



Part I

General Considerations

As these first three chapters demonstrate, there are a number of issues you can begin thinking about and planning for from the very start of your graduate training and as you launch your career in psychology. Chapter 1 offers excellent advice on how to be a successful graduate student from Day One. If you are reading this book near the end of your graduate training, do not despair because the principles outlined in chapter 1 can apply to any new professional setting in which you find yourself. Chapter 2, of course, addresses some very important financial issues that many graduate students and new PhDs face. Given the reality of student loan debt, we are sure you will appreciate the concrete suggestions offered in this chapter to lessen the burden of the repayment process. The final chapter in this Part presents guidance that we can all use to keep ourselves healthy and vibrant in the work we do. As you transition from graduate training to your professional career, you will undoubtedly face new challenges and stressful situations. By taking care of yourself and finding ways to create balance, you can optimize your functioning and achieve a higher level of fulfillment in your professional and personal life.





Chapter 1

Maximizing Your Graduate Training

Issues to Think about from the Start

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Toward the end of your undergraduate career, you probably learned a bit about strategies to increase your chances of getting accepted into graduate school. You probably did not learn much, however, about maximizing your training opportunities while you are there. This book attempts to fill that void, and in this chapter we will explore some issues to think about from the start of your graduate program. In writing this chapter, we are reflecting on things we wished we had known (or were really glad we did know) at the beginning of our time in graduate school. Some of the information presented here will be covered in more detail in subsequent chapters, but we will present some tips for successful integration into graduate program and some pitfalls to avoid.

Getting accepted into and selecting the right (i.e., well-matched) graduate program is essential, but you probably already knew that (and we will discuss this issue as a concern for undergraduates later in the chapter). Success in graduate school begins and ends with a program where student and faculty interests intersect and support each other. Once you are in a program though, the most immediate concern is becoming involved and integrated. Boice (2000) has conducted landmark work on identifying new faculty who are “quick starters,” that is, new faculty who adapt more readily than others and are more efficient at carrying out faculty responsibilities. In a similar vein, new graduate students must figure out what the expectations of their programs are and how best to meet these expectations. Let’s consider some of these factors that can help you to become a quick starter and how

you can most effectively learn to meet the expectations of your department and succeed in your graduate program.

Tips for Becoming a “Quick Starter”

Attend to Face Time

Graduate school is much less similar to undergraduate school than many students anticipate. One of the biggest transitions in beginning graduate school is simply the structure of your day. As an undergraduate, you probably made your way to campus or downstairs from your dorm room shortly before your first class, which you conveniently scheduled to be around noon. You might head home during gaps in your day, or maybe hit the library for a little study time (or a nap) before your classes were over. You might have some club meetings or social activities to keep you occupied until you went home for the night. In graduate school, however, your life has much more focus, for better and worse. One thing to plan on from the beginning is simply to be around; that is, to put in “face time.” Because graduate school is more like a job than “school,” you should plan on arriving in your department in the morning and staying all day. Face time is one of the most important factors for getting a good start and creating good impressions with your professors and cohort. When your advisor wants to see how you are doing on a project, you’ll be there. When a classmate needs help running a study, you’ll be there. When an advanced student breaks open the champagne to celebrate a successful thesis defense, you’ll be there. And you’ll be immersed in the field every day, which will pay huge dividends down the road. Even if you are very busy with offcampus commitments such as practica placements or externships, your time on campus is extremely important.

By paying attention to face time, you will be learning about the subtle expectations of your department and its faculty. Many of these expectations will not be clearly spelled out in any handbooks or orientation sessions, so being around helps you pick up some of those other norms. One pitfall of being scarce in the department is that you might not know that your presence would have been helpful. When you are not there and a problem arises, you do not know who was there to cover for you or to address the issue. As a result, you might not be aware that someone else was picking up your slack. So don’t assume that because you didn’t hear about a negative repercussion of your absence, there wasn’t one.

