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Congratulations!: A Guide for the New Graduate Student
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Dear New Graduate Student,

Congratulations! I am happy to hear that after years of teaching physical education in public school you have decided to return to the university as a graduate student. I am sure that after reading about the application process described by Parker, Griffin, Placek, and Dodds (2000) you have done your research and have chosen the doctoral program that best suits your professional interests as well as your personal needs.

Only four years ago, I was in the same position you are—as a graduate student, I was starting a new phase in my life. I still remember feeling nervous and excited about it. I have learned so much in the last four years about being a graduate student and a teaching assistant—developing and maintaining professional (and personal) relationships with my professors, colleagues, and students, the importance of networking connections, and much more—and I thought you might benefit from some advice before you take your very first steps as a graduate student.

Be Open to Learning

After years of teaching in public schools, you may find that you have more years of hands-on experience than some of your professors. However, do not presume that this experience makes you better prepared than your professors. The facts are simple: at an early point in their career, many university professors decided that they would serve the physical education profession better from the academic side rather than the practical side. Similar to what I have chosen to do, they took academic positions after graduate school, and their main job was—and still is—to prepare the next generation of physical education teachers.

I agree that some hands-on experience is vital to optimally fulfilling a faculty position in any teacher education program. Real life experience is the difference between theory and practice. However, although many of your future professors did not teach in public schools for a number of years, they have worked with preservice teachers in public schools and conducted research in public school settings. It is important that you—as a new graduate student with much to learn—respect, listen to, and look up to your professors, as they certainly have knowledge, skills, and research experience you can benefit from.

In my first semester as a doctoral student, I was sure I knew (almost) all there is to know. I came from a strong teacher preparation program and felt I had already heard...
Graduate students who come from the working world must adjust to being a student again, spending much of their time reading and studying.

enough. It took me a little too long to realize that learning is a process that should never end and that all the people around me are my teachers. I encourage you to utilize all the pieces of information and knowledge you can acquire. This, in addition to your past experience, will make you a more rounded person and a better teacher.

Preparing for the First Semester
By far the most difficult time in graduate school is the first semester. It takes time to get used to a new place, new people, new responsibilities, and a new life as a graduate student. You may even become frustrated as you get used to a very low income again after many years as a public school teacher, and you will definitely need to modify your lifestyle and standard of living. When you look back, I hope you will realize, as I did, that completing the program was worth the adjustments. You will have to readjust to the “student mode,” which means many hours of reading and studying and fewer hours of all other nonacademic activities, but after the first semester you will see things differently—and you may even enjoy the process.

Keep Your Eyes on the Process
Like many graduate students, you have surely considered many factors before committing yourself to at least four years of graduate school. Soon you will meet other doctoral students who have committed to graduate school for reasons different than yours, but this does not mean you made your decision for the wrong reasons. Each one of us is a different individual, and we operate sometimes based on different motives.

When I started, I had only one goal in mind: to gain a doctorate degree that would allow me to teach in the same institution I had just graduated from. I was very committed to finishing graduate school even before I started! Now I can admit that, at first, I failed to see the importance of the process of being a graduate student. There is so much more than “just taking classes” in these four years, as I will explain. You should keep in mind the reasons that brought you to graduate school but, at the same time, listen to yourself throughout the process. You may find yourself staying in graduate school for reasons different than the ones that drew you into it.

However, the opposite may also happen. For example, a colleague of mine came to graduate school very excited, but soon realized that the graduate school experience was not what she had in mind. It took her a long time to admit that she entered graduate school for the wrong reasons. Eventually she made the right decision for herself and left graduate school to pursue a career in sales, which had been her interest throughout her undergraduate career.

“Just Taking Classes”
Similar to students entering teacher education programs with preconceived beliefs about teachers and teaching based on their past experience, students entering graduate school may have developed a general scheme of expectations based on their previous public school and even college-level experience. Generally speaking, while we were undergraduate students, our professors ran the show for us; they told us
As a graduate teaching assistant, graduate students gain experience in teaching adults and form strong collegial bonds with other graduate students.

what and when to read and often quizzed us on our assigned readings in addition to final exams, term papers, position papers, and so forth. You may think that graduate school operates under the same routine; however, you will soon notice that the roles change slightly as you start graduate school, and they shift even more throughout your tenure as a graduate student.

Being a graduate student is much more than “just taking classes.” There is a different set of expectations for graduate students. Professors expect graduate students to develop their critical thinking skills and to contribute to class discussions; they expect graduate students to articulate verbally and in writing their thoughts based on background information; and, at a later stage, they expect graduate students to investigate a problem based on others’ scholarly work. At the end of the process, graduate students should become independent scholars who are able to think critically, articulate their thoughts, and contribute to the scholarly body of knowledge.

