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Advice

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Your First Year in a Ph.D. Program

By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong

Julie: Usually we write about the end stages of the doctoral-student career as soon-to-be Ph.D.'s prepare for the job market. But this month we'd like to step back and offer advice to those just starting out in graduate school.

We believe early career planning is especially important in the current climate surrounding doctoral education. From all sides, Ph.D. students hear that their fields are in jeopardy, that research and teaching positions are shrinking, and that the doctoral path is one taken only by the rich or the financially foolish. That refrain is especially heard in the humanities, as typified by Jordan Weissmann's recent [blog post](#) for *The Atlantic*, but he has also written about the lack of jobs and the decline of research opportunities [for scientists](#). Others have aired similar concerns about fields such as [computer science](#), [particle physics](#), and the [biomedical sciences](#). The challenges faced by Ph.D.'s seeking work outside of academe even made *The New York Times* recently in an article entitled "[The Repurposed Ph.D.](#)"

Jenny: In our work as graduate-career counselors, we know doctoral students to be intellectually inquisitive and passionate about their fields. We also know that during years of graduate study their priorities may shift. Life, to many students' surprise, doesn't stop during a doctoral program. And no matter how much you love your field, research is work and, as such, can sometimes feel like a grind no matter how passionate you are about the topic.

Part of being an engaged graduate student is to manage those shifts in your priorities and attitudes over the long haul. A doctoral program, as the old saying goes, is more like a marathon than a sprint.

Julie: If you started your program in the fall, then you know how to

get around the campus by now, and have developed a study schedule that works for you. It's time to think about making the most of your first year.

First, find out what your department expects of you. I hope you attended the orientation for new graduate students in your department and have reviewed its website. Most departments will have sections about the Ph.D. process, taking you from course requirements through dissertation completion. Some departments may have a timeline that indicates what you should achieve in each year of your graduate program. Others may offer discussions on the nature and benefits of the various requirements and expectations of doctoral study.

Jenny: To get off to a good start it's crucial to be involved in the life of your department and attend the activities, seminars, and meetings that it organizes for students. Faculty members will expect that of you and will see your participation as a sign of your level of engagement in the field.

Attending those events may sound like an added burden, in addition to your coursework and teaching responsibilities, but think of it as a chance to get to know people in your department. Graduate school can be an isolating experience, so it's important to take the time to connect—intellectually and socially—with others, particularly in the early years of your program.

Julie: Second, understand that doctoral education is different from that offered at the undergraduate or professional-degree levels. Most people find that their doctoral program challenges them intellectually in ways they have never been challenged before. That can be exhilarating or discouraging, or both at the same time. It's important to develop a support system that can help you get through the more stressful periods.

Jenny: Most departments provide a range of services, and it's up to you to make use of them. Your department may offer regular professional-development seminars that can prepare you for teaching, writing grants, and going on the academic job market. Take the time to attend those seminars—including some during your first year—as they will help you to gain the skills that can set

you up for success in your field down the road.

Julie: Many universities offer terrific professional-development opportunities through their career services, graduate-dean offices, teaching centers, and other departments, which often work together to sponsor such programs. Savvy students take advantage of those services regularly, while other students seem to be completely unaware of the programs or find out too late. Be the savvy student. Do a bit of research on your university's website, talk to older students in your department, or stop by the writing/teaching/career/dean's office and ask about the services they provide to doctoral students.

Jenny: Once you've chosen an adviser, that faculty member will likely become your main source of career and scholarly guidance. Julie and I have spoken with many graduate students in the course of our work, and we know how much this relationship can influence how a doctoral student experiences a program. A great adviser can make the experience wonderful; an absent, difficult, or even downright mean adviser can turn the experience into a misery.

So chose wisely. Do your "due diligence," as a lawyer might say. In your first year or two in the department, get to know professors and their work, considering carefully who might be a good fit for you. And be sure to talk with students farther along in their programs about their experience with individual faculty members.