Be a Full and Active Participant in Your Program

Another thing that makes graduate school so different from undergraduate is that although your classes are important and you should do well, they are less important than your research success and other areas of your work. Graduate school is



Graduate Training from the Start

far less about checking off a list of requirements and more about becoming an expert in your area of study. Earning a PhD means that you have gone well beyond taking a large number of high-numbered courses and that you have become a true scholar. This means that your education has taken place largely outside of the classroom and in your laboratory, the hallways of your building, in your advisor's office, and in the field.

Seek out ways to be more fully involved in what is going on in your program. For example, if your program has a regular research meeting or "brown bag" series, be sure not to miss it; people notice who's not there, and it doesn't look good. It might be something less formal, such as a Friday happy hour that comprises other students and perhaps faculty. Putting in a little time at social events like these can help you get the lay of the land a little better and bond with others. If there's a committee that solicits student input, then offer your perspective or volunteer to be the student representative. Take the initiative to try things out, and you will find that your work becomes much more pleasant, and you'll do it better as well. You also will pick up on some subtle cues for success in the program that might not occur to someone to tell you bluntly. For example, if you missed an important function or need to be ready for a professor's especially brutal final exam, others might find it more appropriate to let you know in these settings than to schedule an official appointment to do so. You'll find that a lot of business takes place over a glass of beer or a cup of coffee.



Collaborate

No one is an island, and this is truer in graduate school than in most aspects of your life. The group of graduate students who enters the program with you constitutes your cohort, and you are likely to become close to some of them. It is a good idea to foster these relationships on a professional level, even if you don't become good friends. If another student asks for assistance, you will only benefit by offering it. Not only will you show yourself to be a good departmental citizen, you will also learn more about the field by participating in research different from your own, and you may earn more publications in the process. We are lucky in psychology that graduate students tend not to be in direct competition with one another (for example, class rank is fairly irrelevant in psychology, unlike in law school or medical school). If your cohort can help you succeed, and you can help them, everyone wins.

It's also a good idea to take advantage of collaboration opportunities with undergraduates. Not only will you be helping to craft the next generation of graduate students and boosting your own productivity, but you also will be acquiring some valuable mentoring and teaching experience. As you know, teaching doesn't only happen in the classroom, and it is good experience to help train younger researchers. This experience can give you more to talk about when you write your letters of job application too!



Make Use of Your Mentor

Your relationship with your research mentor or advisor is another difference that you will encounter in your move to graduate school. Although you will likely have close interactions with several professors, your primary mentor will be your main collaborator, and you should take steps (such as face time and collaboration) to make that relationship as productive and positive as possible. Many of us have maintained close relationships with our advisors long after graduate school is over because that relationship is a multifaceted one. Through the symbiosis of research collaboration, you will learn more material faster, and you will show that you are a team player. Letters of reference for jobs don't talk only about productivity but also about your initiative, adaptability, and good humor.

One of the primary reasons that some graduate students fail to complete their programs is that they are used to being so effortlessly successful in undergraduate work that they don't know how to ask for help when they need it. Although some advisors certainly are more helpful than others, your advisor is there to guide you and give advice. Solicit it, and take it. Do not assume that you know better than your advisor, and certainly do not ignore the overt advice that you receive. You may need to be a little political at times, but that's a good skill to learn as well. Chances are that even if you don't immediately understand why others see things the way that they do, there is a method to their madness, and it may be in your interest to trust them until you learn otherwise.

Take Advantage of Opportunities

We have frequently marveled at how many times we have been reluctant to accept an invitation or opportunity to do something, only to have it become a priceless experience that affected our perspectives for years. The first time Elliott was invited to teach statistics, he was extremely apprehensive, having been a sub-par (at best) statistics student in school. And frankly, that first semester teaching it was a little rough. But that one experience led to a tenure track job for which statistics teaching experience was a requirement, and now statistics is one of his favorite classes to teach. Elizabeth has served on numerous committees and with organizations that have provided networking opportunities and have led to exciting presentation and publication opportunities.