I encourage you to spend your time as a graduate student questioning, reflecting on your readings, and, most important, engaging in conversations with others. Ask questions and allow the answers to lead you to new thoughts and findings. Never be embarrassed at asking a “stupid question,” for there is no such thing. In fact, it is stupid not to ask when you have questions. After all, as a student you are in the perfect position to ask all the questions you want (it is when you are a faculty member that people expect you to have some answers!). Always keep in mind that learning is a process and that it takes place everywhere, not only in the classroom. Many of the most interesting and inspiring conversations I had throughout gradate school started “out of the blue” from a comment thrown up in the air.

Consider things this way: the undergraduate school experience resembles having someone fish for you and place the fish on your plate, whereas the graduate school experience requires you to spend time learning how to fish for yourself. Your professors will provide you with opportunities to learn, study, expand your knowledge, and “fish” for data and information that interests you. The rest is up to you.

More than Teaching Classes
I am happy to learn that you were also offered a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) position. I was a GTA myself throughout my four years of graduate school, and I will be the first one to admit that it was the best part of my graduate school experience. As an undergraduate, I recognized much of the content covered in the formal class meetings. As a graduate student standing before a group of undergraduate students for the first time in my life, however, I felt challenged. I am sure you, too, will find these first moments as a GTA somewhat strange, because after years of teaching physical education in public schools, you will now be teaching adults. This GTA experience is important because it initiates the symbolic shift from being a public school teacher to becoming a teacher educator. You must not think that everyone holds the honor of being a GTA; schools save this privilege for the best students, and you definitely should be proud of yourself.

As strange as it may sound at first, the best part of being a GTA is not the teaching of classes, but the fact that you will become a part of a very strong group of graduate students who will be your colleagues for the rest of your academic career. While you may initially feel that sharing an office with five different graduate students will prevent you from getting any work done, something unique goes on between the four walls of a GTA office, and it is hard to translate into words.

I spent the best times of my graduate career inside the office among other doctoral students who became very close friends of mine. We talked about everything from course assignments to research ideas, we planned future conference presentations and the million publications we would write once we were out of graduate school, and yes, we also held gossip sessions about our professors (mainly after working hours when we hoped they would never hear). But we also talked about our families, friendships, and life philosophies. We learned so much from one another just by asking questions and listening. Together we celebrated birthdays, weddings, and the births of children, and we provided moral support and encouragement when one of us had rough time.

Being a GTA is about more than teaching a couple of undergraduate classes—it is about being a part of a group that will help you succeed in graduate school and, at a later point, become your support group for the rest of your career.

Choosing Your Advisor
One of the earliest and most important decisions you will have to make as you start your doctoral program is to designate your graduate advisor. Your advisor is the person
who will carry the formal responsibility of leading you through graduate school and will keep a close eye on you until graduation day. Your advisor will help you design your plan of study and get you started on the right track with your teaching and research responsibilities. Your advisor will also lead you through the comprehensive examinations and oral defense, will help you define and design your dissertation project, and will lead you through the formal processes of the prospectus meeting and dissertation defense. In many aspects, your advisor is your mentor.

Choosing your advisor may be the hardest decision you make, since usually you do not have a well-established relationship with any of your professors at such an early stage in your graduate program, and no one is going to guide you in your decision. You will have to choose a mentor that fits your research interest as well as your personality—someone who will help you progress through graduate school, who you will enjoy working with, and who will make the graduate school experience meaningful for you. It sounds like too much, I know. Most of the time, you have to take an educated guess based on previous interactions with professors, stories that you have heard from others, and your gut feeling. I can only wish you to be as lucky I was.

The Seven Flaming Hoops
Choosing your advisor is only the first stage of several that you will encounter as a new graduate student. My colleagues and I used to compare ourselves to acrobats jumping through flaming hoops during a circus. As a doctoral student at West Virginia University, I jumped through seven different hoops: (1) choosing an advisor, (2) establishing a doctoral committee, (3) forming a plan of study, (4) writing the comprehensive examination, (5) facing the oral examination, (6) presenting at the dissertation prospectus meeting, and (7) defending the dissertation work. Different doctoral programs around the country may offer slightly different terminology for some of these hoops, but the overall process is very similar.

Establishing a Doctoral Committee. Once you jump through the first hoop and have chosen your advisor you are ready for the second hoop, establishing your doctoral committee. Based on earlier interactions with the professors in your school, your research interests, and discussions with your advisor, you will ask four professors to serve on your doctoral committee. These professors will meet several times throughout your tenure as a doctoral student and share the responsibility of preparing you for and leading you toward earning the doctoral degree. As when choosing your advisor, you should select those who have the potential to assist you through the process. Many times these professors share interests similar to your dissertation research project, but this does not necessarily have to be the case. Consider your options in consultation with your advisor before establishing your committee. Your advisor is the one who will lead the committee members throughout the process, and it is important that he/she will be in favor of the committee members you choose.

Forming a Plan of Study. Once you jump through the first two hoops, you will have to call for a plan-of-study meeting (the third hoop). The plan-of-study meeting is the first formal meeting in which you will introduce yourself and your research interests to your doctoral committee members. The goal of this meeting is to establish your personal plan of study and the projected time line for completing the process. In my case, I took 18 credits of specific physical education teacher education (PETE) doctoral level courses, 12 credits in research-orientated classes, 15 credit courses in a cognate area (a field outside PETE), and one technology-related course.

