

# A Brief Guide to Thriving in Graduate School and Beyond

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**Abstract:** *The initial years in higher education can be daunting for any junior faculty member and the pressure of “publish or perish” is well-known. The best time to develop a plan for those years is while still in graduate school. This article will outline suggestions based on the authors’ expertise and research that can provide guidance to graduate students on how to build strong mentoring relationships, successfully obtain an initial higher education position, and balance responsibilities, as well as other strategies to succeed in graduate school and beyond.*

**Keywords:** *graduate education, professoriate, higher education, graduate training*

## INTRODUCTION

The initial years in higher education can be daunting for any junior faculty member. Finley (2000) examined the experiences of three junior faculty members and the struggle they faced in an education program that valued service and action research in professional development schools, while their university valued high numbers of publications (something the participants found difficult to accomplish when doing school-based research projects). The peril of “publish or perish” is well-documented and the emphasis on turning not only one’s research, but one’s teaching, advising, and service activities into publishable material is often stressed to junior faculty (Lawhon, Ennis-Cole, & Ennis, 2004). Combining this traditional mindset with the professional imperative to conduct meaningful research in preK-12 school settings (see Finley, 2000) can lead to what Cole (2000) described as “perish by publishing,” (p. 34).

Successful faculty in today’s teacher preparation programs have learned how to balance their scholarship, teaching, and service, and wherever possible, link the three areas together (for example, conducting research on their teaching practice or using service activities as an opportunity to conduct research in the field). Too often, scholars in graduate programs become laser-focused on their research, not realizing that once they obtain a faculty position, they will have to manage this delicate balance of research, teaching, and service. As Adams (2002) found in her study of the Preparing Future Faculty program, many doctoral graduates have difficulty

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changing from an environment in which their dissertation research was their primary focus to an environment in which they are expected to conduct rigorous research while also teaching, advising, and providing service to the profession and community. This article provides strategies graduate students can utilize while still in their programs to lay the groundwork for a solid career path for years to come.

### STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

Surviving graduate school is not as difficult as it appears if one has reasonable expectations for what it takes to succeed and reasonable expectations for success. First and foremost, it is important that you enter your graduate program with the appropriate goal. The goal of graduate school is not to earn a Ph.D. The goal of graduate school is not completing a dissertation. The goal of graduate school is to acquire expert-level knowledge in one or more areas of your field and becoming an independent scientist with an original program of research.

Acceptance into your program of study at the university indicates that the faculty expect that you have the skills to succeed. You were chosen and accepted into the program because the faculty believe you have the necessary skills and dispositions to survive and successfully complete graduate school.

What can you do to ensure your success? There are several things that you can do to ensure your success as a graduate student. These include: (1) managing your time efficiently; (2) being flexible and creative in your thinking; (3) communicating often with your mentors/advisors/committee; (4) understanding the culture of the department, faculty, and university, (5) staying balanced professionally and personally; and (6) being visible in the department.

Each year, you will have a continuous and different set of goals/objectives. In your first year get involved. Get involved with research, develop management skills and attend conferences. Read, read, and read some more. Expertise in an area of study is gained through having a well-developed knowledge base of the existing literature. In your second year, take a lead on a research project. The following are basic steps to develop a research project (see Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2014 for an excellent step-by-step resource on developing research proposals and how to fund your research proposals). Present the following to your advisor:

1. The research question. This should be no more than one or two sentences and should clearly articulate the concepts and their relations.
2. Brief background. This should be approximately one paragraph that outlines the relevant literature and concepts under study and your hypotheses. The project should be well-supported in the literature.
3. Method. This paragraph should outline how the participants, the concepts that will be measured, and justify both. In addition, address practical considerations like how you will recruit subjects and
4. Analysis. Outline possible analyses and any other data issues (e.g., establishing reliability).
5. Proposed timeline. Provide details about when the project will begin, how long will it take, and the goal for dissemination.

In your third year, become an expert in your field. Mentor a first year student and read, read, and read some more. Be involved in two lines of research; one you lead and one in which you collaborate. Join or create writing and reading groups. Continue to mentor younger grad students. In year four, start your own lab, by mentoring younger students, having them work on your projects and prepare manuscripts for publication.

### STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS IN THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS

There are some critical steps to undertake to be successful in the job search process. First, be thoughtful and thorough in your planning. A good way to begin your planning process is with Wood and Thompson's (2014) article in *The Researcher* in which they provide graduate students with a month-by-month timeline of tasks to undertake in the job search process. Start preparing early and be meticulous!

As you read job postings and begin applying, please read the postings carefully and only apply for those for which you actually are qualified. This may seem like it doesn't need to be stated, but a recent study by Taylor, Abernathy & Bingham (2013) in which the chairs of job search committees were surveyed regarding their recent applicants, one participant responded, "In many cases, it seemed that the applicant did not thoroughly read the posted description. Often times, he/she did not have the specialization we need or even the degree we required." In some fields, the professional world may be small. You do not want to gain a reputation as an applicant who is wasting a search committee's time and energy. Target your materials to the jobs for which you are suited.

Make sure you always personalize your application and application materials (Horner, Pape, & O'Conner, 2001). Speak to why you would be good addition to that particular program or department. Search committees can recognize a generic cover letter or recommendation letter and that will move an applicant down lower on the priority list, whereas an applicant who clearly has identified his or her own strengths and how they meet the specific needs of the program/department is going to stand out among the crowd. With most colleges and departments now having faculty and programs on web pages, it is much easier to do advance work than it was even 10 years ago. Before even sending in materials, you should have a solid understanding of any program to which you are applying, and definitely before having a phone or Skype interview, you should look up all the faculty members and know their areas of expertise and research interests.

Finally, it should go without saying that you should choose an institution that matches your career goals. However, that may not be as clear-cut as it has previously been thought to be. The lines between so-called research-intensive institutions and teaching-oriented institutions may be becoming blurred. A study by Fairweather (2005) showed that even in teaching-oriented institutions that while faculty did spend more time per week in the classroom, salary increases tended to benefit those who publish more. In what seemed like paradoxical findings in the study by Taylor, Abernathy, & Bingham (2013), the researchers found that search committees at doctoral-granting institutions stated they were primarily looking for candidates who were well-qualified to teach courses, while search committees at non-doctoral-granting institutions stated they were looking for candidates who had strong research backgrounds and were ready to publish. Listen to the committee during your interview to see if the institution appears to match your needs.

### STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS AS A JUNIOR FACULTY MEMBER

This is the time where *balance* becomes the key term. Knowing your institution and what the expected criteria for achieving tenure and promotion are critical. It is important that you know what number of publications you should have, how your teaching will be evaluated, and what types of service and at what level it is valued at your institution. As Olsen and Crawford (1998) pointed out, "... we still see junior faculty who are asked to take on inappropriate service commitments or unusually heavy teaching loads, or who are simply left alone to discover their own career path through a process of trial and error" (p. 53). These kinds of mistakes can be costly to junior faculty, resulting in failure to achieve tenure or promotion.

How does a junior faculty member avoid that error? First, find a trusted mentor. Look for a successful associate or full professor in your area who has recently gone through the tenure/promotion process (this is critical – you need your advice to come from someone who has actually been through the process at your institution). A strong mentor also provides a junior faculty with the impetus for ongoing academic growth (O’Meara, Terosky, & Neumann, 2008). Next, look for ways to “get more bang for your buck.” The scholarly way of referring to this is called *faculty role integration* (Bloomgarden & O’Meara, 2007) and there is a growing body of research literature on the practice, primarily because time constraints on faculty have required faculty do more work with less time. By figuring out how to turn your service and teaching into research, you will be more productive and have an easier path toward tenure and promotion. Finally, find work that encourages you as a professional and as an academic. You will be spending many, many hours on this work; it helps if you feel passionately about the work in which you are engaged.

### CONCLUSION

The last several years have been challenging times to be graduate students and faculty members across the United States. Yet we remain committed to our fields. We agree with O’Meara, Terosky and Neumann, who put forth this challenge:

... identify ways to foster, in faculty members, the desire and will to craft themselves as teachers, researchers, and partners in service and community engagement who have actively chosen – and continue actively to choose – the academic career as a way to lead their lives. (2008, p. 19)

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