

# Grad school traps

Eight hazards  
to avoid on the way  
to your degree.

BY JEN USCHER

The journey toward your doctorate, while rewarding, is full of potential pitfalls. Looking back, some former students regret that they worried so much or that they didn't publish their research. Others wish they had communicated better with their advisers or finished their programs sooner.

To help you sidestep such common laments, *gradPSYCH* asked advanced graduate students, early career psychologists and other experts to share their biggest mistakes. They recommend that you:

**1 Don't view your dissertation as a burden.** "I treated my dissertation like a beast that needs to be conquered and saw other students doing the same," says Susan G. Vitti, PhD, a clinical psychologist in New York City who graduated from Adelphi University in 2003. Now she feels she would have gained more from the experience if she had viewed it as a learning opportunity.

Tara Kuther, PhD, a psychology professor at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury, says you'll be much less likely to develop a negative attitude toward your dissertation if you start working on it as early as possible. "Start formulating some ideas that interest you and talking with the faculty about them during your first year in graduate school," suggests Kuther, author of "Surviving Graduate School in Psychology: A Pocket

Mentor" (APA, 2008). "For many of us, putting it off is what makes it stressful and overwhelming."

**2 Don't take criticism personally.** If you've slaved over a paper and crave praise and recognition, a professor's critical feedback can really sting. But experts say it helps to remember that he or she is criticizing the work, not you. "I find that if I can distance myself a bit from my work, I can read critical comments in a more open way," says Kuther. "Sometimes that means taking some time before I read the feedback, and some more time before I reread the feedback and make plans to revise the paper."

Learning this skill will serve you throughout your career, says Shane Bush, PhD, a neuropsychologist in Long Island, N.Y. "It's a part of the process any time you submit a paper to a journal, for instance, or apply for specialty board certification," he says.

**3 Set a schedule.** Priyanka Agrawal, a developmental psychology student at the Indian Institute of Technology–Delhi, suggests taking a structured approach toward adviser meetings. "Make a calendar and plan out milestones, like turning in a particular dissertation chapter by a certain time and then discussing it at your next meeting," says Agrawal, who defended her dissertation this summer. "It will make you more disciplined and the process easier for everyone."

Touch base with your adviser at the beginning of each semester and figure out when you'll meet, says Rachna Jain, PsyD,



author of “Get it Done Faster! Secrets of Dissertation Success” (2004). “Tell them the work you’re planning to send them that semester and ask if they’ll be available to give you feedback during the timeframes you have in mind,” she says.

**4** **Publish as often as you can.** Make your dissertation do double duty by using your research to publish two or three journal articles, says Nabil Hassan El-Ghoroury, PhD, APAGS associate executive director. Managing this feat may require you to collect extra data, he adds. “I realized too late that if I’d added just a few more questions to the questionnaire I was using for my dissertation research, I could have had enough data to warrant more poster presentations or journal articles,” he says.

Talk with your adviser about the data you’d need to gather to publish two or more articles. Another good way to get published as a student, Bush says, is volunteering to be a research assistant for a productive faculty member. Professors often list research assistants as co-authors on a study if they help collect and analyze the data.

**5** **Watch what you say.** Don’t forget that your adviser is like a boss, says Jain. “Steer clear of discussing your personal life with them unless, for example, you’re going to miss a deadline because of an illness in your family,” she advises. Brenda Cole (a pseudonym) learned this the hard way. Her dissertation chair became her confidant and encouraged her to talk about her family and her struggles with depression. “After a while, he started bringing up my depression and anxiety when discussing my progress and performance on my dissertation,” she says. Eventually, Cole felt he was so biased that she had to look for a new dissertation chair.

While you may develop a friendship with an adviser after you graduate, says Bush, it’s best to keep your interactions as professional as possible during your training. “When there’s a blending of roles, it can be harmful to what you’re trying to accomplish in school,” he says.

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**Keep your options open.** Vitti regrets passing up the opportunity to be an assistant teacher or a testing supervisor — two jobs that would have made her a stronger candidate for teaching positions at community colleges, for example. “It would have been a short-term pain for a long-term gain,” says Vitti, who at the time was busy juggling school and family responsibilities.

Since it’s impossible to know what career interests you may develop later, you should try to get a broad range of experiences as a student, Bush says. If you have the chance to present at a conference, secure a grant for a research project, or co-author a book chapter, take advantage of it. In fact, this

approach will serve you well throughout your career. “Even when you’re more established, it’s good to be open to trying new things,” says Bush.

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**Search early for a job or postdoc.**

Future practitioners should start researching jobs and applying for postdocs at the beginning of their internship year. That’s what Larisa R. Wainer, PsyD, who graduated from Yeshiva University in 2009, wishes she had done. “I began my job search after I finished my internship and it turned out to be much more challenging than I expected to find jobs that would allow me to earn the hours I need for licensure,” she says.

If you’re pursuing a career in research, you should begin applying for academic positions, postdocs or other jobs at least a year before you graduate.

Also, it’s best to be far along academically when you apply for postdocs or academic positions since many of them hinge on successfully completing your doctorate, notes Jain. “It will strengthen your application if you have at least the first three chapters of your dissertation done when you apply,” she says.

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**Celebrate little victories.**

During her first couple of years in graduate school, Rachel Singer didn’t recognize her accomplishments. “The day after I passed comps, for instance, I just felt guilty that I had been neglecting my dissertation,” says the Boston College psychology doctoral student. That attitude took the joy out of her work and led to burnout.

To get through the marathon of graduate school, “you need to keep giving yourself encouragement at every mile,” says Jain. Reward yourself when you’ve done a good job by going to a movie, taking a bike ride, or planning a date night with your significant other. “You’ll be happier and more productive if you give yourself these little breaks and allow yourself to feel justified in enjoying them,” she says. ■

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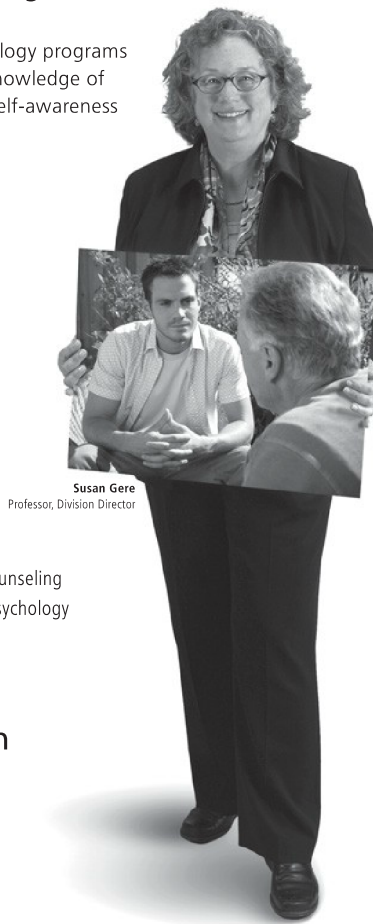
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