

Six Principles of Highly Effective Grad Students

Introduction to Graduate Research

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Structure of Professionalization Sessions

These sessions introduce you to the norms and expectations of graduate study in political science, with specific attention to the program requirements of Vanderbilt.

Today

- Research as a career
- Building a mentorship team
- Norms and expectations

Friday

- Comprehensive exams
- Coursework
- Service assignments

Getting a Ph.D. is weird

Getting a Ph.D. is weird

There are few comparisons to other professions

1.2% of the U.S. population has a Ph.D., according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Getting a Ph.D. is longer than other post-graduate degrees:

- MBA is 2 years.
- JD is 3 years.
- MD is 4 years (although many, many years in residency/fellowship).

You will earn less \$ than you could if you were not an academic.

Getting a Ph.D. is weird

You have an unusual amount of freedom

You do not have a boss telling you what to do.

You can research anything you want.

Your time is unstructured, especially after coursework.

Justin Grimmer calls this our “academic rent”.

The Hidden Curriculum

Hidden curriculum: the norms, expectations, soft skills, and informal knowledge that inform academic practice but are not necessarily formally communicated.

Core competencies:

- Preparing discussant comments.
- Navigating journal placements.
- Securing funding.

Cultural norms

- Networking at conferences
- Working with coauthors.
- What faculty are looking for in job talks

The Hidden Curriculum

Purpose of Professionalization:

1. Getting a Ph.D. is a job.
2. Manage responsibilities.
3. Start your research agenda early.
4. Build a team and go to them often.
5. Be proactive.
6. Be intentional about rest.

These are just my perspectives

Although the advice I give here is based on best principles, others may disagree.

Principle 1: Getting a Ph.D. is a Job

Getting a Ph.D. is a Job

Grad school is not college 2.0

Especially at first, much of graduate school resembles undergrad: taking classes, writing papers, studying for exams.

As we will talk about on Friday, coursework isn't about grades—it is **training**.

- Substantive courses are to develop the theoretical framework to engage with current work in the discipline.
- Methods courses are to develop the skills necessary to advance new research ideas.

Graduate school is your transition from student to researcher.

Getting a Ph.D. is a Job

*You have almost **too much freedom**.*

Especially after coursework, you have an exceptional amount of freedom:

- If you don't want to work, nobody is going to make you.
- You don't have a boss that is going to tell you what to do.
- Little external indicators of success.
- You have few clear deadlines.

Taken together, many students lose structure and fall behind.

Getting a Ph.D. is a Job

My advice: treat this like a 9-to-5

- Show up by at least 9:00AM.
- Set weekly and daily goals, maybe with the help of an advisor
- Write a to-do list and sit at your desk checking off items.
- Stay until at least 5:00PM.

 **This is just my experience.**

You don't necessarily need to come into the office—others find they are more productive at home or in coffee shops.

Principle 2: Manage Responsibilities

Manage Responsibilities

You will have more to do than is feasible

You will have more to do than you can reasonably accomplish:

- Substantive coursework with hundreds of pages of reading each week.
- Methods classes and problem sets.
- RA and TA responsibilities.

Analogy: you are juggling so many balls, that you will not be able to keep them all up.

- Some balls are more important than others.
- Don't drop the same ball over and over.
- Some balls are rubber. Some balls are glass.

Manage Responsibilities

Setting priorities

You should have an informal (or formal) ranking of priorities.

1. Statistics and methods should *always* be at the top of the list.
2. Substantive coursework directly related to your interests.
3. Substantive coursework not directly related to your interests

Even if you are in a course not related to your interests, always do the reading—don't take shortcuts.

Principle 3: Start Your Research Agenda Early

Start Your Research Agenda Early

Coauthor with faculty

The best way to learn how to do your own research is to do research alongside someone who is already experienced.

If your RA responsibility is related to a new project, faculty may ask you to join on as a coauthor.

Completely fine to ask faculty who do work related to yours if there are any projects that you could work on together.

 **Don't take on too much.**

Coauthorships are 2+ year commitments. If you take on too many, it will start to crowd out your own independent research.

Start Your Research Agenda Early

Try out many research ideas

Get in the habit of coming up with many research ideas.

- The best research ideas come from your reading of the news, history, or your personal background.
- For each research idea, think of what the ideal research design would be with unlimited time and money—often it is more feasible than you think.

Have a trusted advisor or peer to talk through research ideas with.

 **Don't write for other people.**

Trying to write for what is popular or fashionable almost never works. The best research ideas come from your passion.

Principle 4: Build a Team and Go to Them Often.

Build a Team and Go to Them Often

Get feedback early and often

It takes time to learn which ideas are worth pursuing, and which research designs are feasible.

Have 1-2 people who will give you constructive but honest feedback about your ideas.

Feedback (especially critical feedback) is a gift. Thank them for their effort and take their comments seriously.

Build a Team and Go to Them Often

Choosing an advisor

Your advisor should:

- write the types of books/articles that you find interesting.
- match your working style and personality.
- be responsive and timely with feedback.

Do not choose an advisor based on letterhead, but your (main) advisor does need to be tenured.



Changing advisors

You do not need to choose a dissertation chair until your third year. If in doubt, use the second-year paper as a test run of their advising style.

Build a Team and Go to Them Often

Building a Mentorship Network

Focus on building a team:

- Academic advisor(s)
- Committee members (or potential committee members)
- Non-committee faculty mentors
- Graduate mentors
- Broader professional teams

Peer-to-peer mentorship is a complement, not a substitute, to faculty mentorship and professionalization seminars.

Principle 5: Be Proactive

Be Proactive

Learn to “manage up”

In a normal job, your boss tells you what to do. In academia, it works better if you are the one (usually) driving the relationship with your advisors.

- Stay on top of readings and go to office hours to clear up sticking points.
- Send a memo to your advisors before every meeting with an agenda and update on your progress since the last time you spoke.

Being an academic is like being the CEO of a one-person startup, and your committee is your Board of Directors.

Be Proactive

Make time for admin

Unfortunately, it means you are also the Chief Operating Officer.

- Be on top of deadlines and put together plans to have things in order well ahead of time.
- Plan out coursework and service assignments so that you are within the program guidelines.
- Know all of requirements, and do the paperwork for your advisors.

This is particularly important if you want to work with someone more senior, who may have more responsibilities.

Principle 6: Be Intentional With Rest

Be Intentional With Rest

You cannot work hard 24/7

“Graduate school is a marathon, not a sprint”

So, train like a marathon runner:

- When you are working, be focused on pushing yourself.
- When you are resting, fully commit to taking time off.
- Junk miles don't do you any good.



Work-life balance is also instrumental

Consistent productivity cannot happen without frequent and meaningful recovery.

Be Intentional With Rest

Take care of yourself

Tips for work-life balance:

- Develop or maintain an exercise habit.
- Get at least 8 hours of sleep.
- Have a hobby.
- Maintain a social network inside and outside academia.
- Get a therapist before you need a therapist (more on this Friday)

Again, this is instrumental!

Questions?