compare her progress to the student who analyzed her advisor’s already-collected data. Find students who conduct similar research to you before you decide that you are doomed to failure. Better yet, set your own benchmarks and deadlines. As parents around the world say, “Be true to yourself.” That applies here as well.

Conclusions and Summary

Graduate school is a wonderful time to learn how to conduct research, to teach, and to think like a psychologist. It can also be an incredibly stressful period in which you have to shift your identity from that of a student to that of an independent researcher/instructor. You will have to think independently, manage many demands on your time, and conduct top-quality research. You will also have to adapt to a culture in which critiques are handed out much more often than praise. Despite this, most Ph.D.s look back fondly on graduate school as a time of fruitful exploration

of ideas and collaboration. Following the tips in this book is a good first step to ensuring that you, too, emerge from graduate school with both a job and wonderful nostalgia. To summarize:

- DO manage your time well. Prioritize those things that will ultimately help you get a job. Keep a detailed planner with deadlines that you actually adhere to. By prioritizing your writing and research and sticking to a detailed timeline, you will move through graduate school quickly and have an excellent job waiting for you at the end.
- DO work hard, remembering that there is always something new that needs to be written, read, or completed. Remember that people are looking to see if you are working hard.
- DO keep the negative feedback in perspective. It is not a negative reflection of your abilities, but it should be used to improve your work.
- DO stay motivated despite criticism. Persevere even though you get discouraged. You will eventually have successes. Then, fully celebrate the successes to help fuel that motivation.
- DO seek out others for feedback, and reach out for help when you need it. There are many people who will be supportive and advocate for you. But they won't know you are struggling unless you seek them out.

But . . .

- DON'T overburden yourself with commitments that don't help you achieve your goal of getting a job. Your schedule is incredibly full, even if you don't realize it yet. Treat graduate school like a full-time job and recognize that any extracurricular activities will eat into your time off.
- DON'T procrastinate. Projects take a long time, but if you work a little at a time, you will complete them when expected.
- DON'T stop working just because it is summer. Summer, without the rush of your normal schedule, can be an incredibly productive time of year. Take advantage of it.
- DON'T compare yourself to others. We only seem to find the students who make us feel bad about our performance and progress.

❖ Suggestions for Further Exploration

- Darley, J. M., Zanna, M. P., & Roediger, H. L. (2003). *The compleat academic: A career guide*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Although this is a book less about graduate school and more about life after graduate school, it serves as a good model for balancing the many demands of graduate school.
- Silvia, P. J. (2007). *How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Read this book early in graduate school, and it will help you quickly make progress.