

## Tough Love: Professional Lessons for Graduate Students

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**Abstract** This article aims to demystify some of the realities of graduate education for the next generation of professors in the humanities and social sciences. Its ‘tell it like it is’ orientation is designed to ensure that graduate students have a firm understanding of the institution they are entering, and will hopefully help them avoid any number of missteps. Topics discussed include supervisor/student dynamics, conferences, writing practices, academic reputation and perseverance.

**Keywords** Graduate education · Professionalization · Mentoring · Graduate supervisors · Academic reputation · Scholarly writing · Academic conferences

Emma’s fidgeting and remote gaze contradict her brusque reassurance that everything is all right.<sup>1</sup> One of our more motivated students, she is bright and easy to like. Today, she is also distracted. Five minutes into our conversation she mentions that she is nervous about our department’s upcoming “research day,” and how intimidating it is to present her work in front of hundreds of academics. We have obviously found the source of her distraction. I explain to her that the total audience for her talk will likely not exceed twenty of her graduate student colleagues

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<sup>1</sup>All of the anecdotes presented here are drawn from my own personal experience or those of family members and extremely close professional confidants. All of the names have been changed and the specifics have sometimes been slightly altered so as to not embarrass anyone.

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This piece is the culmination of many lessons I have learned from a wide assortment of colleagues. Specific thanks to Bill Johnston for prompting me to develop these ideas, to Craig Calhoun for his encouragement, Laura Botsford for copy editing assistance and to Serra Tinic for allowing me to (repeatedly) vocalize many of these issues. Rebecca Morrison, Aaron Doyle, Kiara Okita, Bill Staples and Larry Nichols offered generous and constructive comments on an earlier draft. Special thanks to all of my current and past graduate students and to Richard Ericson, who was my mentor and who became my friend.

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and perhaps a clutch of sympathetic professors. Even the most prominent scholars in her field would rarely garner an audience numbering in the hundreds. She relaxes her shoulders and flushes red, embarrassed at having misunderstood the dynamics of this event.

Comparable moments where graduate students do not appreciate the nature of some small (or major) part of their education have been played out thousands of times. Such mistakes are predictable given the academic apprenticeship model of professional training where professors mentor students through an extended period of one-on-one contact. Students, in this way, are progressively exposed to the rituals and realities of academic life. When a student works with an excellent supervisor this is an ideal arrangement, but not all faculty have the time, energy, or inclination to fully commit to this process. Even a conscientious faculty member may struggle to find the time to adequately nurture all of his or her protégés. Consequently, a significant number of students learn about graduate education in the same way that teenagers learn about sex; from scattered hallway conversations, whispered half truths, and endlessly reproduced folklore. The effect on performance is less than ideal.

Research universities are trying to rectify this situation by developing specialized units to guide graduate students in mastering key moments in their transition to junior faculty members. Such initiatives serve a purpose, but tend to concentrate on certain themes—including an almost totemic fixation on the job talk and interview—and direct less attention to more basic, but nonetheless consequential, attributes of the university experience.

This paper addresses this lacuna by delineating several lessons for students pursuing PhDs or contemplating applying to a PhD program in the social sciences and humanities. As such, it continues the discussion that has been occurring in *The American Sociologist* on this topic (See Burawoy 2005; Ferrales and Fine 2005; Marx 1997; Schulman and Silver 2003, 2005). My goal here is to “tell it like it is,” rather than advocate for “how it should be.” I hold in abeyance important questions about reforming higher education in favour of demystifying some, but by no means all, aspects of the graduate student experience. As these lessons in “tough love” are oriented to the dynamics of research universities some observations may be less pertinent to individuals seeking careers in the private sector or in community colleges where expectations can be quite different. That said, many of the points below should generalize to most graduate programs, and all students will likely benefit from at least being cognisant of the issues identified here. Nonetheless, some students will undoubtedly find these observations self-evident and perhaps patronizing. Rest assured that I would not detail them here unless past experience demonstrated that not everyone shares a comparable grasp of how the university operates.

## **Do You Belong Here?**

The specifics of the dream may differ, but it is always a variation on a theme: You are called into the Chair’s office. It seem that due to an oversight, you were admitted to the PhD program despite the fact that your GRE grades were not up to par. You have no alternative, she says, but to withdraw from the program. Panic starts to set in

and your head reels with the implications of this development. Thankfully, you quickly wake up, but remain unsettled.

