

Doctoral students are so focused on momentary burdens that they graduate without being truly prepared.

[excerpt] ...doctoral education is not an end in itself but a way station. Too many students, alas, become so focused on the classroom, exam, and dissertation burdens of the moment that they graduate without really being prepared in terms of networking, intellectual development, and publication-ready texts.

We believe that careerism is no sin. Getting the most out of your studies and your dissertation is crucial to getting you on the tenure track and setting you up for the multiyear ascent from assistant to tenured professor. Other people — fellow students, faculty members, family — may help you (or hurt you), but in the end you alone are responsible for laying the foundations of your future.

In our experience, as many as half of you will drop out of the process, maybe more in some fields. Certainly, "chance and circumstance" will affect your future, but over the years certain strategies have proved reliable indicators of success in a doctoral program and beyond.

Start the Dissertation. Your initial priority as a doctoral student is to choose a direction for your dissertation. It is not something just to "finish." It ought to be your single most important source of research publications for your years as an assistant professor. A senior scholar once remarked that an ideal dissertation in the humanities and social sciences should contain the basis for six journal articles or one book or both.

To produce that volume of work, you should select a dissertation topic that is important, neither too vast nor too thin, and can be completed in a few years. Specifically, does it contain discrete units of research that can be fleshed out as future articles or book chapters? Do not pick a "just something to get this over with" topic; you will be married to this enterprise for almost a decade (doing it as student, then publishing it as an assistant professor). Will your subject matter reward the sustained engagement?

Once you focus on a dissertation topic, try to orient all your classroom research papers toward it. Ideally, each new course in your program should yield the first draft of a dissertation chapter. Building an accretive set of knowledge toward a master document: That is called scholarship.

Think Publications Now. To become a scholar, you must become both a specialist and a generalist.

Focus on one research topic so that you can legitimately say you are an "expert" on it. But also be able to claim credibly that your topic falls into a wider area of teaching and research that accords with the job categories in your discipline.

An example from our field, mass communication: "My area is political communication; my special focus is on political advertising." It follows that you should not graduate with a CV or a bio-narrative that appears too narrow (six conference papers on "agenda setting in

Bulgarian elections," for instance) or overly diffuse ("I study all forms of floral and faunal communication").

Think about avenues for your development as a scholar. While attending conferences is important, the single greatest imprimatur of credibility as a future scholar for hiring committees is publication in a top journal. Co-authorship is acceptable, although the suspicion will always be that the elder (in age and rank) author was also the senior "brain" behind it.

Build Relationships. Attend national conferences that attract scholars in your area of specialization and generalization. Meet with those people, even if only briefly; ask for their counsel on matters of research as well as your projected career. Those men and women may very well be on the hiring committees for your future job applications or be the "blind" referees of your future submissions to journals. Lay the seeds of your name recognition as well as your intellectual capital...

Make Yourself Marketable. Familiarize yourself with the employment marketplace. Even if graduation is years away, scan the job listings. (Do not, however, apply for jobs until you have at least finished your general exams.) Look for positions that attract you. What do they want? How will you grow to hold such qualifications?

Since one of the key qualifications will be teaching, you will need to develop classroom experience in your area of expertise. Show that you are able to teach a class in what you want to teach as an assistant professor. Prospective employers may be impressed by your publications, your erudition, your collegiality, but a basic question they have is: "What course of ours can you teach?"...

Plan Several Jobs in Advance. It is unlikely that your first job will be at the exact institution in the region of your dreams. Better to go after a college that could be your steppingstone (and who knows, you may grow to like it there)...

You need to decide which track you want to be on. A "teaching" college will not be a good gateway to a top research university; you will be too loaded down with class work, and the university will assume you are not on the "scholar" track. Better to get a first job at a university located somewhere you dislike, and then use that position to build up your CV.

Become an Expert Interviewee. An old piece of wisdom from politics is true in academic hiring as well: The most important message in any political campaign is the candidate. Faculty members will respect your CV, but they will hire you.

The interview — at a conference or on a campus — is the crucial determinant of whether you get an offer or a rejection letter. Accordingly, it is best to learn as much about interviewing as possible. Volunteer to be the student representative on your department's hiring committee; observe incoming candidates; ask others about their experiences; accumulate lists of obvious questions; rehearse in front of your faculty advisers.

Remember, interviews are not broadcast communication where one size fits all. Study the department and its faculty members closely. Show them you know who they are and explain how you will fit in.

If you take away only one lesson, let it be this: Being a doctoral student, and then a job candidate, is not a hiatus before the proper academic employment begins. The career track starts immediately.

David D. Perlmutter is an associate professor of mass communication at Louisiana State University and a senior fellow at its Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs. Lance Porter is an assistant professor of mass communication at LSU and holds a joint appointment with the Laboratory for Creative Arts and Technology.