CHAPTER THREE

THE DOCTORAL PROGRAM AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
PLANNING AND SETTING PRIORITIES

An underlying theme in this chapter, and in this publication as a whole, is that the doctoral program is a form of professional training -- a preparation for a career that will allow you to do advanced research, to teach, and to explore a range of career options. Thinking of the graduate experience as a form of professional development can also encourage you to engage in planning and setting priorities. Harvard offers a number of services to help with that process, over and above the ties that we hope will develop within your department, within your field. At the end of this chapter is a time line for engaging in professional development, suggesting how and when to use some of the principal services available to assist you in that process. The chapter itself is devoted to examining the various facets of the graduate program.

THE NATURE OF THE GRADUATE PROGRAM, ITS PRINCIPAL STAGES

At an orientation program for incoming graduate students to Harvard’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS), the welcoming President of Harvard University at the time, Derek Bok, characterized the mission of graduate students in terms of two distinct processes: a) acquiring knowledge about the “state of the art” as it is passed on from one generation to the next; and b) creating new knowledge and cultivating one’s own interests. The combined effect of the two, often with a healthy tension between them, was compared to the process of coming of age and rejecting one’s “intellectual parents.” Students were urged not to be intimidated by their professors and to think of themselves as professionals from the very beginning.

In this regard, graduate training was contrasted with undergraduate education. At the graduate level, education, as noted above, is a form of professional training. Student motivation and commitment are assumed as givens. Work is less closely monitored and feedback is more informal, with less emphasis placed on grades in measuring achievement. It was noted that while this greater freedom can be exhilarating, it can also be a challenge for students in providing their own structure and momentum.

The basic design of the graduate program is geared to the two goals of acquiring existing knowledge and creating new knowledge. Typically, there are two principal stages.

The first stage consists of course work and fulfilling other basic requirements, including Generals or Qualifying Exams, which are designed to test the mastery of a given body of knowledge. This stage in many departments lasts two years, although in some cases, it is longer.

In the natural sciences and life sciences, students are expected to gain admission to a lab or research group during the first year, preferably by the beginning of second semester, but no later than the end of the second semester. Many science departments offer lab rotations during the first semester in order to assist students in choosing a lab. Making this choice is such an important matter, that in departments where rotation is not offered, students have organized sessions to help inform first years on the qualities of the various labs or research teams. Eventually science students settle into a lab where they will engage in independent research that forms the basis of the dissertation, with the faculty head of the lab typically serving as the main dissertation advisor.

Science students who have gone through the selection process report that in choosing a lab for
dissertation research it is important to consider the research environment that is fostered by the faculty member who heads the lab, and that this can be as important as the particular subject matter (although subject matter may also determine the nature of the environment). Students cite the following factors to consider:

- Are you looking for a high-powered lab that seeks to compete with the corresponding labs at other major research universities, or would you prefer a more low-keyed lab?

- Are you looking for a lab where the faculty head provides lots of feedback and support over a range of issues related to professional development and future plans?

- Are you looking for a lab where you will be able to propose your own thesis project and a lab with flexibility about switching projects?

As you can see, the selection process for a science lab also requires self-assessment, being conscious of which type of research environment would work best for you.

In the humanities and social sciences, many students engage in exploring dissertation topics or doing preliminary dissertation research during the early stage. In planning your graduate career, and especially in exploring potential areas of specialization and potential advisors with whom to work, you should consult a wide range of faculty members or advanced students in your department. Asking them about their current research, making them aware of your interests and concerns, getting them involved in your plans — all these are useful and appropriate steps to take. Whatever you finally choose, you will find it beneficial if you can establish ties with a number of faculty members, junior as well as senior. There are so many different aspects to mentoring and professional development, that it is probably unlikely that all your mentoring needs can be filled by a single person, even if you are able to find an advisor with whom you have a close to ideal relationship. (See the section on mentoring below.)

Departmental requirements and individual choices

In most departments, students are asked to choose a major field for concentration and a minor or sub-field. These choices will partially determine course requirements and also the fields that will be covered on the General Examination. Most departments in the social sciences and humanities also have a required language competence test, and in some cases, a quantitative methods requirement. Science departments have analogous requirements related to the skills and training needed for particular areas of research.

Within the general framework of departmental requirements there are also individual choices to be made, and here it is wise to choose courses that may point to prospective dissertation topics. In the sciences, as noted, the critical decision concerns which lab or research group to join. Some students enter graduate school with a definite idea of their intended topic; others have only a tentative plan. Whether you are in the first or second category, course choices—or lab rotations in the sciences—should provide you with sufficient exposure to your potential area of specialization to enable you either to confirm or possibly to reassess your original plans. Such choices should also provide an opportunity for exploring new areas of potential interest and for developing alternative possibilities as you continue to assess your plans. In most cases, the department program is designed to permit exploration — including interdisciplinary possibilities — prior to commitment to a single area of specialization or specific topic. It is especially important to use the course work stage as a period of self-assessment.