There are many comparable graduate student dreams: you may imagine that you have been singled out for failing high-school calculus; that you lost your student Visa; or, more ominously, that “your kind” is not welcome. Such dreams express anxieties about whether you really belong in graduate school and are to be expected given that you are engaged in a high-stakes, multi-year endeavour in an institution that rarely sets out explicit performance criteria and makes no promise that you will even find a job at the end of the process.

For our purposes, it is fair to assume that, administratively, you undeniably *do* belong in a PhD program. You have secured the types of course grades, test scores, and reference letters to persuade a faculty committee to admit you. This, however, does not address the more subjective assessment of whether doing a PhD is right for you. Outside of my office door I have posted this admonition from Marge Simpson: “Don’t make fun of grad students, they just made a terrible life choice.” The notice gets a few chuckles, but I do not really believe my own propaganda. Notwithstanding my occasionally critical tone, my sense is that the academy is an excellent option for individuals with the right constellation of interests, sensibilities, and habits. People who understand the university—how it works, and what to expect from an academic career—are well positioned to have a rewarding life in the university. For such individuals graduate education is an excellent choice.

That said, I occasionally worry about the nature of the “choice” that some students seem to make. A subset of PhD students enrol in an intensive, multi-year process of professional training with less serious contemplation than they dedicate to planning their next vacation. Some students simply back into the program as if it was expected of them, the next logical step in their lives. Some profess to have enrolled for the laudable but nonetheless woolly reason that they love learning. Still others, to be blunt, are here because they had no idea what else to do. One can find many professors who entered graduate education through comparable routes and who have gone on to have enjoyable careers. Nonetheless, few would recommend giving so little consideration to the decision to enter a profession.

At the most basic, a PhD is the credential required to be a university professor. This is not all that you can do with a PhD (graduates can go into politics, work in non-governmental organizations, edit, and so on), but the academy is the most conspicuous place where a PhD is required and valued. Therefore, before you apply, think seriously about whether a life in research and teaching is right for you. What does an academic’s day look like? Are there reasonable job prospects in your field? What about the prospective salary? Are you willing to move to another part of the country (or world) to secure your first position? What are the prospects for having children? For some, the answers to these and a plethora of other questions will make the professorial life look idyllic, while others will be forced to re-think their professional ambitions. Far better to consider at the earliest possible stages whether this is a career you would enjoy, rather than find yourself with several years and tens of thousands of dollars invested in a job that is not right for you.

Those who pursue an academic career should remember that a PhD is the bare minimum for an entry-level position and, in itself, is no guarantee that you will land a job at a university. There are a host of other things that will flesh out your CV and

make you attractive to a hiring committee. This, in turn, requires greater knowledge about what is expected from an academic career and how the university operates. The remainder of this paper explicitly sets out some of these details, but students are strongly advised to talk with academic friends and colleagues to learn more about the innumerable nuances of how the university operates. One of the most important people in this regard will be your supervisor, which also means that you should have a good sense of what to expect from him or her.

### **Your Supervisor is Not Your Friend**

Your relationship with your supervisor can be key to your smooth progress through graduate school and eventual academic success. That said, the number of students who do not appreciate the nature of this relationship is startling. Most fundamentally, they mistake their supervisor for a friend. It is easy to understand how this belief arises, as student and supervisor can be close in age and work for years on joint initiatives. Notwithstanding such intimate contact, the student/supervisor relationship has unavoidable professional dynamics. While faculty and student should ideally be amicable, and if all goes well the relationship will, over time, develop into a close friendship, there is little place for sentimentality in choosing a supervisor.

Do not lose sight of the fact that your supervisor must evaluate you, and will often write a torrent of letters over an extended number of years to assess your suitability for jobs, awards, and promotion. Faculty cannot write uniformly glowing evaluations of all of their students, lest they undermine the process and their own efforts. Certainly, some referees reproduce the dodo bird's verdict in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that "Everyone has won and all must have prizes!" Long-serving committee members quickly identify reviewers who always provide effusive appraisals, and tend to discount their evaluations. Moreover, faculty risk destroying friendships if they write an excessively glowing letter that plays an instrumental role in a department hiring a weak or middling candidate. Colleagues are not apt to forget such misrepresentations.

