

Comments on Surviving Graduate School

I'm not going to talk about *surviving* graduate school, I'm going to talk about *thriving* in graduate school. Because graduate school should be the absolute best part of your professional life. And as long as it's not the *only* part, it probably will be. Why? Because this is the one time in your life that you have a serious chance of having the majority of what you do all day actually be *for you*. The older you get, the more of your time is taken up doing things for other people: reading their admissions folders, arguing with deans for them, writing grants for them, reading their papers, their proposals, their dissertations, their dissertations again, writing grants for them, reading their dissertations again, writing letters of recommendation for them, writing tenure letters for them, writing promotion letters for them, and so on. That's as it should be—I'm not complaining, any more than a parent complains when they point out to a kid that you get your turn as a giver and a taker in a lot of things.

But in graduate school, almost everything you do really is for you. Even if you are working on someone else's project that you don't find interesting, you're almost certainly gaining in research skills and familiarity with a non-trivial research area. Exams—ugh. You don't like taking them, we don't like writing them, but they're a wonderful excuse to spend time actually reading. I remember when I was preparing for my qualifying exams in political economy with Michael Burawoy, a time that many of us had learned to interpret as unpleasant and stressful, I made some sort of reference to the long sad years of graduate study, and Burawoy said, "ah, this is the best time of your life. This is when you can **really read**." He was of course right and I learned a lot even then about how to take advantage of an incentive structure that

allowed me to spend two years or so just reading great books. And it doesn't really get much better than that.

Except, that it does. Hold on, what if I throw in, that you get guaranteed access to assistance from a sizable group of really smart and experienced people in your field? You can take something you have half-way going but is still falling apart to them and pretty much all of them will take a shot and helping you make it better. *I can't do that.* If I am working on some network analysis but my arguments don't really make sense or connect with my data, I can't go to Laumann and say, "hey Ed, I am stuck with something that doesn't go anywhere and my writing is terrible, will you please read this and tell me how to fix it?" He'd just be dialing the Provost to see if they can revoke my tenure.

Still resistant? OK, let me sweeten the deal. We'll actually **pay you**. Not that much, not as much as you're worth of course, but get used to that. I think that's sounding pretty good.

Of course, I remember the downsides—the directionless, the bad interactions with faculty, and most of all the insecurity. What can you do? Well some things aren't changeable, because they are a field effect—there **are** regularities induced in subjectivity for the occupants of any field position, and this is no exception. How do you deal with these?

- 1) Entrepreneurship. My bud Steve Vaisey says that being a graduate student is like being a start-up entrepreneur. You are trying to get other people, especially faculty but not only them, to invest in you. Demonstrate the plausibility of a return. Invest in yourself wisely.
- 2) One thing about this idea, is that when you're an entrepreneur, you might have nothing but a good idea. You may not even have that yet—just the **potential** for a good idea. People with few cards in their hand easily attribute all causality to other people; see

themselves as helpless and become whiners. Thinking of yourself as an entrepreneur, you are empowering yourself. You have nothing in your hand but the ability to take cards from other people.

- 3) Take people more seriously than requirements. I'm not talking about kissing butt, I'm talking about showing faculty that you are worth investing in so that they work above and beyond the call of duty for you.
- 4) Stay connected. Talk to other graduate students. Go to talks, all the time, certainly **every** job talk. When you're done with classes, have a reading group. Sit in on classes.

I was also asked to address two questions:

- 1) How does one choose a committee? The most important thing is to find people who energize you and give you good feedback. It's good if they're in your area, but it isn't always necessary that your chair be the closest person. Though sometimes it is. Yes, it is important that you think of your committee as letter writers, but the biggest mistake students make is to all go for the most prominent person they can think of. So everyone makes the same choice (and who they think of as most prominent isn't always the way that outsiders do), and you end up with an advisor who is too busy to read your materials. And can't place you. The best advisor is often an advanced assistant. Someone who can really focus on what you're doing, and then can really sing your praises (without worrying about what this does to her other eight students on the market this year). But the most important thing is that this person needs to be able to help you with **your** project. Chemistry—a good relationship—is necessary but not sufficient in all cases.

2) What do I need to do for a proposal defense?

Here you are asking things the wrong way – what do **they** want me to do? What do I **need** to do to satisfy their requirements. Better to say, what can **I** get out of this? And the answer is, you can get a lot out if you have a document that lays out your question, your data, your plan of analysis, and possible pitfalls. Then you end up with a bunch of geniuses consulting on your project for you. Some advisors may want this or that, a literature review, whatever, and if you have to throw that in there to pacify them, so be it. Personally, when I have a student who is ready to start a dissertation, I say just write your name on a clean piece of paper and I'll accept that. I don't care about the rest. But that's not in your interest.

Remember, folks who let you do nothing are letting you be an easy workload for them at the expense of your future. That's often fine with us. Why would you want it, though?