

RESEARCH NOTE

STRAIGHT TALK FROM RECENT GRADS: TIPS FOR SUCCESSFULLY SURVIVING YOUR DOCTORAL PROGRAM

Joelle D. Powers

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Danielle C. Swick

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Pursuing a doctoral degree represents a major life change for students, is incredibly demanding, and the process is complex. Although surviving the PhD process is difficult, it can be done. The authors are both recent graduates of a social work doctoral program and have compiled a brief list of inter- and intra-personal tips that they believe greatly promoted their successful completion of the process and attainment of the degree. They hope these 10 simple strategies are helpful to students pursuing doctoral studies and to social work faculty who currently teach and advise graduate students to promote a successful journey through doctoral education.

PURSuing A DOCTORAL DEGREE represents a major life change for students. In fact, new graduate students will likely experience an entirely new organizational culture of higher education upon entering a PhD program (Gardner, 2008), where the requirements are complex and demanding (Mays & Smith, 2009; Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008). The abrupt life transition and notorious rigors of doctoral studies may be contributing to high attrition rates as only approximately 50% of students who enter doctoral programs in the United States actually complete the

process and earn the degree (Church, 2009; Gardner, 2008).

Surviving the PhD process is difficult, but it can be done. We (the authors of this research note) are both recent graduates of a social work doctoral program and are now in academic positions facilitating the social work education of current graduate students in our field through teaching and research. We have compiled a brief list of inter- and intrapersonal tips that we believe greatly enabled our successful completion of the doctoral program process and attainment of the degree. We

hope that these 10 simple strategies are helpful to students who are pursuing doctoral studies and to social work education faculty who currently teach and advise graduate students to promote a successful journey through doctoral education.

10 Tips for Successfully Surviving Your Doctoral Program

1. Find a Peer Who Understands Academia; Support Each Other

Although friends are an incredibly important aspect of social support no matter what your age, stage, or occupation, you may need a good one now who truly understands the unique aspects of academia. There is no substitute for commiserating with a peer who can appreciate the stress of finals, the quirkiness of faculty, the frustration at yet another new edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, or whatever the case may be. Your family, friends from home, and even your partner may not truly comprehend these issues unless they have also been involved in higher education, which is okay. The truth is you need people in your life who are not involved in your program to keep you balanced, but having a friend who can genuinely relate to your triumphs and struggles during the PhD program may alleviate some of the stress and anxiety often associated with graduate education (Mays & Smith, 2009). If by chance you find a good friend within your own doctoral program, count yourself lucky! Having a good friend in your classes can make all the difference in the world. Cultivate an atmosphere of support for

one another rather than one of competition and you can more easily assist each other through the requirements of graduate school.

2. Seek Out a Mentor

You may be assigned a graduate adviser or faculty supervisor when you first enter the doctoral program. This will provide you with an immediate resource for gathering critical information and advice to get started, and you will need substantial support from faculty during this process (Mays & Smith, 2009). However, you may find over time that there is a different faculty member whose work you respect, whose teaching inspires you, who shares your research interests, or who you just seem to connect with better. If this person is willing and available, we strongly encourage you to establish a formal or informal mentoring relationship with him or her. Having a professor who has successfully navigated his or her own doctoral training and who is well-respected for assisting current graduate students do the same is an invaluable asset. This faculty member may be able to provide wise counsel during times when you are uncertain how to proceed, further assist you in navigating the doctoral journey (Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008), and support your attainment of teaching and research skills to promote productivity during graduate school (Kim & Karau, 2010).

3. Allow for Ongoing Concerns and Adjustment Periods

The PhD process represents a major life transition that seems to raise a common set of worries and concerns among doctoral stu-

dents that should be openly discussed in an effort to normalize them. When you first begin the program, you may experience alarming thoughts such as, “What have I done? Why did I quit my job and move here? This was a mistake.” Please know that you are not alone in these fears and try to cut yourself some slack. Starting a doctoral program completely disrupts your life—this amount of change is likely to induce apprehension in many. Once you have progressed through more of your coursework, you may have new concerns about your intelligence and ability. You may be worried that you are not as smart or qualified as some of your peers or professors and are therefore not a good fit for doctoral training. These concerns may even prompt a desire to quit the program—which is a common thought for graduate students across schools and disciplines (Gardener, 2008). Please don’t be alarmed—these worries are quite normal for doctoral students. You will likely adjust to your new role soon and find that you are both smart and capable. Throughout the duration of the program you may reexperience some of these same emotions and worries (they seem to ebb and flow); talking with a friend, professor, or mentor may provide you with a new perspective and help you to better manage your concerns (see Tips 1 and 2). Keep reminding yourself that the discomforts of graduate school are time-limited, and if you persevere it will all be worth it in the end when you are granted the degree.

4. Timing Is Everything

To successfully obtain a doctoral degree you must be able to effectively schedule and man-

age your time (Mays & Smith, 2009). This may be more difficult in the beginning of the program when you are learning to more accurately predict how long certain tasks take you and how to maximize your productivity. For example, you may be a fast reader who will not need to budget an extensive amount of time to complete assigned class readings. However, writing may be a slower process if you need multiple drafts and substantial edits, thus more time should be allotted for that task. First, get your calendar organized. You need a systematic and consistent plan for compiling all of the important dates and deadlines that are included in your coursework and graduate program. Next, identify the situations (i.e., time of day, location) that are most conducive for your productivity to further organize your schedule. Finally, become good at “back mapping” your schedule to get things completed and submitted by the deadline. Start with the end in mind; work backward from the due date to identify when you actually need to start working on a project to get it finished on time. As you can imagine, the tasks and assignments required in graduate education do not magically fall into place; instead they require time that needs to be carefully scheduled so that you can estimate when each step needs to be completed to submit materials on time.

