

Things I wish I had known earlier: A look back on my journey as a graduate student

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Once in a while, undergraduate or new graduate students come up to me and ask for advice on the best way to approach graduate studies. Although I am somewhat proud of my journey as a graduate student, these questions almost always bring to mind the feelings I had when I was in their position. I wish I had known to ask about the helpful hints I now share with them. Here is a personal recollection of things I learned throughout the years and that might help you now.

From undergraduate studies...

When I first entered the baccalaureate in psychology, all I knew was that I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. I didn't know much about research and personally, at that time, I didn't care much either. So I did not get involved in a research lab until my 3rd year: mistake number one. As soon as you enter undergraduate studies, be aware of all the research assistant job opportunities that are offered to you. Sometimes, it might be volunteer work but it is still an amazing way of getting to know professors and hence, getting a foot in the door of a lab. You might think that your first year is too early to become involved in research, but if I had a first year student offering to help out in my research, I would be pleased to welcome him or her to my lab! So lesson number one: get involved in research work, don't turn your back on research even if clinical work is your main interest. You will learn that clinical work can not be conducted without a

constant interest for research in your practice field. Practice changes through the years. During your career, you will constantly have to stay in touch with the latest improvements in the ways of delivering effective treatment.

As an undergraduate, some students will take a course that involves conducting research from literature review to production of a research report, including experimentation with real subjects. Don't hesitate to present this research work at a convention, even if it is a convention of a provincial association. This is a great way to get a first taste of what poster sessions are like and to prepare to participate in larger events. Personally, I encourage and help students working under my supervision to do so. They have the opportunity to be proud of their work, even though they may have experienced stress while doing it!

In order to prepare yourself to enter graduate studies, you should try to get acquainted with some professors. When you receive a good grade on a class assignment or on an exam, meet with the professor to discuss that with him or her. Professors generally like to be able to associate a face to a name on a good report. Offer them your service as a teaching assistant. Maybe it will just be distributing exam sheets or keeping a check on students taking the exam, but keep in mind that those small things will give you an experience in teaching that could be

invaluable when trying to secure a teaching assistant position.

Also, you could get involved in your undergraduate psychology association. Members of these groups often have to work in collaboration with the department (e.g., directors of program, members of program board, office employees, etc). The more that these people get to know you, the greater the number of opportunities you will be possibly be offered down the road. Plus, I have found it very rewarding to become involved in my undergraduate association – it's also a great way to face your fear of public speaking.

...to graduate studies

It sometimes seems to me that the further I progressed in my studies, the more important my mistakes became. But maybe I just became more critical, that's all! Humour aside, I learned that the classes you take as a graduate student are very important, not only for the theoretical learning but also for the research opportunities they offer. If you put in the extra effort when completing a class assignment, you could turn it into an interesting, publishable short paper, instead of discarding it in the pile of boxes in your office. Doing so, you will add to your publication section of your vita! I realized this fact only when entering the doctorate program, once again, I wish I had known earlier...

Another important step in your progression as a graduate student: don't put off involvement in your research lab until your mandatory classes are completed. The sooner you become involved, the quicker you will get started with your research work and there will be less possibility of procrastination and an extended stay in graduate studies.

When taking a graduate class in research methodology, the instructor, a very good instructor I should note, once told the class (well, he said it in French but here is what it would have sounded like in English!) : “Stop thinking that you are gonna win the lifetime Achievement Award with your doctoral dissertation, it's not gonna happen, this is a learning experience”. At first, I thought “Well, he is wrong: this has got to be the best work I am going to produce”. But two years later, I realized that he was right: there are things that I wish could be better, there are things I would do differently if had a six figure research grant, or if I had another year to recruit subjects, but I am doing my best considering all that is involved in completing a doctoral dissertation. So, I have accepted that the dissertation can't be perfect, even if I am putting everything that I can into the project.

Getting involved in your profession

Either at the graduate or undergraduate level, it is never too soon to get involved in your profession. The best way is to join professional associations, such as CPA, as a student affiliate. Joining these associations can help you learn about the many aspects of psychology. First of all, reading association journals helps you keep in touch with the latest research results and also helps you discover research interests of psychology students across the country. Participating in conventions is another great way to exchange ideas with fellow students and find out more about their psychology program, the classes they are taking, or their particular area of interest. Conventions are also a good way to meet with researchers that you admire or that you have heard of and share the same research interests as you.

Beside conventions, getting involved in associations allows you to keep in touch

with hot topics or debates that are going on in the profession. A good illustration of that point would be the articles in Psynopsis discussing the role of psychologists in health service promotion to the public. Reading these publications also provides you with useful information about internship or post-doctoral opportunities and position openings.

Planning your career goals

I will conclude this article by telling you something that I consider to be the key to success in studying psychology. I have gradually learned that the various activities I was involved in were not only fun and rewarding, but that in the end, really paid

off. You should not shut yourself off from opportunities by being focused on only one aspect of psychology, be it assessment, private practice, teaching, or research. Instead, why not try to make a career by developing a wide range of interests: take advantage of the public interest on diverse psychopathology (e.g., eating disorders, anxiety disorders, dementia, etc.) to give a conference on the subject, create a web site, take a part-time teaching job in college, etc. There are many opportunities . . . use your imagination. Have fun. And be sure to plan ahead. Don't wait until the last week of your internship to start looking for a job: begin building your career in psychology as early on as possible - you will discover that all the hard work you put in was worth it after all!