

Establishing your Goals for Graduate School

By Peggy Itschner

The aim of this writing is to assist you with developing realistic goals during graduate school. With abundant opportunities and expectations before you, it is critical to focus on the aspects of your academic and professional career that are most important. As you set priorities, specific goals will be essential to your success.

A few reminders:

While the goals you set will be very unique to your own needs, skills, and abilities, here are a few general reminders regarding goal-setting:

- ***Talk with people:*** As a graduate student, you have specific people surrounding you that can (and want!) to assist you. Communicate effectively and often with your advisor, professors, and other students.
- ***Evolving goals:*** Your goals will almost certainly evolve as you progress toward your degree. Be flexible and open when goals may need tweaking.
- ***Consider your resources:*** In graduate school, you have access to many resources, such as the Career Center, sponsored workshops, and discounted memberships to professional organizations. Tap into these resources!

Keys to successful goal-setting:

- ***Meet with your advisor/mentor:*** Graduate school can be somewhat of a mystery to new students. So, before setting all of your goals in stone, it is a good idea to meet with your advisor and obtain preliminary advice regarding the areas in which you might focus and create goals that will help you succeed. Keep in mind that the advising relationship itself may be an area where you may want to set specific goals! Throughout this workbook, guidance for working with mentors is provided.
- ***Realism.*** Goals must be attainable, or you will feel discouraged and defeated quickly.
- ***Start with the end goal (big picture) and rein it in with smaller, manageable goals.*** When I know my final destination, I find it easier to set goals along the way that will give me a sense of accomplishment and move me in the right direction. I have found it extremely helpful to categorize the smaller goals as “aspects” of my end goal.

A Little Story about Goal-Setting:

When I decided to move to Washington from Texas for graduate school, I had to drive myself and all of my belongings 2,700 miles. I knew my final goal: to arrive in Seattle safely. But there was a lot to consider in order to be sure that I met my goal! Here's what I did:

- **Talk with people.** You'd better believe that I visited my mechanic and the tire store before setting out on the open road! I discussed with them my final goal (Seattle) and asked for their advice to be sure I had all that I needed (a healthy car and good tires) in order to meet my goal. *(Hint: The "mechanic" and "tire store" is your advisor and other faculty mentors.)*
- **Research from the experts (realism!).** I looked at different maps, checked on the weather forecast (Driving through the Rockies in December? This South Texan vetoed that idea!), and talked with a friend who had made the drive herself before to find out about safe rest stops and hotels. *(Hint: The maps and weather forecast can be workshops or reading on graduate school experiences, and my "friend" can be a fellow grad student who is a year ahead of you in the program.)*
- **Set smaller, manageable goals.** Let me be clear that I did NOT attempt to drive to Seattle in one fell swoop! After conducting my research, I was in a position to set the specific goals that would get me where I wanted to be. I spent the first night in Phoenix, the second in Redding, and the third in my new home in Seattle. Because I set these smaller goals, I significantly decreased my chances of wandering off the path or getting lost.

Goal-Setting Exercise:

Now that we have begun understanding the nuances of setting goals, let's try one:

*The final goal: to graduate!

*List 3 aspects of this goal that could be categorized. For example, my end goal is to complete my Ed.D. in Higher Education. Within that goal, I want to be successful in coursework, contribute as a member of the academic community, and have quality internship experiences.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

*For each of the three categories listed above, provide one smaller goal that would help you succeed in that category and therefore contribute to your ultimate goal of graduation. (Remember to check in with your advisor to be sure this is realistic!)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

In conclusion:

I hope that you now have a good idea of how to set goals for your success in graduate school. Eventually you'll want to develop a framework to take the goals you create and form an action plan so they become reality. Before that happens, however, you will need to meet with your advisor.

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