You and many students in your cohort will be tempted to decline such opportunities, but make your default response to say yes, and you may find your way into some exciting new domains. Despite the inconveniences, we have tried to be positive about things that have come our way, and they have reaped substantial and unexpected dividends. From attending a conference that didn't sound all that great to giving a guest lecture that sounded like a drag on our time, we have serendipitously made invaluable connections and learned that much more about what our career is really all about. You will be told – rightly – that you need to learn to say no. But for a while,

Graduate Training from the Start

make “yes” your initial impulse. Do your best to attend conferences, to get involved with graduate student organizations and governance, and make contacts with scholars and others in your community.

Network

You’ve probably heard that it’s not what you know, it’s who you know (or to be precise, “it’s *whom* you know”). In the humdrum world of academic psychology, you are unlikely to rub elbows with the truly rich and famous, but you will have the opportunity to meet the movers and shakers in the field, and it’s a great idea to make the most of it. That does not mean to kiss up to them or to brag that you’ve disproven their theory, but it means to express interest and ask questions when you really have them. Although you may be intimidated the first time you meet people you have read about since you were a freshman, you’ll quickly learn that these biggies in the field are people too, and they’re typically pleased that you share an interest in their work.

In addition, do not only pay attention to the hotshots in the field. Try to get to know some fellow graduate students or faculty you may not have heard of but who are doing work that you find interesting. Not only will you be establishing friendships with like-minded colleagues, but you also may establish connections that will help your career. Getting other people’s perspectives and hearing what others are doing in their research can be invaluable in troubleshooting your own work and helping you to generate new ideas, not to mention the benefits of having additional collaborators.

Engage in Self-care

Graduate school can be overwhelming, even to the most prepared student, and many graduate students could benefit from efforts to reduce stress (Descutner and Thelan, 1989). Remember that you’re still on a college campus, which means you can join the gym, attend movies and other campus events (one of the perks that partially justifies the meagerness of your salary) to help get your mind out of your work on occasion. Every now and then, read something for pleasure, even if others make you feel guilty for doing so. Although you will be immersed in the field – and that’s generally a good thing – you owe it to yourself and your field to keep your perspective. Just as you should take advantage of the professional opportunities that come your way, you should know your limits and say “no” from time to time. Just as you need to be putting in long hours in your office and the lab, you need occasionally to join the group in the bar or the park to cut loose a little bit. Graduate school is a full-time job, but it doesn’t have to become everything in your life, so keep your perspective, and you’ll be a better psychologist in the long run. Learning how to find time to relax in graduate school will help you learn how to achieve balance in your professional career later on, a topic explored in more depth in chapter 3.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Thinking You Have Nothing to Learn

Everyone who enters a selective PhD program was a bit of a hotshot in college (Terre, 2001). The playing field in graduate school is somewhat more level because everyone there was successful in most avenues of undergrad. Some graduate students enter their programs under the impression that they have all the answers, an attitude that rarely results in success. At the same time, beware the cohort member who tells you how graduate school *really* is; he or she probably doesn't know but is hanging onto that last opportunity to act like a big fish in a small pond. A little humility can go a long way because it will make your mentor want to work with you, your cohort want to collaborate with you, and the more advanced students welcome you. Graduate school is tough if you have to do it alone, so cultivate those relationships by showing that you are there to learn from those who came before you.

Being Too Rigid in Your Plan

A major part of the reason that you were accepted into your graduate program was because you expressed an interest in topics that were relevant to your mentor or other faculty in your department. Although you may have written your application as though you could be all things to all people, perhaps you have a theory in mind that will change the world, and you have no intention of straying from that trajectory. With all due respect, the beginning of your graduate work is the time to be flexible, open-minded, and cooperative, not dogmatic or stubborn. It may be, for example, that your advisor's interests have changed over time from when he or she listed those interests on the departmental Webpage. This is not a bait-and-switch; it's simply a natural progression. You need to adapt to the evolution of those around you and find ways to incorporate your revolutionary concepts into a paradigm that can align with their expertise. Of course, try to have input, as innovation is essential, but finding a new perspective on that idea can make your contribution to the field that much stronger. Especially at first, take as much guidance as others offer; you'll have the opportunity for more independence and autonomy later.