Also to be noted is that the issue of balancing teaching and studies can be a complicated one. Participating in teacher training or teaching practica is often a department requirement that needs to be incorporated into the overall planning process. See below for specific advice on gaining teaching experience and using the Derek Bok Center to improve your teaching skills.
The second stage becomes more focused on the dissertation: formulating a topic, working on getting an approved prospectus, and then researching and writing the dissertation. The dissertation is expected to be a mature piece of scholarship that makes a contribution to the field. Many dissertations eventually are converted into publications. (See below for more details on the dissertation stage in the humanities and social sciences; also see the following chapter.)

In the sciences, students are commonly asked to submit an original research proposal for their qualifying exam. Ordinarily in the sciences, the dissertation grows out of research done in the research lab; it is usually a series of papers or write-ups of lab results that have been undertaken as original research.

Additional considerations for certain areas of specialization
There are some fields in the humanities and social sciences that have great scholarly significance, but relatively little demand for teachers. It is important to be aware of demand — of fluctuating conditions, as well as more stabilized ones — not so much to be dictated by them, but in order to plan a program that will help to counteract the effects of the market. While all students would be well-advised to plan a well-rounded program, this advice applies especially to people in fields with relatively low teaching demand. They should place even greater emphasis on developing strong secondary specialties, as well as other desirable skills. Students who choose an interdisciplinary program should be aware that the job market is still largely structured around individual disciplines, so it is important to develop sufficient strengths to allow you to apply to a single department, if necessary.

The length of time from entry into graduate school until receipt of the PhD varies considerably, from four or five years on the fast end of the spectrum, usually in the sciences, to eight or more on the slower end. Recently there has been a growing consensus among faculty and administrators in higher education that the doctoral program should be completed in a timely fashion, which means as close as possible to the six-year period. Attempts are being made to redesign doctoral programs, making them more streamlined, in order to make this goal a reality. Adequate funding also helps to speed the time-to-degree, and attention is being given to the creation of new financial aid packages and/or fellowships that will further enhance this goal.

ROADMAP TO THE ADVISING PROCESS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL: THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL ROUTES TO HELPFUL ADVISING

The more formal part of the advising process typically has two different stages: first, as students enter a graduate program, the departments normally assign a faculty advisor to assist students with planning a program of study; second, as students reach the dissertation stage, the dissertation topic normally determines the choice of advisor or dissertation committee.

In the sciences, the faculty member who heads the research group or lab in which the student settles for dissertation research typically becomes the student’s main dissertation advisor. In all fields, students are required to have three faculty members sign off on their completed dissertation, and two must be members of the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

There is also a more indirect and ongoing process that can be thought of as the informal advising process (see also the discussion on mentoring below). In contrast to making an appointment with a faculty member explicitly for advising purposes, it occurs in a variety of contexts where a student seeks or is offered advice by a faculty member: graduate seminars, courses in which graduate students serve as Teaching Fellows, jobs as Research Assistants, and even briefer encounters in which graduate students request letters of recommendation -- as for example, for fellowship competitions. The faculty members are not necessarily confined to the graduate student’s own department (and in some cases, the contacts
may occur outside of a students’ own institution).

Once you recognize these situations as opportunities for gaining advice, you can play a more active role in seeking it and in making the most of the advice that you receive. Here are some examples:

- Getting feedback on a seminar paper can lead to the identification of a dissertation topic; or it can lead to a scholarly presentation or publication.

- Similarly, getting feedback on teaching sections from the professor of a course can lead to improved teaching skills.

- Still another opportunity occurs when students apply for fellowships and request letters of recommendation from faculty members. Many students seek advice specifically on their proposals in making this request (this is over and above ongoing discussions that normally occur as students consult with advisors in selecting and formulating a research or dissertation topic). Students find that professors become more invested in the fellowship application process when their advice is sought specifically on fellowship proposals.

The more that you engage in these encounters and recognize them as a form of advising, the likelier that good mentoring relationships will develop — ideally with even two or three faculty members, depending on the size of your department. (See below for a discussion of mentoring and special issues for women in regard to the more informal processes of professional development.)

In the more formal or explicit advising contexts, it is helpful to know in advance what you hope to get out of the advising relationship. Graduate students who are still in the early program planning stage will want to consult with their advisors on the nature of departmental requirements, the nature of the General Examinations, and how best to meet requirements and prepare for the Generals. In most departments in the humanities and social sciences, students are asked to choose a major field for concentration and a minor or sub-field; in the sciences, as noted, students are asked to choose a lab or research team. These choices will partially determine course requirements and also the fields that will be covered on the Generals, and also the faculty member who is likely to be your assigned advisor.

At a panel discussion in which recent graduate alumni/ae in the humanities and social sciences shared their career experiences with current graduate students, the speakers were unanimous in feeling that close faculty ties had played a crucial role in their professional development, both during graduate study and beyond. They observed that it required some effort on the student’s part, but made it their strongest recommendation. Two contrasting approaches were presented:

- In one case, a mentor relationship was established through a kind of apprenticeship — the speaker had joined a team research project run by a faculty member. It not only helped in getting to know the faculty member, but eventually provided a thesis topic and area of specialization as well.

