

## **Graduate school is a means to a job**

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A checklist of what doctoral students must do throughout their training to prepare for the job market.

One of the most common questions I hear from graduate students, whether they are in their first or their final year, is what they can do now to prepare for the job market.

Excellent question. As a graduate student, your fate is in your own hands, and every decision you make--including whether to go to graduate school at all, which program to go to, which adviser to choose, and how to conduct yourself while there--can and should be made with an eye to the job you wish to have at the end.

To do otherwise is pure madness. I have no patience whatsoever with the "love" narrative (we do what we do because we love it and money/jobs play no role) that prevails among some advisers, departments, and profoundly mystified graduate students. But for those graduate students and Ph.D.'s who actually want a paying job and the things that go with it--health insurance, benefits, and financial security--here is my list of graduate-school rules, forged after years of working in academe as a former tenured professor and now running my own career-advising business for doctoral students.

### **Before Graduate School**

Ask yourself what job you want and whether an advanced degree is actually necessary for it. Choose your graduate program based both on its focus on your scholarly interests and its job-placement rate. If it doesn't keep careful records of its placement rate, or does not have an impressive record of placing its Ph.D.'s in tenure-track positions, do not consider attending that program.

Choose your adviser the same way. Before committing to an adviser, find out how many Ph.D.'s that potential mentor has placed in tenure-track positions in recent years.

Go to the highest-ranked graduate department you can get into--so long as it funds you fully. That is not actually because of the "snob factor" of the name itself, but rather because of the ethos of the best departments. They typically are the best financed, which means they have more scholars with national reputations to serve as your mentors and letter writers, and they maintain lively brown-bag and seminar series that bring in major visiting scholars with whom you can network. The placement history of a top program tends to produce its own momentum, so that departments around the country with faculty members from that program will then look kindly on new applications from its latest Ph.D.'s. That, my friends, is how privilege reproduces itself. It may be distasteful, but you deny or ignore it at your peril.

Never assume that the elite, Ivy League departments are the highest ranked or have the best placement rates. Some of the worst-prepared job candidates with whom I've worked have been from humanities departments at Yale, Harvard, and Princeton. Do not be dazzled by abstract institutional reputations. Ask steely-eyed questions about individual advisers and their actual (not illusory) placement rates in recent years.

Meet, or at least correspond, with your potential adviser ahead of time so that you understand whether he or she has a hands-on approach to professionalization training and will be personally invested in your success.

Do not attend graduate school unless you are fully supported by--at minimum--a multiyear teaching assistantship that provides a tuition waiver, a stipend, and health insurance that covers most of the years of your program. The stipend needs to be generous enough to support your actual living expenses for the location. Do not take out new debt to attend graduate school. Because the tenure-track job market is so bleak, graduate school in the humanities and social sciences is, in most cases, not worth going into debt for.

Apply to six to 10 graduate programs. If you are admitted with financial support to more than one, negotiate to get the best possible package at your top choice.

Be entrepreneurial before even entering graduate school to locate and apply for multiple sources of support. Do not forget the law of increasing returns: Success breeds success and large follows small. A \$500 book scholarship makes you more competitive for a \$1,000 conference grant, which situates you for a \$3,000 summer-research fellowship, which puts you in the running for a \$10,000 fieldwork grant, which then makes you competitive for a \$30,000 dissertation writing grant.

### **Early in Graduate School**

Never forget this primary rule: Graduate school is not your job; graduate school is a means to the job you want. Do not settle in to your graduate department like a little hamster burrowing in the wood shavings. Stay alert with your eye always on a national stage, poised for the next opportunity, whatever it is: to present a paper, attend a conference, meet a scholar in your field, forge a connection, gain a professional skill.

In Year 1 and every year thereafter, read the job ads in your field, and track the predominant and emerging emphases of the listed jobs. those into your own project, directly or indirectly. You don't have to slavishly follow trends, but you have to be familiar with them and be prepared to relate your own work to them in some way.