Julie: Your adviser will be in charge of helping you get your Ph.D, but you will be in charge of your career. It is vital that you pay attention to what interests you, rather than looking to your adviser for guidance on that. Keep track of potential areas of research interest. Eventually you will need to select a dissertation topic, and you will want it to be something that excites you. Take courses with different professors in your department and, when possible, in related areas of study. Be sure to introduce yourself to your professors, to fellow graduate students, to staff members (such as a graduate coordinator), and to administrators. You never know from where opportunities will arrive.

Jenny: Besides departmental events, attend lectures and programs

elsewhere on the campus to widen your circle. It's also a good idea to start to get to know your scholarly association's website; read not just the scholarship but about the discipline itself and about the services the association offers. Most scholarly societies have listings of job announcements and fellowships, along with helpful professional advice. Too often, I see students who have missed a couple years' worth of relevant information simply because they did not know to look to a scholarly association as a source of information and support.

Julie: Talk with more-advanced doctoral students who participate in graduate-student groups. At Penn, for example, we have active student groups involved in university governance (the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly), career interests (the Penn Biotech Group), and many other topics.

Consider joining a graduate-student group and maybe even taking on a leadership role. The organizational and administrative skills you develop—running the group, public speaking and presenting, committee work—can help you be a better student, manage your time better, and provide skills that you will need later in your career, academic or otherwise. It's particularly important to establish a pattern in your career of regular interaction with others around a central goal or project—especially if you are in a discipline where you do most of your research on your own.

Jenny: Developing a range of skills will make you a stronger doctoral student. You will, of course, be better at some of those skills than at others. Take the time to build a level of comfort with the things that don't come naturally to you, whether that means teaching, presenting, writing, or networking.

Most people have a natural tendency to avoid doing the things they perceive themselves to be "bad" at. Your doctoral program will offer you many opportunities to practice your areas of perceived weakness. Take advantage of them.

Julie: Jenny brings up something most people are more likely to associate with M.B.A. than Ph.D. programs—networking. As you go through your doctoral program, you should be building a network of contacts in your field and related ones, from both

inside and outside your institution. Those people can be your collaborators—and sometimes your competition. Either way, knowing them will help you to keep abreast of developments in your field.

That is why conference attendance, even when you are just starting out, can be so important. Find out whether your university offers travel grants to help graduate students defray the costs of going to academic conferences. Keep an eye out for conferences happening near your institution. Many of the major scholarly societies have regional chapters, and attending those sessions is a good starting point.

Jenny: During your graduate training, be sure that you are keeping up your connections (and developing new ones) with people working outside of academe. That will be good for your general mental health and sense of perspective. And it will pay off if, upon earning your Ph.D., you pursue a nonacademic career.

Julie: Many students who start off in Ph.D. programs come to realize that it is not a good fit for them. That does not imply failure or lack of ability on the part of the student, but rather a mismatch between the goals of the doctoral program and the career goals of the student.

If that mismatch is where you now find yourself, go talk to someone about it. Visit the counseling center on your campus, or the career-services office. Many students find the first year of a doctoral program to be extremely challenging, and not just the workload. They are in a new city and trying to develop a new social circle. Talking to someone can help you sort out whether being in your particular program is the right fit for you.

Jenny: Finally, immerse yourself in your coursework but not so far in that you don't take the time to follow up on some of our suggestions. Most of our recommendations complement your research and teaching experience and should enhance your first-year experience.

We invite our readers to share their tips and words of wisdom on the first-year doctoral experience by posting in the comments

section below.

Julie Miller Vick recently retired as senior associate director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jennifer S. Furlong is director of the office of career planning and professional development at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. They are the authors of "The Academic Job Search Handbook" (University of Pennsylvania Press).

Send in your career questions to careertalk@chronicle.com, or post your question in the comments section below.

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The two things I would recommend to new doc students (beyond the above suggestions):

1. Start from day one to use reference software like endnote. If you've done this from the start, when you've finally reached the big day where you are writing your dissertation, you'll have a very comprehensive pool to draw from, which is very helpful.
2. Attend as many dissertation defenses as possible. It is extremely helpful to get a sense of the process and you'll probably get a better idea of the faculty who might be useful members of your committee when that time comes.

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