During this meeting the committee members will determine methods of evaluating competencies in each of the three different areas within your plan of study (your major, cognate, and research areas). By the end of the meeting, you and your committee members will sign off on your plan of study, which will serve as a written contract and your road map until you finish your doctoral program. You should establish your plan of study at an early stage in your program; this will allow you to steer yourself in the right direction based on the agreement between you and your committee members.

Writing the Comprehensive Examination. The next formal stage takes place only after you have completed your course work as established in your plan of study. Following your course work, your professors will evaluate you based on the predetermined competencies established and documented in the plan of study meeting. In many cases, after doctoral students complete their course work, they must pass comprehensive examinations based largely on content learned throughout the doctoral program. The length of these exams, the level of difficulty, and the content may differ from one program to another based on the specific courses taught at each institution. However, the general idea is similar: comprehensive examinations conclude the theoretical portion of the doctoral program and assess a student’s competencies in
the three study areas, the major, cognate, and research.

Facing the Oral Examination. In order to complete the comprehensive exam process you will have to jump through the fifth hoop, passing the oral examination. This examination will take place in front of your major professors and will confirm your competency in the major, cognate, and research areas. Before my oral defense, the thought of sitting in a room for two hours with my five professors was nerve-wracking. Looking back on this event, I can honestly say that it was a joy. Rarely do you have the chance to sit before esteemed professors and engage in two hours of sophisticated academic discussion. Throughout the discussion they tested me based on my reactions and the knowledge I had used to support my answers, opinions, and ideas, yet it was an interesting experience that, in many ways, simulated professional presentations at national conferences.

Presenting at the Dissertation Prospectus Meeting. The next hoop is the prospectus meeting, a formal meeting in which you must present your dissertation research project to your committee members. By this meeting, the committee members should have read your prospectus document and should be ready to assist you in refining the study. Traditionally, this is the most challenging meeting a graduate student will ever experience. Be well prepared to defend your idea for the research study but, at the same time, keep an open mind. Instead of fighting the professors’ comments, truly listen to them.

One of my professors offered me this same advice before my prospectus defense meeting, but it was almost impossible to do. After so many hours, months, and years of hard work refining the document and the research idea, I felt convinced that I had a well-refined study and I was not expecting much criticism of my hard work. Thus, although my committee pointed out several paths that I had not considered, I was not really open to hearing their comments. Instead of accepting their suggestions, I tried to change their minds. The committee members, with more experience and expertise, had made sound recommendations, however, and my research project was ultimately better for listening to their suggestions and comments. It took me a couple of months and many conversations with my advisor to understand that even though I had gotten slightly burned jumping through the sixth hoop, I still made it through. It was time to heal myself and move on since there was one last hoop to jump through.

Defending the Dissertation Work. As strange as this will sound, the last hoop, formally presenting the dissertation research project, will most likely be the easiest. By this time, you will have approval from each of your professors to conduct the study, and all you have to do is report on some of the results and conclusions from your research. It may seem like you have been working all these years for this moment, but once you arrive at the dissertation defense moment, it is more like a formality. It is important, though, that you keep your committee members updated about your project throughout the process, so they will be able to contribute to the process. That way you can minimize the surprises and maximize the chances that your dissertation defense day will be the end of your private circus.

As Challenging as You Make It

Life is not perfect, and neither is graduate school. You will experience some challenging moments—times when you will question your goals and motives. These moments are necessary for everyone to experience, and you may view them as character builders. Most of the time, you will emerge from these moments stronger and more firmly convinced that you are on the right track.

When I had just started, a veteran doctoral student who later became a colleague advised me to keep a low profile as a doctoral student. He was the first to introduce me to the “Keep It Simple, Stupid” (KISS) concept and encouraged me to retain my great ideas and enthusiasm for the post-graduate school days. However, I found myself doing exactly the opposite of what he had suggested. In order to keep myself challenged throughout the program, I made my life as a graduate student as complicated as possible by reading numerous extra materials, continually challenging my professors and my undergraduate students with questions (even outside formal class hours), designing additional research projects to answer questions of interest, and, devising a complicated dissertation project.

When things got too complicated and sometimes even frustrating, I stopped and questioned whether I was in the right place or not. Most of the time I was able to answer yes and moved on; whenever I did not feel convinced, I ran into my advisor’s office and allowed him to do the convincing. My advice to you is a bit different from what my colleague recommended to me. Achieving doctoral degree is not about the KISS concept but about you as an individual. There is nothing wrong with following the KISS concept (as long as your advisor approves it), but it is more important that every day you feel satisfied with what you have accomplished and, more than anything, will be able to get the job done.

Well, my dear friend, I have written as much as I could. I helped several doctoral students stand on their feet while I was a graduate student, and I hope that you benefit from what I have experienced, as well. I wish you all the best and hope that you enjoy and appreciate the experience of being a graduate student in the physical education teacher education program.

Good luck,
Rachel

Reference


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