Students who see their supervisor as a friend are tempted to treat them as a confidante. A delicate balance must be maintained here; you should be comfortable approaching your supervisor if you have serious problems, and your supervisor should be your strongest champion in the department. However, there are implications for revealing too much. For example, one of my colleagues had a student who consistently confessed that he hated writing, to the extent that he found it almost intolerable to sit down at the computer. Undoubtedly he made such revelations because he wanted reassurance and perhaps guidance. At the same time, your supervisor must evaluate you as a student; be wary of revealing things that may raise serious questions about your suitability for an academic career. By all means seek out your supervisor if you encounter problems in the progress of your degree, but for more intimate revelations it is best to seek out friends, lovers, or professional counsellors.

The academic community often judges students and junior faculty in light of their supervisor's reputation. It can take years for you to firmly establish an independent profile, and some individuals will always consider you part of a lineage that is traced

back to your supervisor. Choosing a mentor is therefore arguably the most important decision you will make in your entire program of education, probably even more important than (though undoubtedly affected by) the topic of your dissertation.

Consider a number of factors before selecting your mentor. Among the things to contemplate is whether others recognize them as a solid supervisor. Do they publish quality work in recognized venues? Do they have a record of getting their students published? Have they been able to secure research grants? Are they immersed in their academic community? Such connections are particularly important when it comes time to secure an external examiner, but they also provide the scholarly network in which a student will initially be immersed. Also consider the personality of a potential supervisor. Like any other institution the university has its share of unpleasant and unstable people, so garner a sense of them as a person. This is one reason why it is not advisable for students who are starting their degree at a new university to commit to a supervisor before meeting that individual. No single factor should be determinative, but you need to be conscious of the types of things to review before you so intimately intertwine your life and professional trajectory to a single person.

Having selected a supervisor, take their advice seriously. Several years ago, a student named Omar asked his supervisor, Professor Singh, if he should include Professor Hughes on his PhD committee. On paper, this seemed like an excellent idea as Hughes possessed all of the trappings of academic prestige. Nonetheless, Professor Singh vetoed the idea, only to learn a week later that Omar had, against her insistence, gone ahead and invited Hughes to join the committee. What Omar did not know, because this could not be said publicly to a comparatively junior graduate student, was that Professor Hughes had a well-deserved reputation for being curmudgeonly, unpredictable and unpleasant. The upshot was that Professor Singh withdrew from the reconstituted committee, leaving Omar scrambling to find another supervisor. While you need not slavishly bend to your supervisor's every whim, you must also recognize that your supervisor has a vested interest in seeing you succeed, and has access to a bigger picture than is typically available to graduate students.

If things go well you will find that you and your supervisor are engaged in a virtuous circle. Your supervisor will bask in the glow of working with such an accomplished junior colleague. Michael Boroway, past President of the American Sociological Association, (2005: 53) presents the issue succinctly when he notes that "Faculty have an interest... in accumulating their own capital through building the academic capital of their students." At the same time, students also benefit from their supervisor's reputation. To arrive at such a mutually beneficial situation, you need to be clear very early on about which faculty members can provide the things you need from a supervisor.

### **People are Talking About You**

Both faculty members and students are enmeshed in a reputation game.  
(Ferrales and Fine 2005: 64)

Several years ago a junior colleague submitted the same manuscript simultaneously to two different peer-reviewed journals. This is typically seen to be a serious

breach of academic protocol. Anonymous review relies on scholars volunteering their time to evaluate manuscripts. As good reviewers already have onerous time commitments, the peer review process would be overwhelmed if joint submissions became accepted practice. Hence, the prohibition.

By happenstance, her joint submission was discovered and she was reprimanded by the editors of the respective journals. Her punishment was, in the first instance, not unduly severe. Word inevitably spread and other individuals, myself included, learned about this violation of etiquette. Her reputation became tainted which, in turn, has played a role in her not being invited to participate in a number of desirable ventures. Such shunning was not necessarily conscious or vindictive, but manifested itself, for example, in situations where conference organizers or editors were compiling a list of potential contributors, and shied away from this person in favour of someone else. Cumulatively, such exclusions amounted to an excessive punishment of a comparatively junior scholar who, in her eagerness to publish, made a mistake which she genuinely regrets. The point of this anecdote, however, concerns the importance and fragility of academic reputations, and how tainted reputations tend to spread and compound themselves.

