

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Advice

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### Your Third Year in a Ph.D. Program

*By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong*

**Jenny:** Our most recent column on how to make the most of [your first year](#) in a Ph.D. program struck a chord with readers. The lively response inspired us to continue in that vein and examine another critical year in your doctoral studies—the third.

**Julie:** A common time for doctoral students to "get stuck" is in their second or third year. We've covered [some of that ground](#) before, writing about the emotional and intellectual issues that can interfere with good progress toward your degree. But in this month's column, we will focus on the academic and professional goals that students should achieve in, or by, their third year.

**Jenny:** Career planning needs to happen throughout the graduate-school experience. There may have been a time when doctoral students could blithely ignore the practicalities of the job market until the final year of their studies, but those days are long gone (if they ever truly existed).

Today, to be competitive, new Ph.D.'s are expected to have published in peer-reviewed journals, to have secured grants, and to have taught independently (or nearly so). Securing a strong postdoc—an essential step for Ph.D.'s in the sciences—is a decision that must be thought out well in advance. Doctoral students must lay the groundwork for completing those tasks long before they graduate.

**Julie:** For most doctoral students at U.S. universities, completing the coursework is a mark of the third year (students in some science disciplines finish their courses at the end of the second year). Once you've reached this stage, and are no longer evaluated on class material, you will take a first step toward becoming an independent researcher who is at least partly, if not entirely, responsible for generating his or her own ideas.

For many students, the third year is especially stressful because the end of coursework is coupled with doctoral exams, oral or written, which serve to demonstrate mastery of your field. One way to help alleviate that stress is to develop productive, regular work habits.

**Jenny:** The most successful doctoral students we know treat their doctoral program as if it were a job. They set regular work hours for themselves, and stick to that schedule, rather than waiting until inspiration strikes to get started. They honor their own deadlines (even when no one else is holding them to those deadlines). They develop collaborations to help prepare for exams, learn new software, and complete writing goals, thus building accountability into what are often solitary tasks. They connect with more advanced doctoral students who may be willing to share ideas for how to succeed in the program.

**Julie:** Advanced doctoral students can also give you insights into what it's like to work with particular professors. By your third year, you should have had the chance to interact with all of the faculty members in your department and some in related departments. Perhaps you came to graduate school not knowing whom you wanted to work with. Or perhaps you did know, but now that you've spent time in the program, you've realized that the person you thought you wanted to work with is not the best fit for you.

Whatever your situation, take note of the following as you choose a mentor:

- Is the professor interested in your work? If you get the feeling that a faculty member is lukewarm about your approach or your topic, that person is unlikely to be a good advocate for you down the road.
- Does the faculty member respond in a timely fashion? Few things will hamper a doctoral student's progress more than a professor who is slow to return work. Chances are, that same professor will be slow to evaluate your dissertation chapters.
- Does the professor seem to like mentoring graduate students? Some faculty members are caught up in their own work and have little time (or patience) for the sustained engagement that good mentoring requires. That can be particularly true for faculty members who aren't yet tenured. And having a mentor who does not get tenure can set your work back significantly.

- What does your gut tell you about the professor? Do you enjoy interacting with him or her at departmental events, or do you wake up in a cold sweat thinking about your stressful conversations with this person?
- Does the professor seem to support your career goals? Is he or she flexible enough to support you even if your goals shift?

**Jenny:** For those in the laboratory-based sciences, identifying a good adviser is doubly important. Not only will your faculty mentor help to guide your research, you will very likely spend much more face time with this professor in a lab-based setting. Also, because your funding will probably come directly from your adviser's research grants, the adviser-student relationship is likely to be different from that in the humanities and social sciences. Many of these considerations are well articulated in a NatureBlog post, [Guide to Graduate Students: How to Pick a Lab](#).

**Julie:** Much of the information you need to succeed in graduate school—such as which faculty members make good advisers—will come to you from fellow students, though of course it's important to form your own impressions, too. Develop friends and allies with whom you can prepare for exams, edit each other's writing, and support each other in general. Of course, you may find yourself in competition with peers for grant money and jobs. Learn now to behave with maturity and professionalism when someone receives an opportunity that you hoped would be yours. The benefits of maintaining the relationships you develop in graduate school are well worth getting past such disappointments.

**Jenny:** The experience of more advanced students also can help you to understand what your department will expect of you in terms of research and teaching. Knowing what—and when—is an important part of making the aforementioned "good progress" toward the degree. Your department may have a timeline that it can share with you, with goals that are both academic and professional. If not, take a look at a few timelines available on the Internet. The [University of Pennsylvania](#) has a good one, as do [Columbia](#) and [Georgia Tech](#). Those timelines will give you a basic understanding of how to move forward in your Ph.D. program.

