Tips, Resources, and Challenges for Grad Students

Tips

Reach out to fellow Kappa Delta Pi members, friends, or alumni who have gone through your program for tips!

**COMMIT:** Set a timeline for completing your graduate degree -- this will give you needed milestones and deadlines!

**LEAD:** Find a peer or two in your degree program to serve as support and to give needed encouragement!

**SUCCEED:** Think of each class as a learning opportunity to grow in new ways -- enjoy the journey!

*Have conversations with various faculty in your department.* The diversity of perspectives makes for a richer learning experience.

*Stay in touch with family/friends:* This means keeping them in the loop about your process and commitments and taking time to stay invested in theirs.

*Keep teaching in some form* so that you remain fresh as a teacher, stay connected with the challenges of being a teacher, and never forget why you entered the profession.

*Work in blocks of time,* set the timer for each one so that you hold yourself accountable.

*Work in advance.*

*Don’t be afraid to speak up if you don’t understand.*

*Keep up with your reading.* Go back to the old SQ3R approach you used in high school. Survey the text; ask questions, read, recite, and review. Read the assignment before attending class, so you will ready to engage in the discussion.

*Take advantage of assignments to consider dissertation ideas.* Think of how you can use class projects to further your research agenda. Hone your analysis and argument skills by learning how to apply the literature and construct arguments supported by the literature on a smaller scale. This will prepare you for your candidacy exam and dissertation.

*Finished does not mean perfect.* Follow through, do your best, but know that you could be in graduate school for eternity if you keep finding something in your paper that could be better or waiting for cutting edge research. You have the rest of your life to add to your body of work, so finish the dissertation and graduate.

*Use a planner/calendar:* Get into the habit of using a planner/scheduler to help
keep track of assignment due dates, events/conferences, school closings, student teaching / internship schedules, certification exams, etc. My planner/calendar became my best friend during my MA program, and it helped me manage my daily and weekly time effectively. Additionally, make sure to transfer important dates from your class syllabus directly into your planner.

**Actively participate in class / group discussions:** everyone’s experiences with professors' course participation requirements will be different, but what I found was that my graduate level professors appreciated - and benefited from - a student actively participating in class discussions. When you’re actively engaged in class discussions, you’re showing your professor that you’re engaged and invested in the content of the course, and you’re showing them that you have an ability to intellectually analyze and discuss the class content, and are willing to contribute to and learn from other students' conversations and perspectives.

**Visit professors:** make it a point to visit professors during office hours or during unplanned 'free time' that may arise on both parties' schedules. Having the opportunity to meet with professors on a one-to-one level allows you to gain clarity on assignments, receive constructive criticism or feedback on performance or assignments, and develop relationships with those professors outside of the class.

**Find a study buddy**! Doesn’t matter if that study buddy lives next door or across the country, someone that has the same burning interest that you is vitally important.

**Find more than one faculty member to support you.** It is important to have converging thoughts and ideas when delving into some of the subjects you study.

**Learn to love your calendar.** Learn to organize your time in a way you never thought you could! If you can, put your calendar on your computer and your smartphone and refer to it often.

**Be Mindful** - don’t forget about you and what drives you

**Organize** - Figure out what organization practice works for you- organization will not happen over night, so don't get frustrated

**Start a Pinterest Board** - motivates and relieves stress

**Work smarter not harder.** Develop a schoolwork schedule that suits your life. It may be 4-7 am or 9pm-1 am. Time that is uninterrupted and can permit you to focus on what needs addressed this week. Honestly, schedule a few minutes on Sunday to determine each week's priorities, this will make you more focused and productive.

**Don’t worry about grades.** Grades are earned. Graduate work is an area you are interested in, grades will come, and you are a motivated student. Focus more on learning. If you develop a BIG IDEA plan, you can address your area of interest (thing your master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation topic) you can do a little bit of research as you go through your program –rather than starting it BLANK after your coursework is completed.

**Build relationships with your class colleagues.** No one is an island; your class colleagues will support you through the process. You will find ways to help one another, even if it is just to commiserate as you get through the program. They are the only group that truly shares the graduate experience with you…. not your partner, not your children, not your family, not your co-workers. Reach out, talk to
others, and seek help.