Conveying a Sense of Entitlement

One of the surefire ways to create trouble for yourself in graduate school is to arrive with a notion that you deserve special treatment. Many aspects of grad school life are trying, but remember that everyone is going through the same thing. Your advisor may sometimes be too busy to help you as much as you might like. Your department may ask you to do some things that seem irrelevant to your goals. You may need to help some colleagues out with a project and not get authorship. These things

Graduate Training from the Start

happen and your ability and willingness not to expect the moon from those around you will contribute to your long-term success, as they will see helping you as a mutually beneficial and pleasant exercise, rather than a burden.

Some students enter their program expecting undivided attention and spoon-fed assistance, but those expectations are misguided. Remember that your professors went through graduate school themselves (even though it may have been a *very* long time ago), and they can spot a prima donna when one's around. You don't want to be identified that way. Do your best to pitch in and give as much (or more) than you get. Even if some people hide it better than others, everyone will be stressed out at times, and you do not want to contribute to the anxiety and workload of those around you. Try to be aware of the things others have done for you, even if you didn't ask for it, and return the favor whenever possible.

A Special Note to Minority Students

Although psychology graduate programs have come a long way, they unfortunately continue to be populated largely by students of European descent. We say unfortunately because the disparities of our society are magnified at that level of education. Graduate school can be lonely for anyone, even without the added stressor of feeling more of a minority than you may be used to, especially if you come from an HBCU. Keep in mind that the advice in this section does not apply only to racial minorities. Being the only female in an all-male department can be just as isolating. Further, students of a nontraditional age, who enter graduate school at a later date, may feel distanced from their peers for a variety of reasons. Recognize first that your mentor and cohort are likely to be sympathetic to your situation and understanding of your need to solicit support outside. At the same time, try not to ostracize yourself from the typical social and professional activities of your department. It can be a difficult balance, but it's one you can find and that can lead to your ultimate success.

In psychology we are fortunate to have a professional body that is generally culturally aware, but you may need to take some initiative in making your transition to your new role as a graduate student as smooth as possible (Murray, 2001). If you are of African descent or another ethnic minority group, be sure to take advantage of any special programs or initiatives geared toward you. This may mean getting involved with largely undergraduate minority student associations. Or perhaps it means joining minority student caucuses within your subdiscipline. We have known several African American students who have made connections (typically at research conferences!) with black faculty at other universities who have unofficially mentored them. We strongly recommend following up on those kinds of relationships, and allow other people to help you learn from their experiences. Remember that your success in graduate school means that you will have the opportunity to contribute to the presence of psychologists from minority groups and to lessen that disparity in the future.

Advice for Undergraduates

A big part of getting accepted into a graduate program and succeeding once you're there is picking the right program in the first place, and much has been written on this important topic (see American Psychological Association, 2007, for review). In order to thrive as a graduate student, one must be in an environment where one's interests and talents line up with the desires and expectations of the faculty. Therefore one criterion is central to any application and success strategy – match! Basically there are three simple questions to ask yourself: What are your interests? Who is doing the work you want to do? And, are they willing to train students (Lai & Ellison, 2007)? If you give yourself the time to thoroughly explore these questions, your chances of being a good fit for a program dramatically increase.

Investigate Potential Programs

The best way to find a good match is to research your options thoroughly. Get started early in the application process and learn as much as you can about the programs to which you are applying. Begin by searching *Graduate Study in Psychology*, APA's comprehensive source of psychology graduate programs in the US and Canada. This publication contains all the pertinent information you would need to narrow your search including the number of applications received and applicants accepted each year, employment information of graduates, descriptions of programs, and much more. Using this information, pick a range of programs to explore; include some safety nets and some long shots.