Have a beautifully organized and professional CV starting in your first year and in every subsequent year. When I was a young assistant professor, a senior colleague told me that her philosophy was to add one line a month to her CV. Set that same goal for yourself. As a junior graduate student, you may or may not be able to maintain that pace, but keep it in the back of your mind, and keep your eye out for opportunities that add lines to your CV at a brisk pace.

Make strong connections with your adviser and other faculty members in your department and in affiliated departments. Interact with them as a young professional, respectfully but confidently. Eschew excessive humility; it inspires contempt. Do not forget the letters of recommendation that you will one day need them to write.

Minimize your work as a TA. Your first year will be grueling, but learn the efficiency techniques of teaching as fast as you can, and make absolutely, categorically sure that you do not volunteer your labor beyond the hours paid. Believe me, resisting will take vigilance. But do it. You are not a volunteer and the university is not a charity. You are paid for hours of work; do not exceed them. Teach well, but do not make teaching the core of your identity.

Be aware that faculty members in a variety of departments will be able to direct you to different grant sources, which, over time, will help you to continue paying for your studies without accruing crushing debt. Not all faculty members are familiar with the same grant sources, so breadth is important.

Strategize your writing projects in your courses, theses, and dissertation, to form the basis of potentially publishable papers. If offered the option of writing a master's thesis, seriously consider taking it, as it can form the core of your first refereed journal article. Plan out a publishing trajectory to ensure that you have at least one sole-authored refereed journal article before you defend your dissertation.

Attend every job talk in your department and affiliated departments religiously. It matters not if those talks are in your field or subfield. Go to them all. Job talks and other job-search opportunities such as attending a lunch with a candidate, serving on a search committee, or simply examining an applicant's CV and file are the single best training you can provide yourself on the real requirements of the tenure-track job market (as opposed to your private and often delusional perceptions).

Attend national conferences annually. It's fine to also go to local and regional conferences, but they must never take the place of your national conference, which provides irreplaceable insight into trends in your field, the ethos and habitus of your discipline, and the behavioral norms of professional scholars. It also presents the opportunity to network and to attend seminars dedicated to professional skills such as writing grant proposals or journal articles.

Strategize how to travel to conferences, and work with your cohort to make it a habit of driving together to major national conferences, and lodging together.

Apply indiscriminately for money, and master the fine art of tailoring to meet the grant agency's mission. You'll be surprised by how much the act of transforming your project to meet a new mission reveals to you hitherto unrecognized potentialities and insights into the work itself. Applying for a wide range of grants is one of the best intellectual exercises in which you can engage.

Take every opportunity available to present your work publicly. While I emphasized the importance of national conferences for reputation purposes, actively pursue every possible local and regional opportunity for experience purposes. Public speaking is one of the core skills of an academic career. Make your mistakes in graduate school, where the stakes are low, so that you are a master of the podium when the stakes are high.

### **In Your Final Years of Graduate School**

Avoid like the plague offers of publication in edited collections, which is where good publications go to die. If you have a piece of work that can pass muster as a publication, make sure that it goes into a refereed journal, the best one you can reasonably manage. Don't ever throw it away on conference proceedings, or the like. (That applies to the humanities and most social sciences; some conference proceedings in the sciences are legitimate publication venues. Know your field.) So do not be seduced by expressions of interest from editors of collections or third-tier journals following your conference presentations. The opportunity may seem easy, but you will pay the price later when the collection is delayed for years or the publication is deemed too low-status to help you on the market.

By your third year or so, apply annually to present a paper at your national conference. If you are in the humanities, do not waste time participating in poster sessions. If you are in the hard sciences or experimental social sciences, check with a trusted adviser about the value of posters. Near the end of your program, begin to organize panels for a conference. Your first foray in that direction can be with other graduate students, but don't organize more than one graduate-student panel in your career.

