

TIPS FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

The mantra here is:

“Knowledge = Power”

The doctoral journey can be likened to the extensive training program that athletes go through in preparing for the Olympics. And the analogy is apt: the doctoral experience is like preparing for an Intellectual Olympics. Your task, as an early-stage doctoral student is to successfully traverse the path that leads from the status of an interested novice to that of an emerging expert in a field of study. You need to know what to do - - and how to do it!

Things You Should Know

There are important differences between the undergraduate and graduate experience including:

- * The doctoral student’s identity is linked to the academic department or program and the field of study, not to the collegiate unit or institution.
- * The cultural milieu is the student’s department or program, rather than a residential hall or particular collegiate unit.
- * Within general institutional regulations, each department is an individual ‘fiefdom.’ It sets admission criteria, the course of study and regulations regarding academic progression.

*** Although there is a general pattern of progression to the doctoral degree in all departments (pre-requisite course work, qualifying exams or papers, dissertation proposal and defense), there are variations in the amount of time and academic preparation involved..**

*** Most graduate schools provide a number of academic support services designed specially for graduate students, such as programs for TAs, career programs, and offices that assist students in gaining external support or that counsel students facing difficulties. Institution-wide services may or may not be geared for graduate students, especially at schools with large undergraduate enrollments. The number and kinds of department-sponsored student services vary. They may be limited to workshops for students at the dissertation stage or for women in the sciences or other special groups; on the other hand, many departments will have vibrant communities with many forms of assistance and opportunities for social connections. Currently there is increased focus on the importance of establishing faculty mentoring programs in individual departments.**

*** Decisions about financial support in the form of Teaching and Research Assistantships are made at the department level. In general, student support is made on the basis of academic promise rather than on financial need, as at the undergraduate level.**

Fellowships may be determined departmentally or centrally in the graduate school; this varies from place to place. Many schools will have competitions for dissertation fellowships and for travel funds.

* How things 'work' in the departments varies by academic department, under general guidelines of the graduate school.

Things You Can Do

* Develop a systems perspective, or adopt a 'big picture' view of your department, your institution and your discipline/field of study.

If you regard each as a human activity system (Checkland, 1981, Banathy, 1996), then you can adopt the 4 R's framework for beginning to understand the dynamics of your department, institution and discipline.

* The 4's (Parent, 2002) refer to the following that can be described in any human activity system:

The Rules, explicit and implicit

The Roles that are assumed

The Relationships between each member of the student/department system

The available Resources available to run that system.

* To get the 'big picture' of how things 'WORK' in your department, and discipline, use the 4 R's template for understanding the dynamics of each.

*** To successfully progress from the status of a novice to an emerging expert in a discipline, you will need to develop or increase skills in three areas: intellectual, social and personal/psychological. Faculty members are well-trained and knowledgeable about strengthening your intellectual skills. Your development in the other two areas (social and psychological) can be strengthened by your interaction with faculty, fellow students and staff.**

THINGS YOU SHOULD/COULD DO

*** Organize students in your cohort and develop an action research plan for learning more about how things “work” in each of the interacting and relevant systems. Suggestion: Solicit the cooperation of your graduate advisor and perhaps an advanced T.A. to help direct your action research activity.**

*** In collaboration with your graduate advisor, contact the counseling/psychological services on your campus and solicit their guidance in developing your own Personal Academic Game Plan. This should include specific goals and timetables to make sure that you “keep on course” and don’t get ‘waylaid’ (alienated, stressed, bummed out, low energy) and you make steady progress toward your degree. The expression is apt: “If you don’t know where you are going, you can’t get there from here!”**

Facts that are Nice to Know

* How Institutions of higher education are organized: The earlier

Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education:

Doctorate –granting Institutions

Master’s Colleges and Universities

Baccalaureate Colleges

Two-Year Associate’s Colleges

Professional Schools

Degree Completion Rates, by Discipline

Average Time to the Doctorate, by Discipline

Psychological Principles to Keep in Mind:

- Consider adopting a perspective on each person (you) as an information processor and meaning-maker.
- In many ways, the doctoral experience can be described as both interpersonal and intrapersonal affairs. Maintaining your relationships with faculty members and fellow students is an integral part of the process.

