

Developing an Action Plan

By Peggy Itschner

In an earlier exercise, you delineated specific goals you have for your career as a graduate student. Some goals are short-term, while others are long-term. Regardless, if you are to achieve these goals, you must have a plan of action. The focus of this chapter is to assist you in developing an action plan so your goals may become reality.

A few reminders:

While your goals are very unique to your own needs, skills, and abilities, here are a few general reminders as we begin to create a framework of an action plan:

- **Objective:** As a graduate student, the main objectives are to *contribute original knowledge* to a field of study and become a member of the professional community.
- **Evolving goals:** Because your goals will almost certainly change during graduate school, a dynamic action plan will almost certainly evolve throughout your career as a graduate student.
- **Mentoring:** Having effective mentoring relationships is critical to your success. These include not only academic guidance, but also prolonged nurturing of the student's personal, scholarly, and professional development. Mentors may perform the following roles: advisors, supporters, tutors, masters, sponsors, and models of identity.

Keys to a successful action plan:

- **Organization.** In order to meet your goals, your action steps must be organized. Do this in a way that makes the most sense to you.

1. Organize by year:

Example: Your goal is to present at a national conference. Your action plan for this goal may be this:

Year 1: Attend a national conference with faculty member.

Year 2: Present at a local/regional conference with a faculty member or graduate student peer

Year 3: Present at a national conference

*Tip: You may want to further break down this example by planning action steps throughout the year.

2. Organize by area:

Example: Your goal is to gain leadership experience in the department. Your action plan by area might be this:

- Academic: Intentionally take courses where leadership opportunities may be emphasized. In class discussions, participate actively. For group projects, take on the leader role.
- Social: Attend departmental activities, such as brown bag lunches. Select a group, such as the Diversity Task Force, to be involved in. Coordinate a study or writing group.

- **Realism.** Make sure you aren't living in La La Land when creating your action plan—it must be attainable!
 1. Carefully assess the action steps you develop to see if they are realistic.
 2. Have faculty and other graduate student peers (particularly peers who are further along in the program than yourself) review your action plan to be more certain you your goals/action steps are realistic. (Can you REALLY publish a book by the end of your first year? Probably not. Can you co-author an article with your faculty advisor by the end of your second year? Much more likely.)
- **Support.** It is crucial that you develop effective mentoring and peer relationships in graduate school. The encouragement, feedback, and understanding of like-minded people will be your mainstay on many occasions. When your plan of action suddenly hits a bump in the road, the academic and professional community you surround yourself with may be the difference between staying and leaving. In the same vein, take care to surround yourself with people who are the right fit for you. Consider personality, academic, and research fit.

Approaching advisors/mentors:

I have mentioned the importance of good mentoring relationships twice, but I realize that approaching faculty advisors or even peer mentors can be daunting.

- **Helpful hints.**
 1. Be respectful of their time. Be punctual and prepared so that you make the most of your meeting.
 2. Do your homework. Know your goals for the meeting and the questions you want to ask.

3. Be open-minded and flexible. While you want to be prepared, you also want to keep yourself open to new suggestions and ideas.

- ***Suggested questions.***

1. What do you think about...?
2. I am open to new ideas, as well. Based on your knowledge of and experience in this area, do you have any other suggestions for meeting this goal?
3. I have prepared with my own resources, such as...Do you know of someone else I might talk to who has expertise in this area? Are there other resources or readings I should utilize?
4. Is this a realistic goal? Are the action steps I have outlined achievable?
5. Do you foresee any obstacles or hurdles I will likely come across?

Action Planning Exercise:

Now that we have begun understanding the nuances of creating an action plan, let's try one based off of a goal you developed in chapter 2.

*State the goal: _____

*Deadline for completing this goal: _____

*List 3 steps of action you can take to achieve this goal:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

*For each of the three steps list above, answer the following:

- Deadline: WHEN do you intend to complete this action step?

- Community support—WHO can help you with this step (i.e. faculty advisor, peer mentor, classmate):

- WHAT questions should I ask this person in order to complete this action step? (Refer to the section above regarding approaching advisors/mentors.) List a few of them here:

1. _____

2. _____
3. _____

- Personal resources: WHAT skills and abilities do you already possess that will help you to take this action step?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

In conclusion:

I hope that you now have a good idea of how to build an action plan with the ideas and tools presented here. One of the first goals every graduate student has is to successfully complete required coursework for the degree.

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