There are several ways to evaluate an academic's standing, including number of publications, quality of the venues where they publish, awards, positions on prestigious commissions, or the value of their research grants. Conditioning all such factors is their professional reputation, comprising their colleagues' informal appraisal of countless acts performed over the years. At the end of the day, this reputation can be an academic's most significant asset, because everything else is contingent on their standing in their community. It is their reputation that gets them invited to contribute to prestigious volumes, to evaluate funding proposals, and that gives their letters of reference added weight. As a graduate student, you must be cognisant that you are developing a professional reputation, and that while this is built up incrementally, it can be tarnished very quickly. This means that you must "learn to recognize how each exchange with a faculty member has the potential to shape a student's budding reputation" (Ferales and Fine 2005: 59) and to accept this situation without becoming a sycophant or paralyzed with anxiety about how others are interpreting your every move.

The importance of reputation also means that people talk about you. Such talk is not (only) the result of the prurient voyeurism of the academy, but is an inevitable aspect of graduate education. Departments, instructors, and supervisors must make decisions about students—are they progressing adequately, which students should receive funding, is this student ready to start teaching, and so on. The result is that faculty and administrators talk about you in committee meetings, hallways and, in more collegial departments, over a drink. A vital point to grasp about such talk is the disproportionate weighting of small, often trivial, distinctions. While it would be ideal if all decisions were based on formal meritocratic criteria, the reality is that the curriculum vitae for many graduate students look very similar. Grades are clustered in an extremely narrow band, evaluation letters are glowing, and publication histories are roughly comparable. In such situations of approximate uniformity more subjective and impressionistic criteria take on a disproportionate significance. Hence, the difference between a professor casually saying that she was impressed by a student's guest lecture as opposed to noting that the student seems constitutionally incapable of being on time, can carry an unfair amount of weight.

If we take just one fundamental lesson from the connection between such talk and reputations, it is that if you are going to do something in the academy, take the task seriously and do it to the best of your abilities. Such an orientation undoubtedly provides its own intrinsic rewards, but it can also yield more straightforward benefits. Even if you are simply doing a small favour for someone who is not related to your area of specialization or is not on your committee, remember that the academy is comprised of a series of tremendously small communities. The number of people who work in your area would likely not fill a bus, often not even a small bus. Administrators responsible for making decisions about hiring, promotion, and awards frequently contact trusted colleagues who were in the candidate's department, sometimes years previously, in order to solicit their impressions. Things go much more smoothly for that candidate if the person being approached says that they remember being impressed by that student's input into a hiring committee, as opposed to—as once happened at my university—saying that the only thing they remember about that student is that he took a vacation to Cancun when he was supposed to be grading 200 undergraduate essays.

### **You Do Not Know How to Write**

The assertion “you do not know how to write,” may be true to varying degrees with particular students, but it should be embraced by all graduate students. Writing will constitute a major part of your job, and good writing improves your published works immeasurably, translating into greater success in grant applications, letters for students, and a plethora of other things. Too many graduate students mistakenly treat writing like riding a bicycle, a skill that they have acquired and cannot forget, irrespective of the fact that they have not taken the activity seriously since their freshman year. A better analogy is that writing is like karate or tap dancing, a form of artistry that deteriorates if not constantly practiced and which can only be improved through consistent, concerted effort.

One great secret of graduate school is that good writers can do extremely well, whether or not they are the smartest person in the room. Alternatively, if a student is brilliant but an atrocious writer, few people will ever discern how smart they are because their papers will not be read. As a journal editor I receive a good number of submissions that are so poorly written that I am left to ask myself “Why do they hate their audience?” Few things rattle anonymous reviewers more than poor writing, and a hostile reviewer immediately disadvantages your work. Editors commit an enormous amount of time and energy revising works produced by bad writers; they are disinclined to invite such individuals to participate in writing projects. On the positive side, editors actively pursue good writers. If you are fortunate enough to become an *excellent* writer, establishing a reputation for powerful prose and masterful metaphors, people will read your work irrespective of the topic.

Graduate students are on the cusp of a vital transition in their relationship with their audience. In graduate school, faculty read your papers and dissertation chapters *because they have to*. That changes after the dissertation is completed, or as you start to publish in journals. Academics are overwhelmed with things they want or need to read. If you write so poorly that your audience struggles to understand your point,

they will simply set your work aside and move on to something else. For an author this is a disaster, as being unread is akin to being irrelevant. There are far too many ways to improve your writing to list them all here, but some time-honored techniques include joining (or establishing) a writing group, reading books on the topic, and simply paying attention to why you like, or hate, certain authors.