- In the contrasting case, the speaker approached it in a more personal way. She took the initiative to engage in fairly sustained intellectual dialogues with faculty members. As she looked back on them, she found that she could evoke or “replay” these conversations in her memory, and that they had a greater impact on her intellectual development than reading alone had ever done.

At the same panel discussion, a faculty member who was present noted that the benefits were not all on one side: most faculty members find a sense of accomplishment not only in the books that they write, but in their students, who ensure continuity for the future.
**AFTER THE GENERAL EXAMINATIONS: REFINING OR CHOOSING A DISSERTATION TOPIC IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, MAINTAINING MOMENTUM**

Maintaining momentum after the General Examination was an important theme that was emphasized in a panel discussion by recent graduate alumni/ae, especially in the humanities and social sciences. They all described the fairly common experience of inertia that sets in and the difficulty of getting started on the dissertation after the General Examination is passed and the more structured part of the program ends. They could offer no magic formula for regaining momentum, but they told of factors that helped in choosing a dissertation topic and getting started. Suggestions for choosing a dissertation topic and adviser and for completing the dissertation in a timely fashion will be taken up in the next chapter. (In the sciences, research, almost by definition, is an ongoing process starting as early as the first year, and in many fields, formulating an independent research project is part of the qualifying exam, so maintaining momentum tends to take care of itself, as does the issue of funding, which commonly is provided for through the student’s research lab.)

**Applying for fellowships for dissertation research: a question of timing**

Closely related to maintaining momentum in the humanities and social sciences is the issue of timing for fellowship applications or the cycle of the application and awards process. In most cases, fellowship candidates must apply for research fellowships during the academic year prior to when support is needed — with many fellowship deadlines occurring during the fall of the previous year. Fellowship tenure roughly coincides with the academic calendar.

For many students, the task of writing a fellowship proposal that far in advance is a problem — even for those students who have chosen a thesis topic and done some preliminary research. (Indeed, most researchers will confess that the best time to write a truly accurate description of the project is after the project has been completed — the early timing of the fellowship application is a problem for most scholars.)

One way to deal with the problem is to recognize it as such, and to start planning fellowship applications as early as possible — as soon as a topic has been chosen and some preliminary research has been done. This also means becoming informed about possible sources of funding and fellowship deadlines as early as possible.

Equally important in dealing with the timing issue, is to recognize that a fellowship proposal is a projection of what you expect to accomplish, made on the basis of preliminary research. It is not meant to offer definitive conclusions. The task in the proposal then is to offer sufficient reason as to why the project is promising — why you think the project will make a significant contribution to the field. (See Chapter Five for a more detailed discussion of the fellowship proposal.)

**PRACTICAL TIPS ON THE MENTORING PROCESS ACROSS ALL FIELDS, FROM A RECENT PANEL DISCUSSION**

The panel was entitled “Mentoring: Defining it, Acquiring it, and Assuring Equal Opportunities for All Students.” The speakers represented a wide range of fields and an equally wide range of stages along the academic ladder, from graduate student to senior faculty. Each of them addressed the questions: What are graduate students looking for in a mentor? Do they view the mentoring relationship differently from the advising relationship, and if so, how? What was truly remarkable was that the speakers managed to present candid and extremely helpful suggestions in a collective fashion, listening carefully to one another, with dynamic interactions as they went along, while also sharing generously of their own individual experiences. Their responses to audience questions continued to show these very same traits. Faculty panelists included: Caroline Elkins, the Hugh K. Foster associate professor of African studies; Howard Georgi, Mallinckrodt professor of physics; Alyssa Goodman, professor of astronomy; and
Dudley Herschbach, the Frank B. Baird Jr. research professor of science. The panel also included advanced graduate students or postdoctoral fellows.

We realize that good mentoring is not something that can be legislated. Still, it is our belief that the more we publicize what can be expected in a mentoring relationship, the more that faculty members and students alike will absorb this and view it as the norm. Here are some of the major points that were made by this truly unbeatable team.

- Take an active stance as a student, rather than simply waiting for the right mentor to come along: Be alert to positive experiences with faculty or other members of the larger scholarly community, and try to follow up and build further on initial exchanges that were rewarding. It is extremely helpful to get to know several faculty members really well.

- Attend professional meetings as well as talks at Harvard with guest speakers, exchange ideas with people on panels where the topic is one you have been pursuing or perhaps are planning to pursue. Engage in follow-up correspondence. Scholars are usually pleased when interest in their work is expressed. Keep in mind that asking thoughtful questions is not a sign of what you don’t know, but rather, how interested you are in becoming better informed. One panelist emphasized that a state of uncertainty is part of the very nature of research; there is a need to develop a tolerance for this state.

