

Surviving the Ph.D.: Hints for Navigating the Sometimes Stormy Seas of Graduate Education in Political Science*

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The scene is a familiar one: two graduate students, alike in most respects, but headed down divergent paths. Both students entered the Ph.D. program in political science at the same time with similar credentials and similar goals. While having coffee one day, the two reminisced about their graduate experiences and their respective futures. Graduate Student X was lamenting that after four full years in the Ph.D. program, he still hadn't reached the dissertation stage. Graduate Student Y, on the other hand, was in very good spirits—she had finished the dissertation and secured the job of her choice. What distinguishes these two very similar individuals who achieved very different results?

Graduate education can be very intimidating. Even those who have been in the system a while may find the process unnerving. Often, students fail to see graduate school through to graduation. Many such failures stem from students having unclear expectations and a lack of knowledge about how they can enhance their prospects for a successful graduate career.

Graduate students, especially those in doctoral programs, must start almost immediately to wrestle with certain issues that will impact their future careers. How will I make it through my course work? How will I survive my comprehensive exams? What subfield would I like to eventually do research in? Whom should I pick as a mentor? What topic should I select for my dissertation? Should I present my work at conferences? How do I write, let alone *build*, a vita? These are questions that every graduate student should confront and grapple with. How students address

these questions can significantly influence the career choices and paths they will face when (if) they graduate.

Stage One: Getting the Feet Wet without Drowning

First-Year Blues

The first year in any graduate program can be difficult both personally and professionally. Often in this situation, the student has moved away from family, friends, and significant others and is cast into an uncertain environment. Fellow graduate students and professors are strangers and the first few weeks can be intimidating. Besides the personal tumult, the academic component can be even more unnerving. Graduate work is different from undergraduate studies—expectations are higher, the workload is greater, and the pressure can be enormous.

This whole phenomenon involving the first two semesters of graduate work could be termed the *first-year blues*. It is just what it sounds like—a potentially discouraging but important initial stage of the graduate career. Courses usually are chosen for beginning students (frequently core classes and the one or two methods/research design classes) and they may feel like nameless faces in the classroom. New students must remember: *it gets better* and, *they are not alone*. If a student survives the first year blues, he or she will often find that graduate school isn't such an awful place, that he or she can compete, and that ultimately he or she can succeed. Students must also realize that most fellow graduate students are going through the same process and are having similar negative feelings. The urge to drop out may be greatest at this point—especially in the first semester when many students come to the realization, often incorrectly, that they have made a terrible mistake.¹

Workload

One of the challenges students face in the first stage of a graduate program

is the increased workload. There is a sharp difference between undergraduate and graduate studies—courses are tougher and students are expected to come to class prepared and ready to participate. Papers in graduate seminars are predicated on solid social science research, not based on opinion. In essence, the bar has been raised and graduate students must meet these higher demands.

A daunting task of graduate scholarship is the large workload for each class. If a student were to attempt to read every word of every assignment in every course, there would not be enough hours in the day to accomplish this task. Students must learn quickly to look for general themes, conflicts, etc., in assigned readings in order to synthesize large bodies of research. Students must not lose the forest for the trees—i.e., *students should learn to grasp the general essence of a body of literature without memorizing every reading it in its entirety*. Once a student develops this skill, the workload isn't as overwhelming.

First Impressions Matter

The first year is also crucial because it is then that a graduate student fashions his or her reputation. I cannot overstate how important it is to *establish an excellent reputation from the beginning*. Fortunately for some, unfortunately for others, reputations can be hard to change once formed. It is up to the student to make sure that the faculty and other graduate students see him or her in a positive light. The surest way to do this is for the student to be prepared for class and willing to participate. Nothing deflates a professor's opinion of a graduate student quicker than a student who appears unprepared and not serious about his or her studies. Another way to accomplish this is to be punctual or even early in submitting assignments. A student's punctuality demonstrates that, unlike many others, he or she is not a procrastinator. Finally, if a student finds him or herself struggling in a particular

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class, the student should speak with the professor in an effort to determine the problem. Most professors are open to this as it demonstrates that the student is serious about his or her scholarship. However, the student should not expect special consideration because of such discussions.

Networking with Peers

The first stage is important for one final reason: *friendships made with fellow graduate students can enrich both the student's personal and professional lives.* Friends can, among other things, provide entertainment, companionship, and emotional support. Graduate school can be a very lonely place and a close friend or two can make a great difference. Friendships in graduate school do more than just enhance a student's personal life—they can also provide a network that can pay dividends throughout graduate school and beyond. First, graduate school friendships can provide students with a support system through which they can help one another get through graduate coursework. This would include, among other things, meeting for study sessions, providing input on seminar papers, and being a source for ideas. Also, peers can provide emotional support and advice. After all, who knows more about the situation that a doctoral student is going through (e.g., money problems, family conflicts due to graduate school, politics within the department) than another doctoral student in the same program? Finally, friendships made in graduate school can last a lifetime, thus enhancing one's personal and professional lives. Peers can become a source of intellectual stimulation and motivation for research—many coauthored books and journal articles are spawned directly from friendships struck in graduate school.