The second meaning of the assertion “you do not know how to write” refers to writing as a form of labour. For a sedentary activity, composition is also surprisingly hard work; something that only looks romantic when viewed from afar. Knowing how to write therefore also means learning to structure your life to provide sufficient time and motivation. Most graduate students write because they face university-imposed deadlines. As you progress further into your PhD you are increasingly responsible for establishing your own writing routine. This is harder than it sounds, as the university offers innumerable distractions that appear more pressing and pleasurable than the isolated exertions of authorship. Ask published authors how they write, and press them for the specifics. Some set aside particular times of the day while others compose in hour-long segments, never leaving their chair until that time has expired. Others commit to producing a certain number of words or pages a day. Many authors, wary of being distracted, unplug their telephones and refuse to read their email until they have produced their self-imposed output. Your particular regime will be shaped by family commitments, circadian rhythms, and other more idiosyncratic factors. Pay attention to what stimulates, or disrupts, your writing, and be ruthless about carving off time at the keyboard, ideally on a daily basis. While writing is always hard work, the more it is part of your regular routine the more manageable and enjoyable it becomes.

### **Conferences are Not Important for the Reasons You Think They are Important**

While publishing is the most respected way for researchers to communicate their findings, the academic conference is also justified as a forum for intellectual exchange. In practice, the major humanities and social science conferences can be terrible venues for serious academic debate. Presentation times are too brief to even begin to flesh out an argument, and “themed” panels can often appear to have been thrown together haphazardly. Audiences are usually small, a problem that is particularly acute for graduate students who can face dishearteningly empty rooms. This is not to say that graduate students should not attend conferences, or that they should not take their presentations seriously. Attending conferences serves several purposes, but you need to know what can realistically be gained from such events. Moreover, be parsimonious; do not attend so many conferences that they become a diversion. Committee members have been known to cock an eyebrow when a graduate student’s CV contains pages of conference presentations but few publications.

Conferences help to answer the question “what should I write about?” If you cannot find an interesting or relevant panel at an established conference talk to your supervisor or other graduate students about proposing your own session. Once you have registered, start writing a paper, not just a conference presentation. The distinction is important, as conference presentations can be so cursory that practiced lecturers can fill their allotted time by speaking from the briefest of notes. In

contrast, you should aim to produce something approximating a first draft of a paper. After the event, incorporate any comments you might receive and revise the paper with an eye towards submitting it for publication or using it as a dissertation chapter. Doing so will also help address the fact that writing and revising can go on interminably. Committing to turning-out a conference paper by a specific date is a time-honoured way to advance your writing, bringing it to some form of closure.

Like my student Emma mentioned above, graduate students are often anxious about their first conference presentation. Such fears are entirely understandable given that these presentations can be a student's first public performance of their emergent academic persona. In the back of their minds hovers the nightmare scenario that a prominent scholar will single them out for a mean-spirited attack. While such things have happened, they are primarily the stuff of graduate student lore. Indeed, if such a highly unlikely scenario occurred the wider audience would tend to sympathize with you and rightfully recognize the truculent faculty member as a profound boor. Audiences tend to identify with graduate student anxieties and, even if they disagree with you, will likely do so respectfully. Hence, when it is all over, you are more apt to lament that there was not a larger audience than the fact that one of the few people who chose to attend opted to abuse you.

There are a host of subsidiary benefits to attending conferences. Making a presentation can make your research seem more real to you, allowing you to recognize that you are becoming an expert in the field. Conferences also get you out of your solitary bubble, providing an opportunity to meet a wider group of scholars and colleagues. Moreover, conferences provide a good amount of the shared cultural repertoire of an academic community, and are a recurrent source of anecdotes and occasional moments of intrigue (Cohen 1995).