What Research Tells us about the Doctoral Student Experience

* Motivation is the Name of the Game!! Psychologists have long demonstrated the importance of goal setting, and it is imperative for you to set long-term and intermediate goals, with specific timelines for achieving them. These can include specific goals for each stage of the doctoral journey. Give careful thought to the barriers and

freedoms (both personal and in the environment) that will affect each goal.

* Check out the counseling psychologists on your campus and get their help (group or individually) in setting up (and continually updating) a Personal Academic and Career Game Plan. It will help you set the stage for a successful academic and later, a career journey.... and ensure that you will get where you want to go!

It IS an Interpersonal Journey! Relationships with members of the faculty and staff and with your fellow students is the other factor cited by researchers. Technically, the term is 'academic-social interaction'. That and maintaining student motivation is reported as an important success factor in both undergraduate and graduate education.

* Check out your Self-Talk! Remember the saying, "it isn't what happens in your day-to-day life but *what you tell yourself is the meaning* determines how and what you think, how you feel, and what you do." Make sure that what you are 'telling yourself,' about your personal capabilities and the support available to you in the academic environment is accurate, relevant and timely! Your Personal Agency Beliefs (Ford, 1987) are an important factor in your motivational level and a determining factor in your academic success.

Personal Agency Beliefs: Our beliefs of our ability to accomplish a goal as well as our beliefs that the environment will provide the resources we need to accomplish our goals.

* **Knowledge is Power!** Your Academic institution, your department and your discipline can be viewed as individual ‘human activity systems,’ devised by human beings, and maintained by the processing of information and life energy. Use the 4R’s template (cited above) as a framework for learning more about how each system “works.” They are the Rules, the Roles, the Relationships and the available Resources.

* **Learn more about how you “work.”** Identify the skills and abilities (intellectual, social and personal/psychological) you need to develop or strengthen.

**The Four R's of a Successful Doctoral Experience
Involve Understanding
How Things Work in These Three Interdependent Systems**

In the DISCIPLINE	In the ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT/ INSTITUTION	In the INDIVIDUAL STUDENT
The RULES that determine		
Sources/nature of data Rules of evidence Research methods Current paradigms Structure of knowledge	Departmental policies and procedures Distribution of resources Stages of doctoral progression	Awareness of personal rules about what is O.K. and NOT O.K. to think, feel and do in all aspects of everyday life
The ROLES that can be assumed and how to assume them		
Contribution to the research literature; Membership in relevant division of discipline	Serve on journal editorial boards; Belong to local, regional and national organizations	Integrate and balance multiple roles: Student, TA/RA, family responsibilities such as spouse, parent and offspring
The RELATIONSHIPS		
Between the institution and department and the national audience; The status & reputation of the department and faculty; Sources of external funding, areas of system-wide oversight	Between the faculty and department chair, with the Academic Senate, the various departmental committees; Between faculty and students in their RA, TA and fellowship roles	With fellow students and faculty to develop collegial relationships, to feel part of a community of scholars
The RESOURCES		
Explore potential resources in conjunction with national organizations and funding agencies	Become aware of the funding sources available locally and from system-wide administration	Become aware of the academic and personal counseling sources; potential funding for other kinds of support

Books and Other Resources

Hawley, Peggy. 2003. Being Bright is not Enough: The Unwritten Rules of Doctoral Study.

Parent, Elaine R. 2005. The Academic Game: Psychological Strategies for Successfully Completing the Doctorate.

For a deeper description of the psychological strategies and tools you can use, consult the book, The Academic Game: Psychological Strategies for Successfully Completing the Doctorate . It is available from your bookshore or the publisher, Infinity Publishing Company.