

# Graduate School

**G**raduate school is the first step in what will become a long series of steps in your professional career. It is a time when you will develop some deep and lasting friendships. It is also a time when you will experience a great deal of frustration and anxiety. Graduate school can be an emotional roller coaster ride. To make it worth the price of admission, consider the following:

**Persevere.** By being admitted into a top graduate program, you more than likely have all the intellectual firepower you need to become a successful academic. What separates those who finish with a Ph.D. and those who don't is the will to succeed. Wanting to succeed means making sacrifices along the way, including late nights and weekends lost to studying. The same is true when it comes to finding a job, getting tenure, and advancing in the profession. This does not mean everything is always difficult. The academic profession includes a great many rewards including the ability to study what you want, determine your own schedule, constantly meet interesting people and inspire others. Trust me, the rewards do outweigh the sacrifices.



**The Big Goal.** The reason you are in a Ph.D. program is to write a dissertation and get a job. Don't forget that.

**The Big Goal, Part II.** The dissertation demonstrates that you have the basic skills needed to do research on your own. Although the substantive content will matter, your dissertation committee will be looking to see if you have mastered the research techniques needed to become a productive scholar in the future. Students often forget that and get bogged down in trying to demonstrate how much they know, rather than revealing that they know how to conduct research and *finish* a project. See Professional Pointers #55 (The Dissertation) for more details.

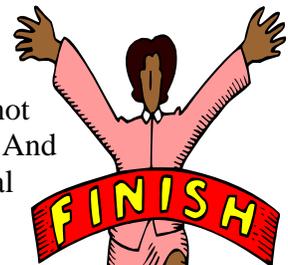
**Your Coaching Staff.** When it comes to writing your thesis and getting a job, who is on your dissertation committee is as important as what is in your dissertation. Choose wisely.

- Pick people you know you can work with.
- Pick people who will push you.
- Have at least one or two “big names” on your committee. Prospective employers look at who you work with to get an indication of what you do. This may be inappropriate at times, but it is also unavoidable. Also, the “big names” usually have good contacts at a wide array of universities and can help work your case when it comes time to look for a job.

- You can have more people on your committee than the required minimum. But don't go overboard. If you think that a fourth person would really help, then put that person on the committee. However, realize that one of the most difficult tasks in your dissertation defense will be scheduling everybody to be in the same room at the same time. Also realize that the old cliché “too many cooks spoil the broth” is applicable. Sometimes adding more people increased the likelihood that you will receive contradictory advice. If a large committee prevents you from finishing, cut it down.

**Learn to Hurdle.** There are a great many obstacles along the path to a Ph.D. Realize them for what they are – hurdles. A M.A. thesis is generally designed to show that you have the basic skills needed for research and can follow a smaller project through to completion. The qualifying exams are designed to show that you have breadth in the subfields you choose to study. The Ph.C. defense (dissertation proposal defense) is a check to make sure you have a reasonable research plan in place before plunging into the research. Each of these hurdles is important, but remember that the big prize is the dissertation.

**Run Fast.** Graduate school, despite all its hardships, has a certain bohemian allure to it. Although it may not seem like it now, this will be a time in your life where you have a great amount of freedom and free time. (I'm not kidding. If you think the grad school life is too consuming, the professoriate is not for you.) Do not get snookered into becoming a lifelong student. That is a bad strategy financially and professionally. (Potential employers often see 9+ years in grad school as an indication of laziness.) Try to aim for 5 years, perhaps a bit more if you are doing extensive fieldwork. (Seven years is not uncommon, but set your initial goal at fewer years and push yourself.) And while you may try to aim for perfection in your dissertation (a noble goal to have), remember that the best dissertation is a finished dissertation.



**The Rejection/Rejoice Ratio.** Throughout your career, you will come to realize that rejection and failure are common. Up to now, you probably have had an easy go of things. However, expect many fellowships to be turned down, articles rejected by journals, criticism at conferences, etc. In the long run, your rejection/rejoice ratio will be much higher than one. Keep trying though and remember that even the very best scholars have been turned down more times than you will ever know. And take time to celebrate the triumphs.

**Make Friends.** Grad school is a great time to make lifetime friends – true friends who will help you celebrate your triumphs, comfort you in your agony, and give you someone to have dinner with at conferences. Form a study group. Have a weekly potluck dinner with your cohort. Go bowling after POL S 500. Whatever you do, try to avoid conflict within your cohort. Also remember that someday down the line you may be competing for jobs with your close friends. Never let that interfere with the importance of your relationship.