Once you have identified potential programs, visit their Web sites to ascertain how well the program seems to match with your interests. Are the topics you are interested in emphasized in the program's description? Does it appear that faculty there is actively working in your areas of interest? If it seems like the program is a good fit, go to the next step.

Investigate Faculty Members

One of the major differences between undergraduate and graduate studies is that, for the most part, in graduate you are actually applying to work with a *person* as opposed to a program. Typically you will be accepted to work in a specific faculty member's lab and become a member of his or her research team. Therefore, it is very important that you have a good match not only between you and the program, but also between you and the faculty.

Begin by exploring faculty Web sites. How do they describe their interests? Do they have a strong (or any) student presence on their site? After identifying some faculty



Graduate Training from the Start

with similar interests, look up their recent articles or chapters and read them closely. Can you mesh your interest with their methodology? You will learn a lot about how you would spend your time in their lab by simply reading their current research.

Make Contact

Once you have a list of programs and faculty of interest, make contact with them. Be sure to do this, however, in a nonharassing, polite way. Think of an insightful question to ask (that has not already been answered on their Web site or promotional materials) or ask if the faculty currently is accepting students into their lab. This is an opportunity to demonstrate that you have done your homework and are seriously interested. You might also consider contacting current students in the program and asking them about their experiences and satisfaction. Do not underestimate that, with faculty or students, this is the first impression you are making – so make it good!

Attend to the Nontangibles

Finally, do not overlook other quality of life issues when choosing a program. If you cannot take the cold, perhaps a graduate program in North Dakota is not for you; New Orleans sure would have been difficult for us if we hated humidity! Are you willing to leave behind family or significant others if you enroll in an out-of-state program, and how will that impact your happiness in general? These are important issues to consider when picking a program because ultimately they will affect your overall experience. On the other hand, remember that your graduate school time isn't for ever, so be willing to go out on a bit of a limb and take a few chances if it feels right.

In sum, the more time and effort you invest in ensuring a good match between you and your program, the more likely your chances of maximizing your training and enjoying a prosperous career with your psychology degree.

Conclusion

Congratulations on making it to the highest level of an educational program! Your undergraduate training led you to this point, which will help you make it into our great field as a professional. In coming this far, you presumably know a thing or two about studying, time management, and self-motivation. We have tried to bring your attention to some of the less tangible issues that you should be aware of as a graduate student. Remember that you are being evaluated on many different levels and that those letters of reference that you eventually will solicit will benefit from a thorough assessment of you as a whole person. Likewise, your eventual success as a scholar and on the job market depends upon your ability to show that you are a complete applicant. It's never too early to get going and to make the most of the opportunities that come your way. Enjoy this exciting and revealing time in your career, and welcome to the next level!



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Suggestions for Further Reading

Darley, J. M., Zanna, M. P., & Roediger III, H. L. (Eds.) (2004). *The compleat academic: A career guide* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. This book, now in its second edition, has become a classic, filled with practical career advice for new academics. Taking a graduate student or new faculty perspective, the authors present the “informal rules” of the academy as well as the ins and outs of topics such as the hiring process, teaching strategies, and publishing. This book is worth consulting at any point in your academic career.

Johnson, W. B. & Huwe, J. M. (2002). *Getting mentored in graduate school*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Written specifically for graduate students, this book provides a guide for finding and utilizing a true mentor. Based on the premise that students who have a mentor get more out of their graduate training, the authors use their own mentoring experiences to provide strategies to ensure that these relationships are successful. This book would also be useful for faculty who want to improve their own mentoring skills.

Kuther, T. L. (2004). *Graduate study in psychology: Your guide to success*. Springfield, IL: Thomas. As the title suggests, this book provides a comprehensive look at issues related to graduate school success. This book is primarily focused on getting *into* a graduate program and provides valuable tips on how to choose a program, how to enhance your application, and even provides a year-by-year guide for undergraduates. The author also offers practical advice for the transition to a graduate program.