5. Expect to Work Incredibly Hard—Then Do It

We assume that you know doctoral programs require a tremendous amount of hard work and the demands and expectations for students are high. You will be stretched, challenged, and

forced to rapidly learn new things that may not be at all easy or intuitive. You will likely read, write, present, and research more during this time in your life than ever before, and to do these things well will take a substantial amount of effort and dedication on your part. However, all of this work will result in you being prepared to take the next step in your career after you graduate. Also, the increased effort that you put into your doctoral studies now will result in greater pride in yourself and your accomplishments when you finish. So work hard.

6. Be Prepared for Feedback: Good, Bad, and Ugly

Doctoral programs integrate considerable feedback about your skills and performance (Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008). This may come in the form of assignment and course grades, scholarships and awards, manuscript acceptance and rejection, and even verbal feedback from faculty. When the response is favorable, it feels like fantastic validation of your decision to become a doctoral student. But when the feedback is constructive in nature—brace yourself—it can sting. Remember that we need to be aware of our strengths to build on them, and similarly we need to understand our challenges to address them and become more successful. According to Thorlakson (2009), who wrote about the transition from doctoral programs into academic careers, “The way in which we deal with rejections and failure can have a huge impact on our long-term success” (p. 164). So our humble advice is to congratulate yourself on any and all newfound strengths, then

acknowledge the areas that need improvement and work on them. Resist the temptation to neglect acquiring and honing skills that you do not yet have or enjoy (Howard, 2009). These may include research methods, statistics, academic writing, and teaching skills. This is the time to practice, ask questions, and learn from mistakes—that is what is expected of students. Truly, it is your job right now to learn, and it will only earn you respect to openly address any weaknesses in an attempt to overcome and improve them.

7. Celebrate Small Accomplishments Along the Way

This is very important: Do not wait until you have successfully defended your dissertation to celebrate your work in the doctoral program! You are working hard, and there are many accomplishments along the way that are worthy of acknowledgment and reward as they occur. You finished your first semester course finals? Go have a drink with your cohorts to celebrate. You had your first manuscript accepted for publication? Treat yourself to a pedicure or dinner out. You presented at the national conference for the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) or Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) for the first time? Take a day off and do nothing but watch sports or go see a movie with friends when you get back home. Relax and commemorate these small successes—you have earned it. And while you are at it, don’t forget to celebrate the successes of your peers. Higher academia in social work actually consists of a small circle of folks, which means you may be colleagues with the other doctoral students in

your program for the rest of your career. So build collegiality now by acknowledging and celebrating the good work and success of those around you. This type of ongoing celebration will make the tough times in your graduate program much more bearable.

8. Do Something Outside of School

Take a break from school and do something completely unrelated that makes you happy or relaxed regularly. Whether this means taking a cooking class or piano lessons, coaching your child's soccer team, going to a museum, jogging, doing yoga, or having a regular dinner date with a partner or friends—you need these types of extracurricular activities to stay mentally healthy and balanced. It can be easy to become completely wrapped up in academics to a point that is unhealthy, which may leave you feeling burned out.

9. Focus on Research, Writing, and Teaching

Three of the cornerstones of an academic career are research, writing, and teaching. Although the specific type of school you work in will dictate the amount of focus on each of these tasks, you will likely need to become proficient at all three to be successful. It may be tempting to take every class offered on your campus or to get involved in every facet of the graduate program, which is fine if you want to be a student forever. If not, you will need to streamline your focus. We highly suggest making every effort to gain critical skills in these three areas during your time as a stu-

dent. You will be well served in the job search process and throughout your academic career if you can conduct high-quality research, remain active in scholarly writing and publication, and teach well.

10. You Can Do This if You Choose To

This is the point in this note where we (the authors) make a confession. We are not academically gifted, extraordinary, or special in some unique way that gave us a leg up in our doctoral programs. We are in fact quite ordinary, and we still managed to successfully earn PhDs and begin careers in social work academia and research that we enjoy. Yes, it takes an enormous amount of hard work (see Tip 5), but if you are willing to put forth that effort, you can accomplish this goal if you want to. Tell yourself this. Tell each other this. And remind yourselves of this fact as needed.

Closing

Becoming a doctoral student and working to earn a PhD is a huge undertaking that requires substantial dedication, perseverance, and effort. However, doctoral programs can be successfully navigated (Mays & Smith, 2009). Ten simple tips from recent graduates are described with the intention of promoting the successful attainment of doctorate degrees by better preparing graduate students and the current professors who teach and advise them. The hope is that current students not only survive their doctoral programs in social work education, but flourish in them.

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Accepted: 05/11

Joelle D. Powers is associate dean for academic affairs and **Danielle C. Swick** is research assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Address correspondence to Joelle D. Powers, School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 325 Pittsboro St. CB#3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27599; jdpowers@email.unc.edu.

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