

Recommendations for Surviving Graduate School: Keys to Success

Dan Krejci, PhD, Associate Professor
MPA Program
Jacksonville State University

Introduction

Are you facing any trepidation regarding your tenure in Graduate School? Oftentimes, graduate students are plagued by thoughts of how to survive the courses offered in Graduate School. Before presenting my recommendations for surviving Graduate School, faculty wanted me to pass on two important items for your consideration. First, you are not alone in feeling apprehensive—even the most seasoned graduate student faces these feelings from time-to-time. Second, these feelings will ease somewhat as you gain more experience in your studies. In order to facilitate your success in graduate school, the faculty offer up several recommendations for your perusal—recommendations that we found useful during our years pursuing graduate degrees.

Recommendations for Success:

1. Study Strategies: Many freshly minted graduate students (as well as some of the more seasoned ones) use the same study strategies they used as undergraduates. My advice for most of you is to refrain from the study strategies you used as an undergraduate, unless of course, those strategies are consistent with what is presented in this document. Graduate studies, for the most part, consist of many work-intensive courses. Therefore, reading and taking notes is a vital key to surviving Graduate School. If your ability to become conversant with the literature is deficient, then this deficiency will haunt you during examinations, especially the MPA Comprehensive Examination. Sometimes in your courses you may be allotted an introductory week (except summer terms)—a week in which you are presented an introduction to the course that allows you to get a jump on the reading assignments. Use this week to get ahead on your reading assignments. If you can get a head start and stay ahead, then you will probably face less stress in the course. You will find that less stress generally equates to an increase in your confidence level (an inverse relationship), which, in turn, promotes a higher probability for success in this and other graduate-level courses.

2. How to Approach Your Reading Assignments: On many occasions, I have observed students using a highlighter when they read academic literature. However, these same students did not take the time to write notes in the margins of their readings—notes that indicate what it is they read in the literature. I highly recommend the use of a highlighter, yet only if you make a concerted effort to write margin notes regarding the text you highlighted in the literature. This activity aids students in their preparation for exams. If you highlight the text and do not write any margin notes, all you have accomplished is coloring a book (something that was great in Kindergarten but not helpful in Graduate School). In addition, if a professor provides you with an exam review sheet and you go back to the text that does not have margin notes, then you are forced to reread the text in order to locate the various items on the review sheet.

3. How to Accomplish #2 Above: If you truly want to master the literature, which is one of the purposes of the program, then you need to adopt a strategy that aids in this endeavor. I highly recommend each student construct an annotated bibliography for each course the student takes while enrolled in the MPA Program—both for public administration and concentration courses. You can find information about how to construct an annotated bibliography on the INTERNET—just type in *annotated bibliography* on any search engine (Google, Yahoo, Dogpile, and others).

4. Establishing a Weekly Work Schedule: The faculty *highly recommends* every student establish a written schedule that includes all of his or her weekly activities (work, leisure, eating, studying, writing papers/exams, and etc.). In addition to making a schedule, you must adhere to it—procrastination is a “mind killer.” The best time to get a jump on any course is at the very beginning; *do not wait until the last minute to work on your assignments.*

5. Writing Research Papers: Following in the spirit of item #3 above, the time to begin work on research papers is at the very beginning of the course. Students need to start thinking about topics for their research papers within the first week of class, and if you need assistance in topic selection, please contact your professor as soon as possible. Students who wait until the last minute to start tend to turn in papers that are of poorer quality. Furthermore, please take ample time to proofread your paper, as well as all of your assignments, and use any grading schemes/instructions that are listed in your course syllabus. Our courses generally have grading schemes/instructions for all assignments—take time to become familiar with all course requirements at the beginning of each semester. The best approach to proofreading semester papers is to finish the paper about four days before it is due and wait 24 hours before proofreading the paper. This procedure allows you a couple of days to fix any errors you discover in your paper.

6. Turning in Assignments: Students must acquire the habit of turning in assignments on time. *Many of your professors do not accept late assignments*, particularly when the student posits an excuse *after* the assignment is late. If you experience any extenuating circumstances that prevent you from turning in an assignment on time, then you need to inform your professor before the due date, not after the fact. Please note: your professors determine if the excuse you provide is valid (proof may be required) and whether or not the excuse warrants serious consideration.