National meetings are also a useful forum for networking, a practice that has been tainted by the crass way in which it is performed in industry and government. In the context of the academy, where few people might share your research interests, networking essentially amounts to meeting and sharing ideas and plans with people in your wider scholarly community. Even prominent "name" scholars enjoy meeting a junior colleague who has comparable interests, has read the same materials, and who shares personal connections. Simply introducing yourself, politely and with genuine interest, can pay dividends down the road. An editor might need an extra contributor to a book, or want someone to write a book review. If she can remember having met you, even briefly, you have a greater chance of being called upon. In addition, such encounters provide you with the enviable ability to write that email which commences: "You may not remember me, but we met at the conference in Minnesota two years ago..."

While at the conference, balance taking in the local colour with attending your friend's presentations. They will remember the gesture, and you will appreciate it when they crawl out of bed at 7:00 am on the last day of a gruelling conference to reciprocate.

## **Undergraduate Teaching is Poorly Recognized**

If you want immediate insight into the reward structure of research universities, ask a friendly professor to identify the five most important individuals in his academic

subdiscipline. Once he has listed a few names, ask whether those people are good undergraduate teachers. You will likely be met with a blank stare, or at best a mumbled response that he presumes they are good teachers because they are brilliant and give excellent conference presentations. You could press the issue a bit further and ask if he knows of any “star” academics who have a reputation as lousy undergraduate instructors. He will probably affirm that he does, although discretion might prevent him from naming names. This situation—the fact that professors can be recognized as stars when few people (beyond their students) are aware of their skills as an undergraduate teacher, and the fact that bad teachers can become big name academics—accentuates the most poorly kept secret in the academy: undergraduate teaching counts for very little within the institutional reward structure of research universities.

While universities are now more vocal about fostering excellent undergraduate teaching, to date this rarely translates into anything approaching the type of recognition and rewards that flow to excellent researchers. Much like professional service, teaching is something that academics must do, and administrators certainly expect that it will be done well, but it is not the primary focus of research institutions. With the exception of the recognition afforded a few individuals who have carved out professional trajectories that involve prominent national teaching awards, university administrators usually take teaching for granted. Universities would certainly prefer to have good teachers, but as long as faculty conduct research, publish, and secure grants, the system is content with middling teachers and will often tolerate bad instructors, unless they are so atrocious as to become embarrassing or abusive.

Junior faculty members face pressure to publish and secure grants. It is through such activities that they will most readily develop an academic profile, get tenure, and be promoted. They will also have to teach, and teaching, especially when done well, consumes a monumental amount of time. Unfortunately, time is a finite resource and every hour spent on improving your teaching is one that could have been dedicated to activities that are more highly valued within the university’s symbolic economy. Even universities with an honest desire to foster excellent teaching have a hard time reconciling the fact that for someone to become a marginally better teacher they will have to take time away from something else. In the eyes of the global scholarly community, the likely return to the individual, department, and university on a faculty member becoming a somewhat better instructor is negligible as compared to their publishing even a reasonably recognized article.

This situation has produced a number of consequences. It has helped to make teaching release (after personal salary) the most valuable commodity within the academy,<sup>2</sup> something that is fought over ferociously, often by people who take every opportunity to broadcast their commitment to “critical pedagogy.” It also means that when universities go headhunting for academic stars to fill prestigious chaired positions, they are looking exclusively for researchers. If such individuals are also good teachers so much the better, but that is not why they are recruited. Indeed,

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<sup>2</sup> A colleague suggested that I was likely understating the case, as she would gladly buy out her teaching with her own salary if the university allowed her to do so.

teaching load is one of the most significant considerations for professors when assessing competing job offers. Finally, one gets a further sense of the relative value of teaching by recognizing that faculty typically see extra teaching as punitive. This contrasts markedly to the situation where a faculty member is asked to conduct extra research or publish more. While she might perceive such demands to be unfair or unachievable given other obligations, she would not likely see them as a punishment.

All of this produces a number of practical implications for graduate students. Most importantly, it suggests that you need to think about how to calibrate your priorities. The blunt reality is that you do not need to excel at teaching in order to land a job at a research university. Ideally, you might want to do some teaching near the end of your degree to gain valuable experience, a sense of self-confidence, and some remuneration. When applying for a job, it will also allow you to tick off the ‘teaching’ box on your CV, present a teaching philosophy, and recount a few classroom anecdotes.