In the year before you go on the job market, organize and propose a high-profile panel for your national conference that is made up of young, up-and-coming assistant professors. Ask a well-known scholar to serve as discussant. Make efforts to have the panel respond to, or engage with, a trending topic in your field and/or one that is identified as the primary theme of that year's national meetings. This panel is your "coming out" party, and makes you visible on a national stage, framed and contextualized by the more senior scholars who already have reputations on the panel's topic. At the conference, do not forget to organize a lunch (or dinner or coffee) for the panelists to get to know them better and lay the groundwork for future collaborations and possibly letters of recommendation.

Cultivate a letter writer who is not from your Ph.D.-granting institution. Having all your recommendation letters come from your own committee or department is the sign of a relatively immature candidate. It is not a death knell in your first or second years on the market, but be aware that the strongest and most successful candidates will have a recommendation from an influential senior scholar from outside their home department who can speak to their standing in the field (and not simply to their performance as a graduate student in the department).

Write your dissertation with an eye to the publications that it will become. Be aware that in most fields, at least one refereed journal article while you are still A.B.D. is now necessary to get shortlisted for tenure-track jobs. At the same time, be aware that publications that date from before you accept your tenure-track job sometimes do not count toward tenure. So the balance is delicate indeed. You must publish enough to get a job without prematurely exhausting your supply of material you will need for tenure. (That is why I recommend writing a master's thesis, which will give you material for a publication without cutting into your dissertation material.)

If you are in a book field, be aware that presses will not look kindly at a book proposal in which more than half of the material has already been published in articles. Therefore, in a typical five-chapter dissertation, you want no more than two chapters to be put out as refereed journal articles. While writing the dissertation, have a publishing plan in place. You may write one chapter, for example, with an eye to fast publication while you are A.B.D. Set aside other material for refereed journal articles while you're on the tenure track. Meanwhile, write the dissertation itself as much like a book as your committee will allow. If your committee insists on methodology and theory chapters, write them with the full knowledge that they will most likely be removed from the ultimate book manuscript.

Remember that the best dissertation is a finished dissertation. Your dissertation must satisfy a committee, while your book must satisfy a set of reviewers and an editor who operate nationally and internationally. Do what it takes to satisfy your committee and finish. Leave the Sturm und Drang for when you are revising the manuscript into the book that will become the real mark of your scholarly reputation.

Be the sole instructor of at least one course but not more than three (if you can help it). After about three, the benefit of additional teaching experience diminishes, and becomes a distraction from the real capital-producing work necessary for the tenure-track job market, which (unless you're applying to community colleges) is publication and conference activity. If your department does not offer A.B.D.'s the opportunity to teach your own courses, then carefully seek an opportunity from another college in the area. Do a good job, but do not allow your teaching to derail you from the writing, publishing, grant writing, and conferences that are the core elements of the tenure-track search. TA experience is not an adequate substitute for teaching a course of your own.

Go on the market while A.B.D. because you want to make your worst mistakes while you still have a year of financial support from your home department. Most people who prevail on the market need at least two years to do so.

Cultivate a professional persona as a young scholar. That persona is separate from your previous identity as a graduate student and is, instead, confident, assertive, sophisticated, and outspoken. Devote as much time as it takes to writing out brief--and I do mean brief--summaries of your dissertation research, teaching techniques and philosophy, and your future publication plans. Practice delivering those brief summaries until they become second nature. Make your application materials absolutely flawless. Take your ego out of the process and ask everyone you know to ruthlessly critique your CV, letter, teaching statement, and research statement. Prioritize the advice you receive from young faculty members who have recently been on the market, and from senior professors who have recently chaired a search committee.

Some graduate students will rush to follow these rules, some will panic and view the task as impossible, and others will indignantly deny the validity of these steps. The choice is entirely yours. But be aware that the best and most competitive candidates--the ones whom I have watched and assisted as they sailed through the job market--had every one of these elements of their record locked and loaded.

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[Base de Dados]. Disponível em:  
<<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=599e51ce-9882-4501-b113-9286452176d%40sessionmgr15&vid=1&hid=10&bdata=Jmxhbm9cHQtYnImc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl#db=tfh&AN=84680230>>. Acesso em: 23 Jan. 2013.**

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