- Be aware that it is highly appropriate professional behavior to ask for feedback on work that you have written and that you plan to pursue further. Many scholars prize a mentoring role. One faculty panelist went even further and said that he felt sorry for those faculty members who are not interested in mentoring; he finds it truly a privilege. He added that serious researchers take their teaching and mentoring seriously; they learn by seeing things through the eyes of new students. All panelists agreed that making use of faculty office hours was one of the best ways of approaching faculty. They also suggested that it is helpful to find a happy medium, between sounding too desperate or too casual as you seek faculty advice. Best of all, try to avoid getting to a point where you feel desperate; don’t wait too long before seeking advice.

- Another faculty panelist noted that you can even get some degree of mentoring or acquire role models just by observing people, both those whom you admire and those whom you don’t.

- Still another faculty panelist emphasized that a good mentor must be prepared to give good strong honest advice across the board, adding that the best advice is the tough advice. All the panelists were quick to add that it is important first to say something positive; a negative tone prevents the mentor from getting the point across. One panelist noted that if a research problem is not working, he tries to help the student to find a new problem as quickly as possible, adding that a quick initial success is great for morale; it helps to develop a sense of competence.

- A panelist at the postdoctoral stage said that she found accessibility to be one of the most important traits of a good mentor, someone willing to help with all kinds of needs. She also said that it was important to help the mentor with the process, even if it means openly confessing that you don’t know what you are doing. She noted that she tried to be patient with herself, to accept where she was, even if she was stalled.

- A panelist at the graduate student stage defined good mentoring as someone willing to be pro-active in helping with professional development: networking for you at conferences, providing guidance on publishing opportunities, and continuing to stay in contact with former students after graduation. She added that such faculty members are likely to be greatly in demand and thus very busy. She suggested
being strategic in your choice of mentors, seeking those who balance or complement each other. Her department puts together a list of potential advisors and which students have worked with them, which facilitates getting tips from other graduate students in choosing mentors. She also noted that not all your mentors have to be in your department, that it can be very helpful to go outside and get a different perspective.

- Finally, an interesting paradox emerges from all the comments on mentoring: If it goes very well, then the mentor comes to think of the student as a colleague, which in a sense cancels the mentoring relationship.

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR WOMEN: ACCESS TO MENTORING AND OTHER CHANNELS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The question of what is good mentoring, which is relevant for both women and men, acquires a special cast when discussed by women, since men have been the dominant presence in higher education, in both faculty and administrative positions, for such a long time. Within the GSAS Women’s Group, open to women in all fields, mentoring has been viewed over the years as going beyond advising in two significant ways: one, it entails the concept of mentor as role model, with an especially strong interest in hearing from women in academe who have been able to combine career and family; and two, it views the mentoring relationship as going beyond specific academic issues, guiding the student through the various stages of professional development. It entails taking the whole person into account, conveying a sense of support and encouragement. Academic advising of course is a part of mentoring, but only a part of a larger phenomenon.

GSAS women have reported varied experiences and preferences in their quest for a satisfying mentor relationship, with the following patterns emerging:

- Students in fields where women faculty are poorly represented – and this is particularly true in many of the sciences—have found it necessary to broaden their search, looking beyond their own department or even their own institution for women in science as mentors.

- They have also found it useful to come together as women and share ideas for improving the environment for women. It was in this spirit that the GSAS Women’s Group was originally formed over a decade ago. And more recently, a new group has formed, Harvard Graduate Women in Science and Engineering (HGWISE), focusing on the particular needs of women in these fields. They have gotten off to a running start, contributing many valuable ideas that went into the report of the Harvard Task Force on Women in Science and Engineering. To keep up with the efforts of this very active group, see their website at: http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/hgwise/

- Since mentoring, as defined above, has several facets, many women have found ways of satisfying their mentoring needs by taking a composite approach, identifying particular faculty who provide encouragement and support, and others whose strengths are in providing academic guidance, and still others who provide guidance in professional development and inspiration as role models. Not all of these needs are gender-specific, and graduate women have found male faculty members who have served as splendid mentors.

- In the specific search for role models in fields where women are poorly represented, an important way of expanding the potential pool is to make contact with alums in your field. Harvard’s GSAS maintains close ties with its alums; in our survey forms we specifically ask if they would be willing to act in an advisory capacity, and are creating a data base with the names of such people. More information on this database will be available at the HGWISE website. In addition, the Harvard
Alumni Association offers a university-wide database of potential mentors, called the “Professional Connection.”

- To make the most effective use of alumni/ae mentoring or networking opportunities, it is important to think in advance, not only about what you hope to learn from the contact, but also what you would like to convey about yourself, your own interests and priorities and goals. The PhD counselors at the Office of Career Services can assist you in the very important process of self-assessment. They can also provide further information on the “Professional Connection” database.

