

Grad Student Advice Series: 10 Ways To Be A Successful PhD Student

march 20, 2013 by [anna pitts](#) 1 comment



104



From Start To Finish

Your PhD is going to be the focus of your professional and personal life for at least four years, so it is important that it will be time well spent. Here are some tips and points to consider to make sure you are a successful PhD student from [The Graduate Recruitment Bureau](#).

So how do you get from start to finish and what can help keep you motivated throughout?

1) Choose The Right University

*Research ahead of time which Universities express/match up with your best research interests and goals. Dig deeper as to what programs are ideal ([look at alumni placement ratings](#)-where do they end up? what percentage go in what sectors?), who has available funding, which programs offer stipends (is being a TA a requirement?), if there are training grants you should apply for (i.e. [NSF](#) or [NIH](#)), and which professors are looking to take students. With the [NIH sequester](#) in play, you'd be surprised how competitive things (positions as a result of funding) are becoming.

*Chances are if you email these professors ahead of time, you can meet with them prior to the start of your graduate program and beat out the crowd for limited lab slots available for grad students. **The early bird gets the worm**, as some graduate students even start working prior to the official start of the semester.

Financial backing is important, as your PhD can't begin without it, so a major step for being a successful PhD student is to ***get financial funding***, and as much of it as possible. PhDs are not cheap with all the material, equipment and research that is required. So, the more secure financial aid you apply for, the less you need to worry about (if the financial aid is required and is graduate program dependent).

If funding is of concern, get in contact with any relevant business or organization(s) that might be interested in your research and willing to fund it for you. For example, research charities or councils that have shown a keen interest in your area of study fund doctorates and academic institutions will have lists of the PhDs they offer.

*Many life science programs give you a stipend to support you (and you might have to TA on the side). When that is not enough, check out 7 easy ways to earn an alternative income here:<http://thegradstudentway.com/blog/?p=86>

2) Keep The Passion

An undeniable necessity for being a successful PhD student is ***to have a real passion for your topic***. Your PhD will be your life for the next 4 or more years, so you need to be really committed to the subject with no risk of finding it tiresome.

The passion you feel for your subject will be tested throughout the course of your research due to work, time and supervisor pressures, so ***the bond you share needs to be indestructible***. If you aren't 100% committed to your topic, then you can't put in the needed effort and passion that are key ingredients for a successful PhD. So, make sure you are really interested in the research you are about to undertake.

3) Learn

Knowing the experts in your field can only help you and your PhD be a success. ***Apply to work with a prestigious tutor/mentor***, as after all, who better to be your mentor than the leading expert in your field? If you don't ask you don't get so ***don't be afraid to try***.

In addition to having a tutor/mentor who seriously knows their stuff, you need to read, watch and listen to your favorite authors and researchers and then try and make contact with them. More often than not they will be more than happy to spend some time discussing their latest findings and theories with you- they are the Hollywood Royalty of academia so let the know you are their number one fan. You never know, they might have some life changing opportunities for you.

4) Network

Your PhD is going to take up a substantial part of your life, and it is important to realize that *a successful PhD student will change their priorities from year to year*. In the first year, *you need to network and get your name out there* and be known. If people don't know you exist, how will they know about your research and whether it is something really ground-breaking that they should take an active interest in?

After your PhD, you are going to need contacts and opportunities and your research is the key to open all these doors, so take the time in the first year to spread your word and get involved in projects. In the final years, *your main priority should be your work*, so it is sensible to turn down some event invitations- you should have made a big enough fuss about yourself in the first year to be able to not attend some events and still not be forgotten. Build yourself a solid basis and name early on, and then complete your work knowing that the interest and knowledge about it is still out there.

5) Read



Doing a PhD means making an original contribution to the field; one of great value, interest and benefit. *Your research needs to complement existing research* and not replicate anything.

Therefore, you need to *read as much as possible including every piece of theory and research* that has ever been done in your area. Know what has been found, what hasn't been proved, what's been suggested, successful and ignored. If you don't know what is already in existence, then you can't make an original and reputable contribution to the field. Therefore, it is essential that in order to be a successful PhD student that you start hitting those books.

6) Communicate

It's great that you're doing all this research and discovering all these fascinating trends, but if you cannot communicate your research and progress effectively-then the real potential of your PhD will be lost.

Brush up on your communication skills. Your written communication needs to be impeccable; logically ordered, easy to follow and with a clear message. Obviously, grammatically correct and with no spelling errors too! When presenting your work to audiences at conferences and meetings it needs to be an exciting, engaging delivery.

Additionally, ***make sure you are presenting your work to the right people***. To be a successful PhD student you need to be more than a great researcher; you need to be able to convey your findings and theories to a specialist audience in a way that will create and retain your professional, reputable image. This means no stuttering, no monotonous lengthy speeches and no waffling, unpunctuated sentences.

7) Work hard

A good work ethic is pivotal to your PhD success. You need to work hard and play hard to stay motivated and sane during your PhD. It is essential that you ***allow yourself breaks*** if you feel as though it's all getting too much and a touch of cabin fever is setting in. An hour's break or a day off can do your research the world of good. If by lunchtime you are going mad then go for a jog, do some painting, bake a cake- whatever you do to reconnect and re-establish control. On the other hand you can't take too many breaks, so keep in mind that you still need to stay productive.

Treat your PhD like a job- as it essentially is- which equates to five days a week and having down-time on weekends. Or, if you need to work weekends then make sure you allow yourself some relaxation in the week. The balancing act of work and play is a fine art, but master it and you'll be a successful PhD student.

8) Persevere

Perseverance is the key to success with all PhDs, as most research won't instantly fall nicely into place right from the get-go. You need to stick with it and constantly reassess and modify your method(s) to achieve the best you can and derive promising results.

This means ***you must be organized as well as tenacious***. Keep meticulously detailed notes at every stage of your work so far and have a plan of action so you always know what the next stage is. It doesn't matter if in reality the next stage doesn't pan out as planned, but by knowing which direction it is headed will help to channel your energy and research to make the most efficient use of your time.

9) Stay productive



When inspiration strikes, jump on it. *You don't have to stick to the traditional three part strategy of completing a PhD- reading, doing, writing.* Apart from being a long winded and tiresome method, it might not actually be that productive. If it's necessary to do some research to back up your writing, then it is fine to read some more.

Or, if it makes more sense to carry out the experiment or data collection over a longer period of time, then do it alongside the reading and writing. There is no right way of working, so just do what is best for you. Just make sure you *keep things fresh and moving forward* to be successful.

10) Publish

Obviously your PhD is going to be published on completion, but *write it up and publish it in various places as you go along.* At the natural end of each stage do a write up and publish it online, for example, on your own blog or relevant websites.

Get people excited about what you are doing and keep them in the loop with your progress. Write up each chapter in the form of an article and then rewrite them to encompass your whole PhD.

If you want to learn more about the importance of science blogging and gaining online exposure, check out this post by the Next Scientist: <http://www.nextscientist.com/writing-science-blog-saved-phd/>

*Note: * in above article paragraphs indicates comments contributed by The Grad Student Way (United States specific)*

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