Things that Can Go "Wrong": Finding Our Own Way in Graduate School

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Introduction

Graduate school was not designed for most of us. Students from marginalized backgrounds (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, certain socioeconomic backgrounds, those with disabilities) are less likely to have information about graduate school and academia, making them more likely to face challenges in navigating gatekeeping and moving through program requirements. Such students may also be at institutions that are unsupportive or hostile. While facing these obstacles, it might feel like something has gone "wrong." This chapter is intended to challenge that framing and guide you through these issues.

We start by acknowledging the various structural issues within graduate school and academia that are often the primary contributors to graduate student experiences "going wrong." These include faculty mentorship, hostility, and financial precarity. Then, we outline ways that plans might change for students, and how you can make choices when: changing your dissertation, subfield(s), and advisor; transferring programs; working additional jobs; taking a leave of absence; and caring for your mental health. As a supplement to this chapter, we have created a handout[6] to help you weigh options as you're navigating these forks in the road.

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https://bit.ly/NavigatingOptionsGuide

Structural Challenges of Graduate School

Faculty Mentorship

As Calarco (2020) notes, faculty mentorship is key to success graduate school. But it really is the luck of the draw whether you have an advisor that takes mentorship seriously, is not overworked or overcommitted, and has the professional ethics necessary to recognize this part of their job as an obligation. As a result, students may be susceptible to under mentoring, which seriously impacts their ability to graduate, perform well on the job market, and develop the networks necessary for success.

Marginalized students are less likely to know academic norms—the 'hidden curriculum'—and thus might not realize how much mentorship a faculty advisor owes them as part of their job. The hidden curriculum of academia is made clear for students with proper mentorship, whereas others learn, rather inefficiently, who to connect with, how to present at a conference and take advantage of the experience, where to publish, etc. (Barham and Wood 2021, Calarco 2020). Strong mentors often advocate for their students, facilitate funding, and identify opportunities to publish.

Students might also accept poor or inappropriate working conditions and not recognize that they are being exploited by faculty or administration (see Chapter 55 on overwork and Chapter 69 on rest). Much like other students in broader university settings, graduate students from marginalized backgrounds are less likely to ask for help, whether that be seeking feedback or extra funding. Alternatively, students from more privileged backgrounds will demand resources, which allows them to perform and produce at a higher level and have a more positive graduate school experience. This inequity in access and treatment often leads to the mistaken

impression that marginalized students are just not on par when, in reality, some students have been set up to succeed while others have been left to falter (Calarco 2018).

It is important for you to know that these inequities exist and to recognize what students are owed by their mentors in their department. Departments accepted you on the basis that they would provide such training, oftentimes in exchange for underpaid labor. This understanding can help students seek solutions if they feel they are being short-changed in this area rather than endure such dynamics.

Faculty Hostility

Faculty can, unfortunately, show not only a lack of care for their students but also outright hostility. Racism and sexism in the academy are widely documented. BIPOC academics have discussed at length their experiences, and the "presumed incompetence" that colors their interactions with their colleagues (Muhs et al. 2012). (see Chapters 56, 59, and 62 on concerns for underrepresented minorities, international students, and first-generation students, respectively).

Political science is no different; reports of racial and sexual harassment are continuous (Nair and Wang 2021, Flaherty 2018, Merhson and Walsh 2015). Hostility towards marginalized students can manifest directly, with harsh comments, aggressive or demeaning behavior, and general disrespect. Hostility can also manifest more indirectly, by isolating students, withholding financial support, and smearing their reputation within the department and within the discipline.

Dynamics between faculty members can also negatively impact your trajectory. Personality issues and competition between faculty can sometimes leave students in the awkward position of navigating grievances that have nothing to do with them, just to complete the requirements of their program.

Financial Precarity

The intellectual, social, and political challenges of graduate school are often compounded by material and economic pressures. Many graduate students are awarded stipends that fail to cover basic living expenses; this financial precarity then exacerbates other stressors (Fernandez et al. 2019, Acker and Haque 2014). A lack of support further entrenches economic, social, and racial inequalities, creating barriers to entry for those without access to familial financial support from pursuing graduate education. For those that do make it through the narrow financial door, the stipends provided come with strings attached, such as strict time limits on completion of a program, after which point graduate students receive no support, or are even required to pay the university themselves (Wong 2018).

Ultimately, a structural shift in the sector is necessary. Universities in North America (and globally) increasingly operate through a financialized business model that prioritizes revenue over the needs of students (Cellura, Akers, and Malas 2021). Part of this trend has been increasing reliance on a precarious workforce of graduate students, and this contingency is undoubtedly harmful. At the same time, contingency enables some collective leverage that is being used by students across the country.[7] Assessing and identifying how universities are accommodating (or curtailing) graduate student mobilizations for rights at work can be an instructive litmus test for prospective students (see Chapter 33 on graduate worker unions).

