

How to Survive Graduate School

Jesse Tack

Department of Agricultural Economics
Mississippi State University

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About Me

- Graduated last year from Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at U.C. Berkeley
 - Dissertation in the areas of agricultural production and risk management
- Currently an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Mississippi State University

Thinking Back on Grad School...Reflections

- Every stage of grad school provides some combination of physical, mental, and emotional challenges
 - First stage: surviving core classes and passing preliminary exams
 - Second stage: surviving concentration classes and completing second year project
 - Third stage: developing a dissertation topic and passing oral qualifying exam
 - Fifth stage: finding a job and completing dissertation
- Not only is each stage challenging, but the challenges are increasingly difficult. Each stage felt like the stress couldn't get any worse, yet every year the bar was raised higher and higher.

Silver Bullet?

- There is no silver bullet for surviving grad school, but...
 - A significant enabler of success is having a positive attitude
- For any given activity (whether freely chosen or required), important to ask yourself
 - What am I getting out of this?
 - Can it be useful to me?
- If you can identify the first and answer yes to the second, then you have what I would consider to be a positive attitude
 - If you cant answer yes to the second, try again. I cant think of anything I did in grad school that did not benefit me in some way, no matter how uninteresting it was at the time.
- Having a positive attitude during your graduate education is very healthy. Surviving grad school becomes much easier!

What am I Getting Out of This?

- There are a tremendous amount of things that you do in grad school
 - coursework, exams, research, presentations, writing
- What you are expected to achieve from these activities all boils down to three things:
 - Mastering the scientific method
 - Applying the method in a way that contributes to the profession
 - Communicating the contribution to an audience.
- All grad school activities contribute to at least one of these three! I swear!

The Early Years: Goals

- I will refer to the first two stages as the early years
- Required activities include coursework, preliminary exams, and often an empirical project.
- The goal here is for you to learn about and master the scientific method.

Coursework

- Coursework is great exposure to the components of the scientific method
 - Theory courses (e.g. Micro and Macroeconomics) show you how to build models and generate testable hypotheses
 - Empirical courses (e.g. Statistics and Econometrics) show you how to collect and analyze data
- But rarely does a class show you how to put these components together
- Fortunately, there are several available resources at your disposal to learn how to bridge your coursework
 - Conducting research
 - Attending seminars

Graduate Student Research

- Serving as a graduate student researcher is probably your single best resource for learning how to combine the components of the scientific method
- My advice: get involved in research projects as early as possible! I cant stress this enough!

Student Research: My Experience

- Started grad school as a research assistant. Great experience!
 - Got to work on many different phases of many different projects
 - Got to see how the components of the method were put together (Question, Motivation, Theoretical and Empirical Frameworks, Results)
- Take home message: get involved with research projects as soon as possible. Great way to learn how to combine the components of the scientific method.

Attending Seminars

- Attending seminars is probably the most under appreciated resource for learning how to combine the components of the scientific method
- Doesn't take much time, usually about an hour, and the return on your time is high
- Seminar presentations are formulaic, there is an introduction, motivation, theoretical and empirical framework, and discussion of results. These are exactly the components of the scientific method that you should be learning to combine!

Attending Seminars: My Experience

- Looking back, I should have attended more seminars
 - Did not fully appreciate the benefits of seminar attendance
 - Always had a convenient excuse, e.g. “I am totally stressin on question 3 of problem set 2 for Micro”
- If I could go back in time, I would attend as many seminars as possible, even if the topic wasn't remotely interesting.
 - Lunch time seminars are especially great, I really miss them
- Take home message: next to your coursework and research experience, seminars are the next best way to learn about the scientific method. Don't undervalue them!

The Later Years: Goals

- I will refer to the last two stages as the later years
- Required activities include developing a dissertation topic, passing oral qualifying exam, finding a job, and completing dissertation
- The goal here is to demonstrate your ability to apply the scientific method in a way that contributes to the profession, and effectively communicate that contribution to an audience

Dissertation Committee

- The dissertation demonstrates your ability to implement the scientific method in a way that contributes to the profession
- Finding a good research question and a supportive major advisor is really important, but...
- Another important component that is often overlooked is who you choose to serve on your dissertation committee with your major advisor

Dissertation Committee: My Experience

- I looked for committee members that had a very good reputation as major advisors
 - As a general rule, how faculty act as a major advisor is a great signal for selecting committee members
- I was not concerned about finding members that researched in the areas of my dissertation
 - Good strategy if your major advisor is familiar with your topic
 - Bad strategy if isn't. You need guidance from someone.
- Take home message: take the formation of your dissertation committee seriously and don't get caught up with big names.

Dissertation Filing

- REALLY IMPORTANT! When your about six months away from your expected filing date, make sure to contact all committee members and inquire about there schedule
 - Knowing their schedules is your responsibility!
- It is very common to lose contact with the outside member on your committee during the dissertation writing process for various reasons. This can be very dangerous.

Job Market Talk

- There are many components of the job search, a good job market paper and supportive recommendation letters are very important
- Equally important are your interview and presentation skills
 - The paper and recommendations will get you in the door, but after that its up to you to sell yourself!
- Practice, practice, practice
 - It is very intimidating the first time you give a seminar
 - Conference presentations are good practice, but people are often much more critical when they are considering you as a colleague
- Your department should provide you with an opportunity to practice your job talk in front of faculty
 - Be prepared, faculty that you are friendly with might playact as the tough critic

Job Market Talk: My Experience

- During my practice talk I got rattled early because the nicest faculty member in the department was playing the role of the bully. It freaked me out!
- I found a small, supportive group of classmates and we practiced our job talk with each other in an informal manner
 - Great way to hone presentation skills
 - If you get tripped up or if the words aren't coming out right, just stop and solicit feedback on the spot
- Take home message: practicing your job talk is crucial. By the time you have your first fly out, you should be able to give your job market talk in your sleep!

Summary

- Have a positive attitude. What am I getting out of this?
- Early Years
 - Get involved with research projects as soon as possible
 - Attend seminars
- Later Years
 - Don't overlook importance of selecting and staying in contact with dissertation committee members
 - Practicing your job market talk is crucial