How to Be a Successful Graduate Student

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Outline

- Definition of a Successful Graduate Student
- Characteristics of Good Graduate Students
- How to Be a Good Graduate Student
Definition

- A successful graduate student is one who gets as much out of the process of graduate studies as possible.

Why Bother?
- Graduate work is a privilege.
- Fully engaging in graduate studies builds character.

Characteristics of Successful Graduate Students

- Working hard 5.60
- Getting along with people 5.17
- Writing ability 4.83
- Doing research 4.74
- Handling stress 4.72
- Discipline 4.64
- Good grades 4.61
- High intelligence 4.53
- Establishing a relationship with a mentor 4.39
- Getting along with peers 4.00
- Broad knowledge 4.00
- Specialized knowledge 3.88
- Reflecting program values 3.78
- Being liked by faculty 3.69
- Creativity 3.67
- Obtaining a master's degree as quickly as possible 3.60
- Visibility in the department 3.45
- Competitiveness 3.29
- Relating to professors on a personal level 3.24
Characteristics of Good Graduate Students: Faculty Responses

(From Cornell University)

- “Characteristics of a good graduate student are a passion for scholarship, originality and the ability to make creative decisions. The student must start with a professional goal, not appear in a graduate program to "look around" for something interesting, i.e. to go shopping. There is some shopping necessary in finding the right people for his/her program and graduate committee, but not to see if a subject turns up! It is assumed that an undergraduate has already some exposure to the discipline prior to coming to a graduate program.”

- “Someone with a lot of self-motivation and a driving curiosity to understand how nature works. This person should have a good critical mind; that is, they should not accept everything they are told but also think before they question anything. A good graduate student feels personal responsibility for learning, for understanding the science behind the research, for making and recording careful observations in the laboratory.”

- “Intellectual curiosity; Ability to work independently; High level of personal motivation.”
Characteristics of Good Graduate Students: Faculty Responses

- “Intelligence; self-motivation; creativity; enjoyment of the scientific process; ability and willingness to see both on the fine-detail scale and The Big Picture”
- “passionate about a particular field or set of questions, self-starter, independent, dedicated, and a personality that can withstand the emotional roller-coaster of grad school”
- “The prime index of success is motivation.”
- “consistency of effort and self-motivation is key”

Summary: Necessary Qualities for Success in Graduate School

- Curiosity and exploration
- Love of learning
- Self-motivation
- Self-discipline
- Perseverance
- Initiative and independence
How to Be a Good Graduate Student
(Adapted from report by Marie desJardins, Indiana University)

- Why is graduate work hard?
- Doing the Thesis/Project
  - Day-to-Day Work
  - Staying Motivated
  - Working with a Supervisor
  - Selecting a Thesis Topic
  - Writing the Thesis
  - Getting Feedback
- Becoming Part of a Research Community
- Creating a Balanced Lifestyle

Why is Graduate Work Hard?

- Two main things make graduate work so hard:
  1. The unstructured nature of the process
  2. Lack of information about what you should spend your time on

- Common complaints:
  - Workload
  - Uncaring attitudes of faculty
  - Constant pressure of being evaluated

- How to beat these problems:
  - Strong motivation and focus
  - Knowing the expectations/standards
Day-to-Day Work

- Thesis work is a process.
  - Reading, thinking/creating, discussing, seeking feedback, writing, and revising
- At first, you should spend at least half of your work time reading.

Tips:
- Keep a journal of your ideas
- Read like a critical consumer
- Take notes
- Keep your articles and notes organized

Staying Motivated

- The hardest part of graduate school is staying motivated.
- It's normal to suffer from insecurity, anxiety, low self-confidence, and even boredom.

Tips:
- Find a sympathetic ear.
- Identify the exact reasons for your anxiety and make steps to improve the situation.
- Schedule organized activities.
- Set daily, weekly, and monthly goals that are reasonable (divide-and-conquer).
- Use a buddy system.
Working with a Supervisor

- Your choice of, and relationship with, a faculty supervisor will make or break your graduate career.
- Finding the “right” supervisor is critical.
- A good supervisor will serve as a mentor.

Tips:
- Know your supervisor’s research, supervision track-record, and expectations for you.
- The most important thing is to ask for what you need from your supervisor.

Tips for Selecting a Thesis Topic

- Read – be aware of past and current research.
- Check “suggestions for future work” sections of articles.
- Develop an extension of a previous study.
- Pick a topic that’s important.
- Pick a topic that you’re interested in.
- Pick a narrow, well-defined topic.
- If you’re gutsy, pick a topic that branches out in a new direction (but be aware that this can be more difficult).
- If the topic is too out of the ordinary, it may be difficult to argue for its merits.
- Write a thesis proposal.
Writing the Thesis

- Myth – the thesis happens in two distinct phases: doing the research and writing the thesis.

Tips:
- Break the writing process down into manageable stages.
- Set goals in terms of tasks that can be finished in day or week.
- Write by way of a refining process.
- Keep your audience in mind while you write.
- Use a buddy system.

Getting Feedback

- It is essential that you learn to cope with, and even seek out, critical feedback.
- Learn to listen to valid constructive criticism and to ignore destructive pointless criticism.

Tips:
- Don’t take constructive feedback personally.
- To get feedback, you have to put your work out there.
  - Discuss your ideas/research with students and faculty
  - Make presentations
Visibility

- Becoming an active member of the department and broader research community is critical for your development as a student.
- Your supervisor plays an important helping role.

**Tips:**
- Present your research at seminars.
- Attend conferences.
- Publish papers.
- Network with other researchers.

Balance

- Faculty members disagree on the issue of balance.
- Psychologically speaking, it is unrealistic and unhealthy to spend 80% of your waking hours working.

**Tips:**
- Keep a consistent schedule.
- Find enjoyable non-work activities.
- Create a supportive social network.
Resources

- How to Be a Good Graduate Student -
  http://www.cs.indiana.edu/how.2b/how.2b.html
- Time management –
  http://www.gradresources.org/articles/time_management.shtml
- Choosing a Thesis Supervisor –
  http://www.uleth.ca/edu/runte/professional/choose.htm
- How to Choose a Good Supervisor -
  http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg19726442.500-the-phd-journey-how-to-choose-a-good-supervisor.html
- Maximizing Your Relationship with Your Supervisor -
  http://www.cpa.ca/cpasite/userfiles/Documents/students/Psynopsis20.pdf