**Julie:** Most important, make sure you have regular conversations with faculty members in your department, especially those you

hope will serve on your committee. You regularly met with a range of faculty members during your coursework or your lab rotations, but that will change as you move into a single lab or as you begin working on your dissertation. Be sure to maintain relationships with faculty members you don't see regularly. Cultivate them as sources of support from now on, not just in the year you are on the market.

**Jenny:** Every year, and certainly starting by the end of the third year, find out about the job outcomes of newly graduated Ph.D.'s in your program. Ask newly employed Ph.D.'s for tips, not just on the job hunt but on what you can do now to prepare.

As you process the information, think about your own career goals. When you started your doctoral program you may have been single, open to going anywhere for a good job, and gung-ho for an academic career. A few years later, perhaps you have developed a serious romantic relationship and become less open to moving anywhere. Such factors can affect your job possibilities.

Keep in mind: Most doctoral programs are at institutions located in cities or in large university towns, but many tenure-track jobs are at colleges and universities in remote areas. [A study](#) conducted for the American Historical Association found that a key reason Ph.D.'s were employed outside of academe was their unwillingness to move. To pursue an academic career, you will need to get comfortable with the idea of moving, possibly multiple times. And if you find you want to stay put, you'll need to pursue alternate career paths.

**Julie:** By your third year, be sure to have attended two very specific types of talks—dissertation defenses and job talks. Attend as many dissertation defenses as possible. That will help you to prepare for your own. And you will get to see faculty members functioning as readers and critics of your colleagues' dissertations, which may help you decide who would be the right choices for your committee.

**Jenny:** Job talks will give you a sense of what to expect when you go on the market. We've often heard faculty members say that the job talk—and the Q&A afterward—is the make-it-or-break-it

moment for candidates. As one [Comments \(34\)](#) noted, trying to make job-talk presenters "shake in their boots" was "a blood sport at my school." The commenter said some faculty members "saw themselves in competition with another school for who could be meanest to the person presenting. As a result, when I ran into meanness when job hunting, it didn't faze me."

**Julie:** In addition to preparing you for antagonistic faculty members, watching job talks will help you see how a range of people present. How do they structure their talks? What do they choose to cover? How do different people handle being interrupted?

Watch carefully and use what you observe to develop a strong presentation style that works for you. Presenting your work at an academic conference, preferably one organized by a regional or national scholarly association, is a task that you should complete by your third year. Calls for paper submissions are often sent out well in advance, so be sure to check out the deadlines.

**Jenny:** It's also important to practice writing about your research. Edith Gonzalez, the sponsored-programs officer here at the CUNY Graduate Center, gives a terrific piece of advice to our graduate students. She encourages them to practice writing about their research regularly—in varying lengths (150 words, three paragraphs, one page)—and for multiple audiences (someone in your field, someone not in your field but in academe, someone who knows nothing about your line of scholarly inquiry). That is great practice for writing grants.

**Julie:** Talk with your adviser about how much you are expected to publish as a graduate student as it varies from discipline to discipline. In some science fields you will graduate being named as a co-author on several publications, while in some humanities fields you may only have one (or none). There's no one-size-fits-all-disciplines number, which is why it's important in the third year to talk with your adviser about this. Sometimes it's necessary to do a postdoc to produce the necessary publications. Find out what other Ph.D.'s in your program have done.

**Jenny:** We're going to end with a few things to avoid:

- Don't spend too much time participating in online forums on the academic job market. Too many posters are embittered and snarky. That's not what you need at this stage (or any stage).
- Don't avoid a professor whom you think you've disappointed in some way (because you dropped his or her class, didn't do as well as you should have, or other reasons). Build bridges. You never know when someone may be in a position to help you.
- Don't isolate yourself from family and friends. It's important to have things in your life other than your Ph.D. Social interactions with people who care about you are good for you and for your work.

**Julie:** Finally, immerse yourself in preparing for your comprehensive exams or preparing for your dissertation proposal (depending on your discipline). But take the time to incorporate our suggestions into your planning. And come back to this column to check the suggestions of our readers. They've been in your shoes and will have some solid and helpful advice.

Readers, please share your tips and words of wisdom for third-year doctoral students 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](mailto:careertalk@chronicle.com), or post your question in the comments.*

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SRQkitten · 2 hours ago

Great advice! I found attending dissertation defenses to be useful as the first one I attended, one of the committee members challenged the candidate defending about a statistical decision she'd made in a manner that clearly caught the candidate off guard. When I asked my faculty advisor/chair about this, she said that was this individual's way of doing things in a defense. I immediately crossed that committee member off my yet to be formed committee as the question he asked should have fairly been asked much earlier in the process.

Also, while other students experiences with faculty members as dissertation chairs & members should be solicited, you have to trust your own judgment as well. I had been given a couple of "soft" cautions about my chair from folks who had experienced issues with this person. My experience was different, my chair was organized, helped with keeping to a schedule, asked thought-provoking questions throughout the process, no small thing when we were working at this long-distance.

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