By now, many of you have probably heard about or actually experienced first hand “the good, the bad, and the ugly” of pursuing a graduate degree. The truth is that whether you are a newcomer to Duke’s graduate community or a returning student, there are many challenges you will face at each stage of your study: course work, preliminary examinations, and dissertation. The key, however, is finding useful ways of navigating this difficult, but mostly rewarding, terrain of graduate study. Here I offer a few suggestions for staying the course. Ultimately, it is my hope that you will be a success at Duke and will find it a rewarding place to pursue your graduate work.

BUILD A SUPPORT NETWORK

Your perception about how you are or are not supported by the university community will greatly influence your experiences (academic and social) while here.

A first step is to take ownership of and to recognize the fact that you are an important part of what makes Duke University a world-class institution.

Second, get involved with the Graduate and Professional Student Council (GPSC) or other graduate student organizations. These groups serve important advocacy roles by helping the university to identify and to address the needs of its graduate students.

Third, interact with students inside and outside your academic and professional disciplines; seek out or create your own support groups (e.g., writing and dissertation groups); share works in progress for feedback from peers; and participate in campus-sponsored intellectual activities.

EXPLORE EXPECTATIONS

To start, make sure you take time to read Best Practices: Core Expectations for Graduate Education at Duke University – available in the “Academics” section of the Graduate School Student Handbook and at gradschool.duke.edu/studenthandbook. This document summarizes the expectations of graduate students, faculty, departments and programs, and The Graduate School in creating a productive graduate research environment. In addition, you should ask your director of graduate studies (DGS) or other departmental faculty and staff to provide written guidelines for completing each stage of your departmental degree requirements: course work, preliminary examinations, dissertation prospectus, and the writing of the dissertation. Keep all this information in an accessible spot at home or on campus. Also take time periodically to think about your own expectations for graduate school and communicate with your mentors, advisors, and fellow students as these expectations develop and evolve.

ASSESS YOUR FUNDING

Review your admissions material again to make sure you fully understand the terms of your graduate fellowship: What is the stipend amount? Are tuition and fees covered? Are there teaching, research, or other requirements? How many years of support are guaranteed? What are the academic requirements for keeping the award? At the appropriate time, you should consider entering departmental, graduate school, and national competitions for additional funding such as travel grants, teaching and research fellowships, and dissertation support.

SEEK MENTORS

It is important to establish mentoring relationships with faculty early in your academic career. Good mentoring will ensure that you are well trained in your discipline, successfully complete your degree, and have adequate job opportunities.

Mentors are essential in helping you to learn about unwritten rules and informal networks in your department. Because of the variety of roles that mentors serve, we encourage you to seek out multiple mentoring partnerships (inside and outside the department). One mentor might be good at coaching, teaching, and advising; another at helping to identify potential job placements; and another at giving insight about balancing your personal and professional lives.

USE YOUR RESOURCES

Take full advantage of the resources and services, that the university provides to help you to accomplish your academic, personal, and professional goals. For more information about these resources, visit the Graduate School website gradschool.duke.edu.
Prescription for Persistence: Strategies for Staying the Course in Graduate School

CHALLENGE YOURSELF
Graduate school is a time to explore your deepest interests and discover what you are capable of accomplishing. Use these years to explore your field, take challenging coursework, and engage fully in research. Also consider becoming involved in community service, taking a course outside your field, or doing something to develop other interests outside the lab and classroom.

CARE FOR YOURSELF
Carefully review and make sure that you understand the guidelines for your health and insurance benefits to maintain a healthy lifestyle by getting adequate sleep, eating healthfully, getting plenty of exercise, and staying in touch with family and friends. If you’re not in good health (physical and mental) chances are you won’t have a productive course of study.

ENGAGE SOCIALLY
Although your main reasons for being here are intellectual, social outlets play an important role in enhancing your academic life. Isolation is a natural part of graduate student life. One way of stemming this isolation is by taking time to participate in social events sponsored by your department, the graduate school, GPSC, and other campus organizations. (This social involvement can also help to strengthen your intellectual networks.)

SHAPE YOUR CAREER
Your success here will also be determined by your own motivation, your perseverance, your discipline, and your ability to organize your time, as well as by how you prioritize and how you choose to use your resources. You are your own best advocate!

STAY SAFE
Do your part to protect yourself, others, and your belongings. Learn about the environment in which you live and work. Is it safe to walk alone or to leave your belongings unattended at a particular place at a certain time of day? The university provides a variety of resources to enhance your crime prevention skills and awareness. Be sure to identify and take advantage of these resources, many of which are covered in the “Safety and Security” section of the Graduate School Student Handbook. More information on safety can be found at duke.edu/police/services.

BE A SUCCESS … ASK FOR HELP
My Graduate School colleagues and I hope you will find Duke a wonderful place for your graduate study. Let someone know when you need help with academic or personal issues. Remember, all departmental faculty and many staff members were graduate students once. According to the National Association for Graduate–Professional Students, major areas of concern for graduate students nationwide include health, mentoring and advising, job preparation and placement, and mental well-being. We urge you to take full advantage of the services provided by The Graduate School, the Career Center, Counseling and Psychological Services, and other campus offices. We also invite you to challenge us to serve you better.

Jacqueline Looney
Senior Associate Dean and Associate Vice Provost
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