**Visit each of your professors during office hours** - even if it is just to introduce yourself. Having a mentor or friend in a professor will almost always make or break your experience.

**Keep students at the forefront of your mind** - it’s easy to get lost in philosophy and research and forget why we are all here.

**Once you have completed the basic course requirements**, you have additional flexibility. Strive for breadth in your knowledge even if not required for graduation. Often careers take unexpected twists, and an area that is now peripheral to your interests may be central later on. Strive for depth in your research area: make sure that you understand the full range of research problems.

**If more than one section of a course is offered**, get advice on which instructor to choose. In general, regular faculty are to be preferred to visitors teaching basic courses, so that you get to know the people with whom you will be working. Try to choose faculty who are possible advisors. If that is not possible, choose the ones with the best teaching reputations, but try for a healthy mix of junior and senior faculty. Remember that eventually you will need letters of recommendation in order to find a job, so it is a good idea to become known to the faculty early.

**Once you are past all the hurdles and working on your thesis**, your course work should be very selective. Don’t dilute your energy by taking too many courses, but don’t miss special opportunities such as seminar courses by top researchers.

**Don’t forget the to-do list!** Your to-do list is your friend.

**Take initiative.** Have a can-do attitude. The more you prove that you can work independently to initiate and complete tasks, the more latitude you will have.

**Be tenacious.** Even when things aren’t going as well as you’d hoped, stick with it. Part of earning your degree is building a thick skin so that you are not so fragile that you give up at the first sign of difficulty.

**Be flexible.** Take advantage of opportunity and happenstance. Work around your problems and be willing to change plans as required. As a grad student, you aren’t in control of anything, so you need to learn how to react to events. Events can be positive or negative. You need to acknowledge that and be savvy enough to recognize opportunities and take advantage of them.

**Cultivate interpersonal relationships.** Treat people with respect. Give credit where credit is due. Acknowledge efforts and thank people for their help. Return favors. Respect people’s expertise, advice, and time. Apologize when you are at fault. Understand that not everyone thinks and works just like you do.
Hone your communication skills. Presenting your research and analysis is crucial to your success long after you’ve graduated. If you can write and speak well, you will distinguish yourself from other graduate students.

Overcome procrastination. Eat the elephant in small bites. Break your project down into small chunks. Schedule out your work, both long term and short term. Keep a to-do list. Schedule breaks.

Build community. Look for ways to get to know your peers. Reach out to others for mutual support. Be inclusive. Be open to the perspectives of a diverse variety of people and viewpoints. A broader range of knowledge and opinions can only enhance your work.

Don’t neglect your family. Remember that your family is making sacrifices while you are attending graduate school. Set aside non-negotiable time regularly for them.

Resources

KDP Global: http://www.kdp.org

KDP - for graduate level funding: https://kdp.org/resources/scholarshipsandgrants/index.php

APA Manual (the hard copy and online source offered through Purdue University called OWL): https://owl.english.purdue.edu

A peer(s) in your program!

Get to know your research librarian and take time to learn and use the many resources available as part of your tuition through your library.

Timer: http://pomodorotechnique.com/

Brainstorming tool: padlet.com

Graduate School Manual—knowing what is expected before you work will keep you from making changes later

Your University Writing Center—take advantage of their assistance

Department / Academic Program: Some universities offer a 'mentorship' program as part of their program, or part of a department fellowship. I - for example - was
awarded a fellowship my first year that 'assigned' me a mentor who was one year ahead of me in the program. This mentor - along with meeting other students from cohorts ahead of my own - really provided me with the guidance that I needed to get through my first year as a grad student. Navigating the entire building (a series of 8ish building connected through a confusing basement), navigating course expectations, teaching styles, certification exam schedules ... it all becomes rather hectic, and having a mentor or someone who can empathize with the plight of a first-year grad student is a crucial resource that should not be overlooked.