A note to department faculty, chairs, and directors of graduate students

Oftentimes, the narratives about graduate school follow a linear trajectory that does not fit most graduate students' experiences in their graduate programs, and therefore, places unfair

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[7] See here a collection of articles on grad-student unions by The Chronicle of Higher Education: https://www.chronicle.com/package/grad-student-unions/

pressures on students. When advising graduate students, we urge you to take stock of various ways students have moved through your program, their financial situation, and how department climate contributes to their trajectories. Survey current and previous (graduated and non-graduated) students and ask if they always hit milestones within the timeline you've set or if they've changed trajectories. This way, you can ground your feedback to your future students based on the real experiences of students in your program.

Navigating Forks in the Road

Changing Dissertation Plans

The most common change that students will experience in graduate school is changing dissertation plans—which happens often. When your current advisor isn't working out, your methodology doesn't suit your questions, a pandemic derails your fieldwork, your research actually fits a different subfield, and/or you're uncomfortable with your research but don't know why—what do you do?

First, remember that your discomfort is often a product of a broader issue. If your advisor is hostile toward your work, it's very likely not about you or your topic. Do they have methodological preferences? Are there geographic regions they're more comfortable advising? Are there biases that you can identify in their own work and how they engage with students? Talk with the advisor's current and previous advisees—notice who they are and identify trends (what topics and methodologies they use) and whether you see yourself engaging with that work. If not, then you know that you might want to seek advising elsewhere.

If you're planning to change something about your dissertation, be aware that you will face gatekeeping. If you're choosing to move from a positivist methodological framework to an interpretivist one, for example, you'll need to communicate your research interests in

interpretivist terminology to a potential advisor. If you're choosing to move from International Relations to Comparative Politics, you'll need to locate yourself within the authors and debates in your new subfield. Students working on your new research of interest can help you translate your thoughts to ensure faculty hear your research better.

Changing Advisors

Changing advisors is also a very common experience in graduate school. This might be: (1) voluntary, as you may change your dissertation topic (see above) or other reasons, including faculty hostility; (2) involuntary, as your advisor take a position elsewhere or has passed away.

If you want to voluntarily change your advisor, oftentimes, it is mutually recognized if an advisor situation is not working out. If you face hesitation from the new advisor, this is likely due to interfaculty dynamics previously discussed. To help communicate the change to both faculty, it's important to "sell" your research to make it evident to others that it makes sense for *your questions.*

However, sometimes, an advisor may be possessive or otherwise hostile about changing. While this is rarer, it is, unfortunately, a reality. Before you decide to leave your current advisor, you should assess which outcome is likely by trusting your gut and speaking to others, including former or current advisees or the graduate director. Remember that other faculty may not clearly say that your current advisor is possessive or hostile due to collegiality norms. However, they may say something indirectly: "I'm concerned that you might not be able to finish your dissertation with" that individual, or that individual "may not be the right fit for you or your project." In some departments, you may be "locked-in" to an advisor after a certain point. You should be sure to research this policy as early within your department as possible.

If you are involuntarily forced to change advisors (i.e., the faculty member leaves), a few things can help soften the blow of the transition. Even if they have left your department/university, your current advisor may stay on the committee to help with continuity; clear this by both your department and current advisor. If they cannot (or don't want to), they may have ideas for other faculty that would be suitable replacements. If your advisor is leaving the institution, you should try to set up a transition meeting where your current and new advisor can get on the same page on your dissertation progress.

Working Beyond Graduate School

Students manage financial pressures in different ways, often through part-time departmental assistantships. For others, economic pressures can be so heavy that—when allowed by university policy—students will either pause programs to pursue full- or part-time employment in other sectors, or attempt to complete full-time graduate studies while working. Many students effectively leverage their subject-area expertise to pursue work in policy and practice related to their research. This hedging can lead to new research insights, deepening expertise, and creating new research networks. But in attempting to stay afloat financially, we risk sinking with the weight of these commitments, leaving little space for the creative thinking and rest that is so necessary to successfully and safely complete graduate school.

What can we do to stay financially afloat? This kind of advice is not new, but it perhaps bears repeating: being proactive from the outset is important. Be clear-eyed about costs, make a budget, and identify potential financial pressure points. For most students, supplementing one's stipend is necessary, and diversifying avenues for financial support can remove some of the pressure. Sign up for grant and funding notifications from your university and other repositories that collate this data. Connect with other graduate students in your field to learn about available

supplementary funding. And ultimately, don't be afraid to pursue your graduate studies in a way that works for you—even if that means pausing your program or going part-time to pursue other kinds of work.

Taking a Leave of Absence

Sometimes, you might want to take a step back from graduate school. But make sure you remember one thing: *this leave of absence is not an additional year of graduate school—it's a break from graduate school.*

Each university structures its options for leaves differently; some consider parental leave (maternity and paternity) to be separate from a leave of absence, some consider medical leave to be in the same category as personal leave. Depending on the type available, the terms will differ. You might lose your stipend, on-campus graduate housing, and university-funded healthcare, for example, during your leave period (or, in some cases, it might jeopardize those entitlements after you return). Furthermore, for international students, your visa might not allow you to take a leave at all.