THE HARVARD TASK FORCE ON WOMEN IN SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING:
RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING EQUAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL GRADUATE STUDENTS

In the Report from the Harvard Task Force on Women in Science and Engineering, May 2005, the point was made repeatedly that one serious obstacle to equal opportunities for women in the sciences, where they are poorly represented, is that mentoring and other informal channels which play a significant role in professional development work poorly for women. In the words of the Report: “At all levels, leaving mentoring to informal channels often leaves women and underrepresented minorities with less support, and it is therefore important that formal plans be put in place for advising, tracking, and oversight of individuals at all levels of the pipeline.” (p. 13)

Whether it is networking or gaining access to special technical training that occurs outside of the formal curriculum, women, by and large, do not receive the same opportunities that are available to men; there is a common tendency for people to gravitate to people like themselves. The Task Force Report, emphasizing that all students must have equal opportunities, calls for a number of specific measures that could help to create a more level playing field: more departmental efforts at integration and collegiality, such as a formal departmental orientation, weekly department lunches or retreats at which students and faculty present research, inviting more women guest speakers, creating cross-field programs that promote a sense of community among women and underrepresented minority science students; making funds available to establish programs to train all members of a department in technical skills and equipment use. (For the full report online, including recommendations for pedagogical training to address gender bias, increased childcare scholarships, improved safety at night for lab scientists, improved recruitment of women and underrepresented minority faculty in the sciences, as well as specific issues for undergraduate women in the sciences, go to: http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2005/05.19/01-taskforce.html.

If you find yourself in a department where there is a need for more provisions that could help to equalize opportunities, there are a number of GSAS personnel who are actively engaged in helping with implementation of the Task Force recommendations, starting with GSAS administrative dean, Margot Gill, and with further assistance available from members of the GSAS Office of Student Affairs, as well as the Director of Fellowships.

ACQUIRING TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND IMPROVING TEACHING SKILLS

The range of teaching opportunities for graduate students tends to vary according to field. In preparing for a teaching career, it is in your best interest to be a Teaching Fellow in as broad a range of courses as possible: introductory and advanced-level courses in your department, including small tutorials where you can develop your own syllabi and reading lists; or courses outside of your department, especially in the non-concentration courses of the core curriculum. You may also want to broaden your teaching experience even further by seeking to give a guest lecture or to teach a course in another college or university in the local area or in the Harvard Extension Program. Candidates who enter the job market report that some hiring institutions express concern over the elite nature of this institution (see below, the
section on job interviews and dealing with “the Harvard mystique”).

It is important to get feedback on your teaching and to polish your skills. In some courses — especially large lecture courses — it is standard practice for professors to observe and critique their section leaders. If this is not done, you can take the initiative and invite the professor to do so. Assisting in lecture courses also provides the reverse opportunity — that of observing and learning how others teach. (Both positive and negative examples can provide insights.)

**Another important means of improving teaching skills and of showing your commitment to good teaching is use of the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning.** It provides a number of services, including the opportunity to teach class sections in the Video Laboratory and have them critiqued. The Center will also give you advice on preparing an effective teaching portfolio. Briefly, the portfolio consists of the items listed below. For a complete description of a teaching portfolio, see the Bok Center web site: [http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/](http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/).

- Statement of your teaching philosophy
- Description of past teaching and advising responsibilities
- List of courses taught (as a course head, Teaching Fellow, or Tutor)
- Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE) scores by course accompanied by an explanation of how you interpret these results (Note: Be sure to obtain and save your scores and CUE cover sheets, as well as synopses of written student remarks, rather than having to track these down at a later date.)
- Description of efforts to improve one’s teaching
- Letters of recommendation (by a course head who can comment on your teaching, advising and administrative abilities)
- Prospective syllabi (for courses you have designed and taught or for courses you are prepared to teach)
- Video clips documenting teaching (which the Bok Center will assist with)
- Sample student work with your evaluations (for example, a photocopy of a student paper that you have evaluated)

One aspect of the teaching experience that often begins at the Teaching Fellow stage is being asked by undergraduates to write letters of recommendation. For a discussion of this important task, see Appendix A.

In some of the science fields, there are few teaching opportunities and no teaching requirement (in virology, for example). Even in such cases, however, there is an opportunity to train younger grad students (and even undergraduates doing summer projects), which can be viewed as an integral part of graduate training. It also helps with managerial skills, which are crucial for eventually running one’s own lab and mentoring students and fellows.

**ENGAGING IN PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES:**

Graduate education is a form of professional training. The sooner you become involved in professional activities, going well beyond the confines of your own university, the sooner you become a true member of the profession. The following are some suggestions for getting started:

**Submitting a GSAS Research Workshop Proposal**

There are now roughly 75 research workshops that bring together graduate students, faculty members, and occasional visiting scholars to discuss shared scholarly interests and individual work in progress. The aim of this GSAS program is to encourage the establishment of ongoing collegial settings for graduate students who are learning to conceive and write scholarly articles, thesis prospectuses, and dissertations. The workshops also offer faculty an opportunity to share drafts of their scholarly work with others in the
field. (The GSAS Research Workshops Program, initiated in the fall of 1993, is now fully supported by GSAS.) Applications for workshop funding are equally welcome from sets of faculty and graduate students within a single department, and from inter-departmental groups of faculty and students. Full details and application form are available online at http://www.gsas.harvard.edu.