**Learn Formatting:** https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/ is Purdue University's Online Writing Project's website, and it's going to quickly become your bible through your graduate program. If your university is anything like Columbia, then your world will quickly begin to revolve around papers, research assignments, and reflections - pretty much anything written! Some professors would dock as much as 5 - 7 points off the final grade of a paper if the formatting wasn't correct. Though 5 points may not seem like a lot, it could make the difference between receiving an A vs. an A-, or receiving an A- vs. a B+ as your final course average. Read and understand the Graduate School manual for your school. Understand all of the requirements, both coursework and time, so that you can fit them all into your harried schedule.

**Know the Manual!!**

**Make friends with the techies!** They will be a huge resource for you as you move forward in your program. Whether it is working through a statistical program or developing a bibliography, technology can make your degree program so much easier. However, unless you know someone who can help you, you will flounder......

**Learning Forward:**  [http://learningforward.org](http://learningforward.org)

**US Department of Education – Research & Statistics:**  
http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/landing.jhtml?src=ft

**Edutopia:**  www.edutopia.org

**Education World:**  [www.educationworld.com/](http://www.educationworld.com/)

**Evernote:**  https://evernote.com - an amazing application that allows you to take notes, highlight them, transfer them and a bunch of other nifty things
**Academic Coaching and Writing**  [http://www.academiccoachingandwriting.org](http://www.academiccoachingandwriting.org)  This website offers free webinars that guide you through proposal writing choices and academic publishing.

**Academic Coaching Videos**  [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/videos/index.html](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/videos/index.html)  This resource compiled by the Academic Skills Center at Dartmouth College has videos on learning strategies, stress management, and active reading.

**BookFinder**  [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com)  When you need to find books to help you with your research, never buy new. Old editions of methodology books for $1.00 work as well as the latest $150.00 edition.

**Journeyed**  [http://www.journeyed.com](http://www.journeyed.com)  Need expensive software for a class? Hit up Journeyed, a discount software store for students, teachers and schools.

**PHD Comics**  [www.phdcomics.com](http://www.phdcomics.com) --This website provides a laugh at times when you most need it most. Through the humor, you will uncover nuggets of wisdom.

**National Graduate Student Crisis Line:**  **(877)472-3457**  This is a hotline for graduate students who don’t know where to turn. We hope that no one reading this document ever needs their services, but want to put this number out there.

**Challenges**

Losing motivation or interest due to personal or professional commitments/needs

Time management: It’s tempting to accept every exciting opportunity that comes your way, but very important to say no graciously when you need to. Also, keep track of your priorities and give them top place in your calendar. Keep a calendar!

Keeping the momentum going.

To finish. Seek out peers as a support group. It’s hard to quit when you have friends that care.

Socialize / Network: I can’t tell you how easy it is to forget that part of your graduate school experience is socializing and networking with professors, students, colleagues, and prospective employers who may be visiting campus. Though I could have done a better job at this during my program (something I expect to dedicate myself to improving during my PhD), if it had not been for me socializing and networking with the professors of my department, I would have never received the Fellowship I received the 2nd year of my graduate program, and I would not have had all of my professors willingly provide me with countless references for my PhD.
programs.

Be a self-starter! Do more than you think you can, this program is more important to you than you know. If you started it then you must want to finish it, so don’t let it get away from you. This goes back to the idea of organization and time management; time for other things will come later.

Isolation- You're not alone- always look to connect with others, surround yourself with others who are looking and participating in similar things- when you meet them randomly, don't let them go!

Completing the graduate program in a timely fashion. To combat this, remain focused and committed to a plan. Graduate school or doctoral programs are only a temporary place. Make the most of it. Develop relationships, challenge yourself – learn to think differently. Remember graduate school is supposed to be about the learner, about you.

Work-life balance - remember that being in education does not mean you have to give up a social life or abandon family and friends - always make time or you will regret it later!

Compliments of Kappa Delta Pi National Graduate Student Committee members: Cecelia Johnson, Deepti Kharod, Courtney Mix-Binish, Daria Pizzuto, Anna Quinzio-Zafran, Ryan Stivers, Karl Swenson, Amaris Tejada, Shawn DiNarda Watters, and Elizabeth Wilkins

Keep the conversation going at KDP Global. http://my.kdp.org/home