If you are considering this option, we highly recommend you speak with anyone on your campus who is familiar with your funding, including your department's director of graduate studies or other administrators who know about the funding structure of your program (a graduate student coordinator for instance). Be very direct about the questions that you ask and get any guarantees in writing. For example, if the university allows you to retain the year of funding that you are not using during your leave and adds it to your normative time, get that in writing. Don't hesitate to triple-confirm information about deadlines, funding, or stipulations post-leave—the university will not hesitate to retract those entitlements from you if it has the opportunity!

Transferring Graduate Programs

You might consider transferring out of your program due to program fit, a shift in research interest, departmental dynamics, regional boundaries (e.g. family considerations, diversity), program ranking, and many other reasons. Although transferring is often not discussed publicly, it is more common than people think!

Ask yourself first: *why do you want to transfer, and why did you want to go to graduate school in the first place*? Depending on the reason, it may not be the best option available to you. If you're transferring to be closer to family living elsewhere, you might consider a leave of absence or finishing your program remotely. Additionally, your goals may have changed, and you instead decide that you no longer want to be in graduate school. "Mastering out"[8] of your program can also be a good option. Answering these two questions will be useful for your transfer application and conversations with potential new faculty.

The timing of your transfer must also be considered. If you transfer early in your program, you may not add (as much) time in graduate school, and the transfer may be smoother. If you transfer later in your program, you may be able to negotiate qualifying exams, or you may carry more knowledge and research skills, making you an ideal candidate to work on a grant or for university-funded scholarships.

One of the challenges of transferring, depending on your situation, is obtaining letters of recommendation from at least two, and likely three, faculty. Identify allies in your department (faculty often outside of your field but are sympathetic to your situation). Although it is best to get letters from faculty in your current program, sometimes that is not an option. If there are no allies in your department to provide letters, you can reach out to faculty at another institution

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[8] "Mastering out" means that you are leaving the PhD program after completing coursework (and likely other) requirements and have thus earned a master's degree in your enrolled program.

who does similar research and offer to collaborate on a project. Building networks through Twitter, conferences, and virtual communities can help you identify faculty for this purpose and programs to transfer into (see Chapter 21 on how to conference and Chapter 27 on academic Twitter). If your research is interdisciplinary, faculty from a different department at your university may have overlapping topics.

Caring for your Mental Health

While graduate school can be a time for you to grow and thrive, it can come at a cost to your mental health (Forrester 2021). The financial precarity of graduate school, added pressure of balancing familial and personal commitments, and persistent structural inequities can all be very taxing (Macintyre et al. 2018).

Limited access to certain resources in departments or universities can slow your degree progress and can cause undue stress and imposter syndrome. Because of this, it is important to assess the resources offered by different campuses to support students and to make sure they speak to a wide range of academic, professional, and personal challenges that may arise.

If you do not feel adequately supported or that the barriers to completion are becoming too high, you can check in with your advisor, department chair, or other university officials and discuss available options. This could include additional resources tailored toward your specific needs, such as a career counselor or therapist, deferral, or even transferring to a different program/university (see Chapter 71 on counseling and other resources). There is no shame in taking advantage of the resources you need to thrive and make sure to prioritize yourself in whatever way makes sense to you. This will take time and possibly multiple tries, but it is critical for your long-term growth.

Conclusion

Graduate school can feel isolating, but it is important to remember that those that have come before you, and those that join after you, also navigate through similar struggles. Building communities with others can help combat this isolation (see Chapter 65 on overcoming academic isolation). Reach out early and often to individuals you have connections with—identify faculty allies and reach out to graduate students with diverse experiences. This can help ensure you get a broad view of possible graduate school and career trajectories.

Ultimately, this chapter is meant to equip you with knowledge of how "things that go wrong" are often not in your control and when some aspects might be, how you can navigate those forks in the road. We want to emphasize that making changes within your graduate career trajectory is *part of learning from graduate school.* In fact, we'd dare to say that, by observing and adapting to your circumstances, as well as building curiosity, you're doing something *right*! Find your own way in graduate school and pay it forward when you succeed.

Takeaways:
You're here to learn; changing your topic and plans is completely fine and part of learning. Know that gatekeeping is common within academia—you're not doing anything wrong.
Not everyone comes to graduate school with certain privileges, including financial stability and coming from academic families, which pose financial constraints and different sets of obstacles as you learn the hidden curriculum of academia.
Departmental dynamics are often beyond your control. Ideally, make sure there are multiple

faculty that align with your interests and identify allies.
Reach out to previous and current graduate students in departments to which you're applying (first-time or transferring). Note: (1) types of students in the program, (2) who graduates and (3) who places. If you're in your program, reach out to those graduate students to strategize how to navigate challenges you're facing.
Facing obstacles can feel isolating, but you're not alone. If you face issues, you're not necessarily stuck with your situation—there are alternative options and sources of support.

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