Stage Two: Refining the Agenda

By the end of the first year, much has changed for the typical graduate student: individuals who were once strangers are now friends; many students will have grown accustomed to the rigors of graduate study; and some students will have a better grasp of the substantive issues that interest them. It is the second stage of graduate school, however, that is arguably the most important. During this stage, students normally identify their area of specialization, find a faculty mentor, and some become actively involved in presenting their research at professional conferences.

Finding a Faculty Mentor

Establishing a strong relationship with a faculty mentor is one of the most important factors in determining the success one achieves as a graduate student. Faculty members “know the ropes,” so to speak, and their guidance on research, and professional and personal matters, can be invaluable. Typically, a faculty mentor is someone with research interests similar to those of the student. Thus, the mentor can be an excellent source for ideas and can serve as an informed reviewer of the student's work (e.g., see Andersen 2001; Benesh 2001; Farrar-Myers 2001).

Professionally, a faculty mentor is “connected.” As such, the mentor can introduce students to top names in the field and direct them to other academics who are pursuing similar research. Also, a mentor can help prepare graduate students for conference participation—from submitting a strong paper proposal to knowing what to expect at a panel presentation. Finally, a mentor can be a trusted source for guidance on personal matters. While it is true that some mentors are more accessible than others, because they have already been through the trials and tribulations of graduate school they will have likely encountered situations similar to the student's (e.g., see Andersen 2001; May 2001).

Avoiding Departmental Politics: Duck Your Head and Stay Out of the Crossfire!

Academia is an ugly place at times. Regrettably, academic departments may suffer from office politics and animosity between faculty members. Conflicts arise for a variety of reasons, from methodological differences to personal jealousy (e.g., Ricci 1984). Some professors have large egos, jealously guard their perquisites and turf, and can be petty. In some academic environments, faculty view graduate students, especially Ph.D. students, as pawns in an ongoing departmental war. A good survival strategy for most graduate students is to avoid getting involved in the conflict if at all possible. If a student maintains collegial relations with most faculty members and other graduate students, he or she minimizes the risk that personal animosities could derail graduation or job placement.

Unfortunately for some students, staying neutral is next to impossible and those students are eventually forced to choose sides. Even in those situations, the student would be wise to avoid conflict

as much as possible—bad-mouthing other graduate students or faculty members is never a good strategy, as such comments may get back to those individuals. When that happens, it is difficult to repair the damage. Also, such scurrilous behavior runs counter to the profession's norms of civility and professionalism (e.g., AAUP 1987; APSA 1997). Thus students must be careful not to damage their own reputations by becoming involved in conflicts that do not concern them.

Making Your Coursework Count: Converting Seminar Papers into Conference Papers

An active professional conference-participation record can only help a graduate student stand out on the job market (e.g., see Brintnall 1996; Dolan et al. 1997; Furlong and Furlong 1994).² Though most departments do not require graduate students to present research at academic conferences, those students that do so can improve their job prospects (den Dulk 2001). By converting graduate seminar papers into conference papers, a student can build a consistent and large record of conference presentations. Such a process is relatively easy and requires little extra effort. Also, faculty will often help their students write conference proposals and revise their papers.

Presenting papers at professional conferences can be an eye-opening experience for a graduate student. Some realize that public speaking and the intellectual give-and-take that occurs at such events can be stimulating and exciting. Conferences also afford students the opportunity to network with peers and established academics in their fields (den Dulk 2001). Conferences also aid students in the transition from “consumer of knowledge” to “producer of knowledge” (e.g., Ryan and Bruening 1994). The sooner a student realizes that he or she has made this transition, the sooner he or she can capitalize on it. In the end, the practical payoff of presenting conference papers is great and comes down to a very simple formula: graduate seminar papers + revisions = conference papers + revisions + persistence = published papers + decent job offers.

Professional conferences also have another benefit: *self-confidence*. It is very common for graduate students to feel inferior to faculty and other graduate students, especially in the area of research. A positive experience at a professional conference begins to chip away at this feeling of inferiority and often results in the realization that after

a number of years of graduate school, the student has acquired an impressive base of knowledge and that he or she can “hold their own” with peers and faculty members alike. For others, they realize that perhaps academia is not for them (or at least a research institution may not be for them—see Harman 1991) and they make plans to seek employment outside academia. Either way, the student has learned valuable information about him or herself and gained experience in a venue that the student will operate in should he or she decide to pursue an academic career.