Universities are strictly, if informally, tiered in terms of research and teaching expectations. Although this is a gross generalization, research universities tend to (predictably) stress research over teaching, where smaller universities and colleges pay more attention to teaching and have lower expectations about publishing. Committee members at major research universities are therefore not necessarily impressed by letters of reference dominated by praise for a candidate’s teaching prowess, while at teaching universities hiring committees can get nervous if a referee extols the stunning research trajectory of a candidate but never once mentions their teaching. When applying for a job you should garner a sense of where that university sits in terms of their honest teaching and research expectations and craft your letters appropriately. This is not something that is necessarily easy to discern, as all institutions of higher education now tend to publicly profess excellence in all areas. Part of the skill set that a graduate student acquires over time is the ability to identify the real expectations that are subsumed beneath these promotional façades.

In concluding this section it is vital to stress that nothing above should be taken as encouraging graduate students or faculty to shirk their teaching responsibilities, dismissing them as inconsequential. One great irony in all of this is that despite the marginalization of undergraduate teaching in the university reward structure, many professors find teaching to be the most enjoyable part of their job. Teaching well enhances your students’ experiences and your sense of personal satisfaction. Hence, the larger point of always doing any task you take on to the best of your abilities undeniably applies to your teaching. The issue here is time management. Being cognisant of what is and is not *really* valued in research universities provides a loose framework for allotting your energies.

### **Get Involved, But Prioritize**

A lot goes on in a university besides research and teaching. During your degree you might find, for example, that your department is hiring new faculty, reconfiguring the graduate curriculum, or hosting a conference. One appealing aspect of the

academic apprenticeship model is that graduate students can be invited to participate in such activities. Where possible, get involved, without losing sight of your priorities.

Many programs have graduate student associations and you should find a way to contribute. Such bodies provide opportunities for you to rectify problems or shape the future of your program. They are also a vehicle for socialization. In smaller programs in particular it can be hard to develop a sense of community. As you progress through your degree this isolation is compounded as you move from coursework to the solo projects of comprehensive exams and your dissertation, and colleagues depart to take jobs, conduct research, or cloister themselves for that final writing push. Student associations introduce you to people who share similar experiences and provide some insulation against unhealthy seclusion. Once you graduate you will find that these individuals become your professional colleagues, and you will call upon one another for years to come.

If your department is hiring a new faculty member definitely try to get involved in this process, whether or not the job is in your substantive area. At a bare minimum, attend the candidate's job talk. These presentations are usually public events and provide an excellent opportunity for you to think about the day when you will be standing in front of a comparable audience. Early in your degree it can be intimidating to imagine such a scenario. Job candidates can be so erudite that it is hard to envision how you could ever be so accomplished. As your research progresses, however, you will become a specialist in your own area; attending job talks is an invaluable opportunity to contemplate the do's and don'ts of presenting yourself to a hiring committee. Indeed, job talks are so important that if your department is not hiring you should seek out and attend talks in other loosely aligned departments.

Some departments let a graduate student representative sit on hiring committees, sometimes even giving them a vote. Jump at any opportunity for such involvement, as it provides a revealing sense of what is and is not really valued in hiring decisions, including insight into how reference letters are both written and interpreted. Be aware that there are also risks associated with being so close to the heart of the hiring process, particularly if graduate students have a vote. Ask your supervisor about the political context of the particular hiring. Avoid being incorporated into someone else's political agenda. If it looks like the hire will be particularly contentious, better to delicately remove yourself from the committee than start your career by becoming ensnared into long-standing vendettas.

Beyond getting involved in existing committees, do not be afraid to take a few risks and propose your own initiatives. Some examples of projects that graduate students have undertaken of their own accord include holding conferences, hosting guest speakers, establishing a student's association, and producing a journal. These activities can consume a lot of time, so do not personally initiate *all* such ventures, but if you think that it would be interesting and worthwhile to establish something new do not be shy about proposing the idea. As you proceed in the academy you will increasingly be involved in such endeavours, and it can only help to learn the ins and outs at a comparatively early stage. The fact that you have never done such things before and are not sure where to start is to be expected. Ask around for guidance and you will likely receive support and advice from students, faculty, and

administrators. Such activities will help establish your reputation for having initiative, but perhaps more importantly, they can be both personally challenging and stimulating.

While it is rewarding at many levels to get involved in departmental life, remember that such activities also provide infinite opportunities for diversion. Hence the same advice applies here as with teaching. If you are going to get involved, do so to the best of your abilities, but remember to partition your time and energy in light of your responsibilities to write and conduct research.