Attending Conferences, Delivering Papers

- A seminar paper or a paper on a lab experiment may be suitable for delivery at a professional conference and possibly for eventual publication in a professional journal. (For the latter, see the more detailed discussion in the chapter on publishing.) If you have received positive feedback from a professor on a seminar paper or a lab report, you should seek advice on how to revise it and where it might possibly be presented as a paper or submitted for publication.

- Professional meetings provide scholars with the opportunity to share work that is still in progress. The ideas have to be well thought out and clearly presented, but they need not be a final statement representing a fully completed project. A graduate student who recently delivered a paper at a professional meeting observed that scholarly audiences are usually gentle with graduate students; they are pleased to see students make this effort, and are pleased to welcome them into the scholarly profession.

- Whether or not you are delivering a paper, it is beneficial to join the professional association in your field and to attend a meeting in order to become accustomed to this milieu prior to the job search. It allows you to meet people with similar interests to your own — at panel discussions, at meetings of various interest groups, at any of the receptions thrown by departments or publishing houses, and at other similar gatherings that occur at professional meetings — entry is often quite open. The exchange of ideas need not end with the meeting’s end; it is increasingly common for scholars to stay in touch via e-mail. The sooner you become professionally active in this way, the likelier you will keep abreast of the latest developments in your specialized field.

- You can gain more frequent exposure to the profession at relatively little expense by attending on-campus or local conferences in your field, or local chapter meetings of the professional association. These are especially suitable forums for delivering papers initially, allowing you to proceed gradually to presentations for a wider audience. Keeping well-informed about campus or local events should become an important part of your professional agenda.

- If you wish to submit a proposal or abstract for delivering a paper, it is important to follow the required procedures for submission and to observe deadlines. These normally are described in the Bulletins sent to members of the professional associations — another reason to join.

- Finally, it is important to realize that pursuing any of the above avenues for sharing research with others in the field does not imply immodesty. It is an appropriate professional attitude.
ACQUIRING LANGUAGE SKILLS IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

Over and above specific language requirements that exist in many departments, candidates in the humanities and social sciences often find that they need additional language skills for their dissertation research. (The issue for scientists in acquiring special skills outside of the formal curriculum has been addressed in the preceding section.) In some cases, candidates are aware of these needs well in advance, and take the necessary steps to acquire sufficient language skills. It is not uncommon, however, for students to discover that their research requires language skills that they had not originally anticipated — perhaps a need for greater fluency, or a need for an additional language. Many seek to go abroad for a summer of intense language study.

GSAS is attempting to address these needs through summer tuition supplements for entering doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences and through Graduate Society Summer Fellowships for students in these same fields, and also through an arrangement with the Harvard Summer School, whereby students may apply for tuition waivers for language study. Another source is the Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (FLAS), which is specifically aimed at students undergoing advanced training in modern foreign languages and related area studies — East Asia, East Europe, and the Middle East. In addition, a few departments have funds available for summer research or study abroad, making it worthwhile to inquire. Finally, several research centers at Harvard that specialize in areas of the world offer assistance for language study. For full details on fellowship opportunities for language study, see The Graduate Guide to Grants, discussed in Chapter Five.

Another possibility is to enroll in language courses at Harvard during the academic year, as soon as you have identified language skills required by your research. Once again, the earlier you can anticipate those needs, the better.

PARTICIPATING IN DEPARTMENTAL ACTIVITIES

There are many opportunities for graduate students to become involved in departmental activities: attending or helping to organize colloquia, joining student-faculty committees, helping with the orientation of new students to the department, and participating in all informational meetings that are offered for graduate students. This allows students to interact with faculty members in a non-teaching situation. It is also a way of keeping informed of departmental policies of concern to graduate students and providing input on those policies. Most of these events are announced on department bulletin boards and on flyers posted around the department; another excellent source of information is the department graduate administrator. Try to make it a habit to keep well informed of events; faculty members sometimes get discouraged from offering further assistance or sponsoring events if students fail to respond. If you think that there are too few departmental events, you can suggest some that you think would be useful. The more you participate, the more you will have a chance to make suggestions for improvements and to work for them. One graduate student noted that she tends to keep in touch with fellow students after they finish the program, and in that way she has extended her contacts network to other schools as well.
SEEKING A POSITION AS HOUSE TUTOR, FRESHMAN PROCTOR, OR GSAS RESIDENT ADVISOR

There are still further ways of broadening your exposure to university life and becoming actively involved. They are also a means of acquiring academic administrative experience, with financial benefits as well. Responsibilities in these positions vary according to the needs of the different populations in the respective housing groups. Selection committees in general will choose applicants who can show that they have the ability to deal effectively with people in close living situations, are reliable, have varied interests or hobbies, and who have been active in community or extracurricular activities in the past. Information about applying is available in the GSAS Office of Student Affairs, Holyoke Center, third floor; (617) 495-1814. Applications usually are due in midwinter. See the sample Application Letter for a House Residential Tutor Position on the following page.