On a related note, political science graduate students have the opportunity to join professional associations at a discount. Membership in such organizations as the American Political Science Association and its various subsections, the Midwest Political Science Association, and the International Studies Association, is valuable for graduate students. Not only does membership bring with it common material benefits such as discounts on travel and car rentals, and a subscription to that organization’s journal(s), it also provides students with information necessary for keeping abreast of developments within the discipline.

Establishing an Area of Specialization

Though the student may not be ready to begin writing the dissertation, it is not too early to decide in which subfield they will eventually write their dissertation (den Dulk 2001). By making such decisions early, the student can begin to tailor classes and seminar papers to that broadly defined topic and thus can acquire expertise in that area before the official dissertation process starts (Fox 2001).

Surviving Comprehensive Exams

Perhaps the biggest hurdle a doctoral student faces is the dreaded comprehensive exam. For some students, there is no bigger worry than that of “comps.” The

notion that two to four years of time spent in graduate school could be wasted based on a poor comprehensive exam performance can be unbearable. More than one graduate student has cracked under the pressure of an upcoming comprehensive exam. My advice to the graduate student facing the comps is to *study, try to relax, and, have confidence in yourself*. The latter suggestion may be the most important—a student who goes into the comprehensive exam process without confidence wastes valuable time worrying and doubting his or her abilities, and will have a harder time than a confident student. Students must remember that they must have been first-rate to get into a Ph.D. program to begin with, and arriving at the comprehensive exam stage means that they have already demonstrated competence in their coursework.

Stage Three: The Final Push

*The Dissertation*³

At the beginning of the final stage of doctoral education it is imperative that the student begin thinking in earnest about a dissertation topic (Andersen 2001; May 2001). Such a process is not easy for many students. It is crucial to take this process seriously and not to leave the decision up to a faculty mentor (e.g., see Useem 1997). The dissertation topic will impact the student’s postgraduate career for years to come (Andersen 2001).

It goes without saying that the doctoral student should pick a topic that he or she is interested in (e.g., see Wuffle 1989). The dissertation is a beast that the student will grapple with for a long period of time, and if the student is not excited about the project, the quality of the dissertation will likely suffer, thus increasing the chances that the student will never finish his or her degree (den Dulk 2001; May 2001). On the other hand, the student who chooses a topic that he or she is genuinely excited about will likely work harder, finish faster, and be

more enthusiastic about his or her first book-length manuscript. It goes without saying that a better-written dissertation improves the odds that the dissertation will be published as a book or as a series of articles at a later date (Fox 2001).

Publishing

At this stage students should also give serious thought and effort to getting some of those earlier conference papers published (e.g., see Brintnall 1996; Dolan et al. 1997). In preparing manuscripts for publication, comments from panel discussants should be taken seriously and incorporated into revisions.⁴

When writing the dissertation, the student should think in terms of presenting a few of the best chapters at professional conferences. Such a process not only builds the student’s vita, it allows the student to get valuable feedback about the dissertation and thus improve the final product (den Dulk 2001; Wuffle 1989). If any of the individual chapters are respectable, efforts at publishing them are well spent. Even papers listed on the student’s vita as “under review” show prospective employers that the student is serious about publishing his or her research.

Conclusion

Some students easily adapt and acclimate to graduate education; for others, graduate school is simply not the right choice. Also, political science departments differ from one another in terms of the rigor of their academic programs, the status of their graduate students, and their internal subcultures. Thus, there is no “one-size-fits-all” model. I have highlighted a few of the more important strategies that assure a greater likelihood of success in graduate school. Taking this advice will not guarantee success; however, it will help students better navigate the sometimes stormy seas of graduate education in political science.

Notes

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1. In the event that the student has made a mistake in terms of the graduate program he or she picked, it is not too late to start fresh in another program. Though a decision to change

programs should be made relatively quickly (by the end of the first year) such decisions should not be made rashly.

2. For web-based resources that aid students in pursuing a job in political science and other related professions, see <www.apsanet.org/jobplc/index.cfm>.

3. Unfortunately, there is a high-rate of attrition at the ABD (all-but-dissertation) stage.

Though many students have struggled for years just to get to this point, for reasons such as burnout and lack of self-confidence, many students choose to leave graduate school as an ABD (e.g., NSF 1998).

4. Be it for reasons that the discussant is commenting on topics outside of his or her area of expertise or because the discussant has not read the paper with much care, panel

discussants are occasionally “off the mark” and in this instance, the student should feel free to disregard the discussant’s advice.

However, discussant comments should be taken seriously even if those comments are highly critical of the paper. Professional

differences of opinion are inevitable—let the journal referees decide who is right.

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