### **Perseverance Outweighs Brilliance**

Given that the PhD is the highest academic credential, one occasionally encounters graduate students who believe they are embarking on a life of the mind. As they see it, this existence is characterized by extended periods spent in deep cognitive repose, or huddled in coffee shops to debate life's great ideas. Such an intellectualist orientation is certainly attractive, and exceptionally smart students have an undeniable advantage in graduate education. Nonetheless, we should not fetishize the importance of being brilliant. Intellect is not as vital as is the self-discipline that will allow you to complete your degree. The road through graduate school is strewn with the unfinished PhDs of brainy but disorganized and distractible individuals. Doing a PhD might appear to be a big job, but in fact it consists of a million small tasks. To tie together the innumerable threads that will comprise your dissertation you need the perseverance to slog your way through the ups and downs of a multi-year endeavour.

You not only need to maintain momentum, but also develop a sensibility about how to manage trying events. For a significant portion of graduate students it is their ability to deal with life's ordeals that determines whether they finish their dissertation. A PhD takes years to complete, and probability unfortunately suggests that during this time you will face challenges beyond completing your degree. For example, it is fairly common for graduate student relationships to fall apart. This is partly a function of the dynamics of serial monogamy and partly a result of the strains of graduate education. You can easily become absorbed in your work, and may sometimes be under extreme stress, neither of which makes for a healthy relationship. Moreover, as you progress through your degree you are also, through a series of often imperceptible changes, becoming a different person, someone with new friends, interests, and routines. Existing partners may not be partial to this transformation.

Sadly, relationship issues can be amongst the least traumatic of the difficulties that graduate students face. I know graduate students who have become seriously ill, have seen family members hospitalized and who have had their parents or loved ones pass away. One of our students had his house incinerated in a blaze that destroyed all of his family's possessions. He then had to find accommodations in a city that was facing a housing shortage, forcing him to live apart from his wife and young child.

If you encounter shattering personal difficulties you need to confront them and make whatever arrangements are necessary to ensure your physical, psychological,

and emotional wellbeing. Seek support from your supervisor and graduate chair. If appropriate, do not be shy about getting professional help from university counselling services. While I have been stressing how to complete your dissertation, when facing overwhelming personal issues such a singular focus on your degree can become self-defeating. There is no shame in temporarily withdrawing from your PhD program in order to attend to your overriding obligations to yourself and your family.

## Conclusion

Several years ago I attended the national meetings of a cultural studies association, during which I saw a memorable presentation by a student named Chantelle. She was poised and polished. She was also wearing a tuxedo. I have often thought about how Chantelle, with her somewhat idiosyncratic sartorial flair, might relate to the advice presented in this paper.

This essay is ultimately an exercise in professionalization, part of a burgeoning effort to detail the realities of academic life for the next generation of professors. However, such advice is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it has made students better prepared to face the realities of the job market and the early stages of their careers. At the same time, we risk losing something in the process. Part of the appeal of careers in the social sciences and humanities has been their anti-establishment orientation. Universities have housed a procession of impressive individuals who, due to any number of personal peculiarities, would have withered in industry or government. Although it has much room to improve on this count, the university has also tended to do a better job of embracing forms of personal difference than have other major institutions. Encouraging students to adopt a more professional orientation risks producing the unintended consequence of limiting the space for forms of difference or quashing some of the individual eccentricities that make the academy so refreshing. While I worry about such a development, I suspect that we are not yet at the point where Chantelle has to exchange her tuxedo for a power suit.

You will ultimately have a more enjoyable and rewarding experience if you know, at the earliest possible stages, the nature of the institution you are entering. This does not, however, mean that you have to mould yourself into a mirror image of the university's professional template. Being attuned to how universities tend to operate does not preclude efforts to transform the institution. Opportunities exist to challenge existing structures and establish a personal niche that consciously subverts inequitable expectations. Individuals eager to push for such change—undoubtedly even more than those intent on simply reproducing the system—need a clear sense of how the university operates. If you are going to advocate for reform or carve out a personal trajectory that departs from the well-trodden path, you are better positioned if you can anticipate the likely sources and degree of organizational resistance. Hopefully, in outlining just some of the dynamics of how research universities operate, these comments will help guide individuals who want to capitalize on the many rewards offered by higher education, as well as those who are eager to challenge some of its more detrimental practices.

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