



Introduction

In the beginning...

Several years ago while I was a graduate student trying to finish my Ph.D., I knew that there was a real world beyond the exams and research. I was working on a dissertation and trying to finish a degree, but very few professors had time to advise their graduate students let alone mentor them in the next steps of their professional career. Oftentimes, the advising of graduate students was left to postdoctoral candidates (postdocs as they are affectionately called). The postdocs were also trying to navigate their careers sometimes without much success. Yet I saw some researchers and professors being successful, giving good lectures, presenting their work elegantly, and keeping all of their ducks in a row. They seemed to enjoy what they were doing.

At the same time, whether in academia or otherwise, I saw other professionals who were dejected and disillusioned with the whole system. They liked the research and work environments but hated the process—maybe because no one had ever provided guidance to them about how to maneuver a career path.

There were no courses or specific guidelines that taught graduate students how to navigate life in and beyond graduate school. Years later when I became an assistant professor, I was determined to develop a course that would help guide a graduate student through the numerous hurdles of graduate life and provide help for their upcoming career. I was and still am fully convinced that we need to

Navigating Graduate School and Beyond

provide students with the necessary tools to become successful in our respective disciplines and not lose them to disillusionment. Advisors have a professional obligation to empower students beyond just the classes and research.

Senior graduate students who are getting ready to defend their research have not even thought about writing a proposal. Neither do they know how to prepare and manage a budget for a project. They have very little information on what is expected of them when they graduate. Yet most students find that a place of employment requires them to communicate effectively, manage a myriad of projects, and write competitive proposals.

I distinctly remember several years ago, when I was a junior faculty member, apprehensively suggesting a course called “Professional Development.” I wanted to teach the students the basics of proposal writing. The senior professors and the others in the room looked at me with glares that said, “Are you serious?” One even questioned why I would create more competition for myself since my livelihood also relied on writing and winning proposals. Finally, after some deliberation, they did approve a one-credit course that was to be taught only to Ph.D.-level graduate students. The course was initially centered on proposal writing and involved all the nuts and bolts of budget preparation, agency requirements, and templates and guidelines. The students loved the course and gave me some of the highest ratings. They felt that this was a skill that they needed.

They wrote an actual proposal for the NASA New Investigator program although they did not submit it. I walked them step by step through the entire process including writing letters of intent, drafting a 15 page proposal, reviewing the proposals of their peers, and understanding the selection process. I also discussed the bliss of getting a proposal accepted and how to develop a thick skin when one gets rejected.

Every time I teach this class I do get one common complaint: there is more work in this course than the one credit that they get at the end of the semester! Since then I have continued to talk with my colleagues in and outside my department, and I have listened carefully to the students regarding what they might like to learn in a course like this. Still called “Professional Development,” the current course has a wide variety of topics including managing time and stress, presenting effective talks at conferences, and (get this—the most animated discussions I have ever had) managing your advisor!

Introduction

I also have a steady stream of master's-level students wandering in to take this class. I continue to learn from these students and add topics of interest that will enable them to make a smoother transition from a graduate degree to employment. I also find myself giving more talks at student conferences these days, and the issues appear to be the same.

More than a dozen years have gone by, and I have been asked numerous times to put my thoughts down on paper. Well, here it is. This book is what I believe, and it is a sincere attempt to help the students navigate their graduate school lives and position themselves for success.

My colleagues may or may not agree with me when I say that most of us are too busy to do a proper job of advising students, let alone mentor them. I deliberately make a distinction between advising and mentoring as you will learn in this book. Mentoring takes effort, time, and discipline. This book, while a good read for students, will also be a useful one for advisors and faculty members both young and seasoned. While this book is not a substitute for proper advising and mentoring, it does take some of the mystery and haziness out of some topics that students always have questions about and might not get straight answers for.

I want to note upfront that it is next to impossible to capture the dynamics of a classroom when writing something like this. The discussions in the classroom continue to be an eye-opener for me, and I strive to include the topics and concerns that are important to the students. This one-credit class behind closed doors is something I look forward to every year. After a few "lectures," students fully warm up and won't stop talking. If instructors choose to use this as a text or reference of some sort, I have included some discussion questions at the end of each chapter to help lead discussions. This course was taught to a group of atmospheric scientists, and I am hesitant to state that every chapter in this book will be applicable to every discipline. However, I do believe that graduate students who embark on a journey to get a master's or a Ph.D. have some core set of issues that they deal with in their graduate life. I have tried to address these issues honestly.

I do realize that there seems to be a dichotomy that exists between students who only want a master's degree versus students who want a Ph.D. I strive to provide discussions that will help those on both of these paths. Regardless of which path one might take, most of these topics are highly relevant. After all, both are

Navigating Graduate School and Beyond

graduate degrees with high expectations from the student's future employer. I have tried to make the student "think" about what their future careers might demand of them so they can better prepare. This is one of the major focus areas of this book.

Finally, I have to say this about myself. I am optimistic by nature. I believe that you the student have an excellent seed within you called potential. Through hard work and the right preparation, you can succeed at whatever you put your mind to. I have seen students who, through sheer determination and hard work, outshine some who were "talented." Preparation and hard work seems to be the greatest equalizer. Another thing, I grew up in the American graduate school system and the way of competitive research, so a lot of the discussions will tend to lean that way.

So get a cup of coffee or boysenberry juice or whatever it is that you drink and enjoy the read!

I am hoping to hear from everyone who reads this book. So e-mail me or post notes for me. Let's get this started. . . .

Best wishes for a brilliant career!

Introduction

Notes