7. Studying for Exams: This recommendation is rather simple, yet is by far one of the most important—study!

8. Transforming Students into Professional Administrators: The foremost objective in the MPA program is to transform students into masters of public administration. This endeavor is not only an academic process, but it is also a maturation process. The faculty expects students to make the transition from Graduate School novices to professional administrators. If you are currently working as a public administrator, then the faculty strives to make you a better one. In other words, “Where you are, we have been; where we are, someday you will be; and it is up to us to get you to that destination.” In order to promote these expectations, the faculty reinforces in students the following qualities (read as core

competencies): (1.) a sense of urgency in accomplishing all tasks; (2.) a sense of ethics; (3.) pride and ownership of your work; (4.) the desire to become a connoisseur of learning (to educate yourself in those things which you do not know); (5.) the ability to pay attention to detail when it comes to course requirements, (6.) critical thinking skills, (7.) written/oral communication skills, (8.) an appreciation of diversity in the work place, and (9.) a sense of social equity. *It is the fifth item that tends to cause students, as well as professional administrators, the most problems.* One thing that students can do to aid in accomplishing item #5 is to thoroughly read the syllabus and become knowledgeable of the course requirements. If you do this, you may discover that you make fewer mistakes in your assignments.

9. A Few Words about Plagiarism: Forget about it, do not even think about it, and, in other words, do not do it. In your classes, you will be provided information regarding academic honesty, and it will generally read like the following excerpt from a MPA Program course syllabus.

Academic Honesty: Please note that in all of our courses, we try to build in “real world assessments.” As public administrators, you must accomplish your work in an efficient, effective and ethical manner all the while promoting social equity. We gauge you on these traits by the following means.

First, we assess your efficiency and effectiveness through your timely submission of assignments. This syllabus informs you of what assignments are due, when they are do, and what format the assignments are required to be in when submitted. It is up to you to meet the deadline for all assignments, and have the assignments in the proper format—just like in the real world of public administration. If you do not meet the deadline, then you may be subject to receiving a zero for that assignment just as you would expect to receive some sort of reprimand for your performance in the *real world*. If you meet the deadline, yet your assignment is not in the proper format, you will have points deducted accordingly—once again a *real world* scenario.

Second, we judge a student’s ethical approach to his/her work based upon the content of the work. In other words, are you doing your own work, or are you using some other person’s work, even if only partially? Each student in this course must complete his or her assignments without any outside help (read as assistance from others). Partial exceptions may be made in cases of documented disability or where academically recognized JSU tutoring service provides limited assistance. Limited assistance does not include having someone plan or write a paper, homework assignment, or examination for you, or even edit it, or give you the ideas to type regarding the aforementioned assignments. In addition, please note that many of the faculty use the Blackboard program **SafeAssign™** to check assignments for plagiarism. Please contact the instructor if you have any questions about this policy.

The instructor reserves the right to call or E-mail students and require an explanation of ideas, arguments, and vocabulary for any paper, homework assignment, or examination offered as their own. If a student fails to provide the proper defense of any of these assignments (the faculty determine if the defense is proper), the grade for the assignment will be a zero, and the student may face further academic disciplinary action. The instructor has a policy of giving students the benefit of the doubt, when one exists, and where warranted. Students who do their own work have nothing to worry about when it comes to this issue.

Finally, social equity is stressed in the fact that all students are treated in a like manner and grades are not assigned for arbitrary or capricious reasons.

10. Ask Questions: In times of doubt about any material covered in your courses, seek out the best references for these courses—your professors. When in doubt about something, please check the syllabus first, and, if you are still confused, contact your professor with any questions you have regarding any course requirements.

11. Keep your Professors Informed: If you are facing some truly tough nonacademic challenges during a semester, let your professors know. Your professors have been down similar roads, we may not be able to solve the nonacademic challenges you may face; however, we will refer you to persons who may be able to assist you.

12. Talk with the Other Graduate Students: It is not a good idea to go through the program wrapped in a bubble. Get to know the other graduate students in the program; in the process you will develop colleagues that you may know a lifetime.

The faculty hope you find these recommendations helpful during your graduate studies, we sincerely wish you the best.