BROADENING CAREER OPTIONS

The Office of Career Services offers a range of services to introduce GSAS students to career options within and outside of academe. It is wise to become familiar with these services early in your graduate career so that you can learn of options and start planning how best to prepare. There is also a booklet written by former OCS PhD Counselor, Margaret Newhouse, which is a guide to preparing for nonacademic jobs, *Outside the Ivory Tower* (copyright 1993 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. It is available at OCS.)
SAMPLE APPLICATION LETTER FOR A HOUSE RESIDENTIAL TUTOR POSITION

Candidate’s address and E-mail
Date

Master XXXXX
Co-Master XXXXXX
Address

Dear Master and Co-Master of XXXXX House,

I am applying for a position as a resident tutor in X House. My name is Sylvia Bassani and I am a third-year graduate student in Musicology. Although my first name may seem American, I was born in an Argentine family and grew up mostly in Italy and France. This explains the first half of my plurilingual thinking. I also hold a Master’s Degree from the University of Pisa (Italy, the leaning tower . . .) in slavistics, and this explains the second half. I have a family disseminated all over the Terrestrial Surface, and I love traveling.

I am applying for a Tutorship, as either a linguistic Musicologist or a musical Linguist. I am currently a Teaching Fellow in a course on seventeenth-century music in the Music Department, and next year I hope to teach in a course on music in the Core Curriculum. I know fluently Italian, Spanish (the Latin-American version), French, Russian and Bulgarian, and I can understand Polish. I can also help with Latin (in Italy we have it as a requirement for eight years). I play the piano and sing in the Radcliffe Choral Society and in the Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum. I enjoy organizing musical and non-musical events, language tables; I try to participate as often as I can to the existent language tables and a musical table in a foreign language might be a nice idea.

I also love sports. I ride my bike in any weather, go to the swimming pool every other day and love downhill skiing (the skis are the first thing I put into the plane when coming from Italy). Another of my hobbies is working with my hands, other than on the keyboard. I like to build or construct whatever I need, paint, invent and so on. Half of the furniture and paintings in my Italian home were handmade by me. I generally like whatever is creative; I also enjoy photography.

Of course, being from Italy, I also love making pasta in hundreds of ways (never overcooked) and good Italian coffee (the second thing on the plane was my espresso machine and two kilos of real coffee). I sometimes organize with other Italians, gastronomic-cultural competitions for the Americans. I hope that you will be interested in having a pasta-maker in your house, a pasta-maker that comes with other positive qualities.

I thank you very much for your attention and hope to hear from you soon. Arrivederci!

Sincerely,
ACQUIRING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION AND SETTING UP A DOSSIER

A good letter of recommendation not only makes a statement of support about a candidate, but also presents a well-documented and informative evaluation of performance. Acquiring letters thus should not wait until your final year of graduate study and the job hunt. Often the moment is lost when professors can produce a well-informed letter with relative ease. In some cases, the potential letter writer is a visiting professor, which would make it even more difficult to get a letter after time has elapsed. Similarly, teaching performance is harder to document after some years have gone by, and most graduate students begin teaching well before the academic job hunt. (Some professors are reluctant to write letters too far in advance of the specific occasion for which it is needed, but others even offer to write as soon as they have read a paper that they consider to be of high quality, or have observed a strong teaching performance.) Be sure to stay in touch with professors who have written for you at an early stage — it is a good idea in general, and it will enable them to update their original letter with greater ease.

In making a request for a letter, it is best to ask in person, using office hours or by making an appointment. Even when making the request shortly after a strong performance, it is wise to bring along the relevant seminar paper or any other material that could help produce a vivid and informative letter. Also, make it clear to the potential letter writer that if there is any reservation about writing, you would prefer to know that.

You must decide in advance whether to waive your right to read the letters of recommendation, a right granted under the Buckley Amendment of 1974. The general wisdom is that letters have greater credibility if you waive your right to see them, but you must decide for yourself in each particular instance.

You may start a file with confidential letters at any time in your graduate career, using the central Dossier Service at the Office of Career Services. As your accomplishments grow, your dossier should change and grow as well. When the time comes for the job hunt, your active file — i.e., the file that goes out with your applications — should be a current one. You can always add new letters to your file and ask letter-writers to update old ones. If an earlier letter has been written for some other purpose — for example, a fellowship application or a letter in support of a House tutorship — it is important to have it adapted for the specific purpose of the job hunt.

COMBINING PERSONAL LIFE WITH PROFESSIONAL LIFE IN ACADEME

This was the title of another panel discussion for graduate students. An underlying premise in this discussion was that the quality of personal life has an important influence on the quality of professional life. It is noteworthy that those who chose to attend a discussion of this topic were exclusively women. (One of the speakers was male.)

The married speakers or those with partners discussed the two-career issue and the frequent need to juggle competing demands. Interestingly enough, the speakers felt that few of the problems came from their spouses or partners, but rather from the pressures and demands of the outside world, or from family members. Couples, it would seem, are ready to make compromises in order to achieve a balance. It is employers and the career ladder itself that make it hard to do so.

For those who have children or are planning to have children, the juggling and dilemmas are compounded. Starting too early can delay finishing the degree or slow down the publications necessary for a chance at gaining tenure. On the other hand, waiting until tenure is secured is too long a postponement for many. The speakers suggested that since there is no such thing as an ideal time, one that will work for everyone, the best thing to do is work this out on a highly individual basis. Perhaps there comes a time when you simply feel that you are as ready as you will ever be.
Single people were equally concerned about these issues. All agreed that at some point the pursuit of a career could pose a challenge to personal fulfillment, and that choices would have to be made.

The issues were given an added perspective by one of the speakers who is from Japan. She found that Japanese society is more rigid and that females have fewer choices — although there are some signs of change, and also somewhat greater flexibility within academe. On the other hand, the greater freedom in American society does not always produce liberation. One member of the audience described the restraints as coming from within; she had many exciting opportunities, but they were a source of both pleasure and pain.

By the conclusion of the meeting, the participants all knew that they had not solved any of these problems, but that talking and sharing seemed to be an important thing to do.

FOUR TIPS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS FROM THE INCOMING DEAN OF GSAS: ORIENTATION, 2005

In her welcoming speech to a new group of entering graduate students, the incoming Dean of GSAS, Theda Skocpol, Professor of Government and Sociology and Director of the Center for American Political Studies, offered four tips that have an important bearing on professional development. Here is a somewhat shorted version of her advice that she tells us is based “on what I learned back when I was a graduate student at Harvard, and based on thirty years of working in partnership with wonderful students in political science and history and getting to know others in many fields.” She has generously agreed to share them for the present publication.

1. GET TO KNOW AT LEAST THREE OR FOUR FACULTY MEMBERS REALLY WELL – AND LET THEM KNOW IN SOME DEPTH ABOUT YOU AND YOUR WORK. Of course, you will want to develop a close relationship in due course with one primary mentor – with your lab director or your thesis advisor. But do what you can . . . to get to know more than one of Harvard’s remarkable scholar/faculty members really well. You can only gain by learning from multiple people, and discovering your own way to put together the many insights they have to offer. And, of course, you do not want to be completely dependent on one person for your future.

2. REMEMBER THAT MUCH OF WHAT YOU LEARN WILL BE FROM—AND ALONG WITH—YOUR FELLOW GRADUATE STUDENTS. You are not in zero-sum competition with one another. Some graduate schools bring in hordes of students and expect 50% or more to fall by the wayside. That is not how we do it here. You have all been picked as people we are sure can earn the degrees you have signed up for. We expect all of you to succeed. So team up with other students in your program to study for classes, prepare for general exams – and gossip about the foibles of the faculty! The friendships you make will buoy your spirits, and last a lifetime. You are getting to know the movers and shakers of the future. And you will learn a great deal from each other as well as from the faculty.

3. HARVARD HAS LOTS OF FOOD – FOR THOUGHT, AND ALSO FOR THE STOMACH! Colloquia, workshops, dinner-discussions, departmental and special interest gatherings are ubiquitous – not just in your department but all over the university. Pace yourself, but regularly attend some of them – including events outside of your immediate specialty. You will learn a lot, and meet key scholars and public figures from all over the world, because everyone who is anyone visits here sooner or later.

Not just that, but you will also find good food and drink at most of these events. . . . I learned this
over the years watching grad students – and people from the Cambridge community – attend all kinds of events in the Government Department, eating their way eagerly through delicious sandwiches, nice fruit and cheese plates, healthy vegetable platters, sinful dessert trays – all while drinking good wines! . . . you can definitely save some money, avoid cooking all the time, and eat pretty well around here—while learning and meeting and greeting at the same time. So dig in to the intellectual fare and chow down, too.

4. Finally, on a more serious note, realize that while your graduate years should be a wonderful time -- as well as a strenuous time of learning and achieving -- they are a prelude, not a lifetime. In June, I will stand before new MAs and PhDs in this same theater – at a time called “Commencement.” It is called that for a good reason: the receipt of the advanced degrees you have come here to earn is the BEGINNING of a mature life of achievement in the many careers for which you are preparing – in universities and colleges, in research laboratories and think tanks, in government and private agencies.

Before you get to the end of this first year of graduate studies – which may seem overwhelming at moments – step back and make a plan for yourself. Set out goals and guideposts to help you move STEADILY through your basic classes and examinations promptly, so that you can get into doing actual research and prepare ASAP to define your own thesis project. Keep in mind that absolute perfection is not your goal, but working hard and doing “well enough” at each step along the way. You are all so smart, that your “good enough” is going to be just fine.

Don’t be afraid to demand that your faculty advisors help speed you along the way. Don’t wait for them to ask you to meet milestones – set your own deadlines, along with your peers, and take the initiative. As soon as you can—by the second year or third year if possible—get involved in actual research and in writing papers to present at workshops and professional conferences. Make the papers you write for courses into realistic research contributions whenever you can.

BOTTOM LINE: You are here, not to study forever, but to become front-line contributors to the advancement of knowledge. And you want to have your degrees in hand as soon as possible. Graduate school is the road to commencement, not an end in itself – always keep that in mind! . . . Best of luck in the months ahead.