

A new life: growing to be a successful Ph.D

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Abstract: Life is full of decisions to make. Studying for a PhD could be regarded as a big one which might change career and life expectations. Successful PhD study is rewarding on one hand and challenging on the other. This student article tries to discuss how to grow to be a successful PhD with several issues. Students are hoped to think carefully about the reason and find research interest and an admirable advisor before applying. Financing support, understanding by family and friends as well as a healthy body ensure a good start for PhD study. During PhD study, they should keep self-motivated, creative, brave and persevering with hard work. Time management is extremely significant since there is too much work during PhD period. A friendly network with advisor, other people and research community provides PhD students a pleasant environment for efficient study. Through hardworking, a successful PhD should contribute a lot to the research programs, find interesting topic for dissertation and fulfill it, publish high-quality papers with new findings and connect with people in the research area by attending academic conferences. What's more, a successful PhD also has plans for better future.

1. Introduction

In the early morning on July 31st 2015, my family got up quickly and went to the Capital International Airport in Beijing, China. My wife and I were going to catch a flight to Chicago, where is the transfer station to San Antonio for us. I am a new PhD student now, three years later when receiving my Master's degree. Did I think about why I want a PhD? Yes, many times. Did I think about the question "How to be a successful PhD"? Yes, but I still need think and practice. I believe other student also thought about these questions with different answers.

This article attempts to answer the questions by raising several points including preparation, input and accomplishment of successful PhD based on arguments of former researches and my experiences. Since I am on my first year as a PhD student, I really need work hard with strong self-motivation to grow to be a successful and happy PhD.

2. Preparation for PhD life

2.1 Why a PhD?

The answer to this question is the first importance before applying for a PhD study. It will be a huge change of the life and career when pursuing a PhD (Dredze and Wallach, 2012). Indeed, the most common reason is to seek a job position in a specific area, such as academic, research and medical positions. However, this reason is not good enough for spending several years in the PhD study if students do not really love and want it. In addition, having a doctoral degree does not mean you will have a satisfying career. More and more PhDs are working on postdoctoral or other non-research positions (desJardins, 1995). Undergraduates or Master candidates should find out whether they really have strong desire for PhD study before applying.

2.2 Choosing an advisor whose work admirable

PhD study could not be successful without the supervision of a prominent advisor. A prominent advisor must be an expert in an interesting area and a professor

who will supervise student with all heart. Students could search by internet to find his (or her) education background, the past work, present programs or projects and his (or her) publications. By comparing thoroughly, they would have the best several candidates for applying. With the experiences of former successful PhD students, participating in the projects they like and having support from their advisors ensured them a really happy and productive PhD study.

2.3 Keeping healthy

There is an old Chinese saying “Without health, without anything”, which means health is the fundamental of everything. That saying might be a little exaggerating, however, health is one of the significances for successful PhD study. PhD study normally costs 3-7 year time input and leads to potential mental stress. That means starting and finishing PhD need both physical and mental health.

2.4 Getting support

PhD study of several years also needs financing support to cover the expensive tuitions and living expanse. All institutes and many advisors provide various scholarships, assistantships and other funding supports. When applying for a PhD position, student could apply for an appropriate financing support as well. For instances, in China (the author’s mother land), all PhD studies are free and with allowance for living as long as students pass the PhD qualification exams.

Whereas, studying abroad would generate another problem based on the author’s experience, which is living apart from family and friends. Thus, the understanding and support from them are so important. With their support and even spouses’ accompany, students will have more confidences to study abroad.

3. Input during PhD study

3.1 Self-motivation

Doing PhD study and scientific research is totally a new life for every PhD student. During undergraduate studies and before, students are generally assigned to learn and submit homework by teachers and officers. While for successful PhD study, students should participate in the courses, programs and even social activities with strong self-motivation. Successful PhD students should have strong self-motivation to think independently, notice pendent problems, solve problems and create new things or methods. When students encounter difficulties or stresses, they should talk to others or relax in kinds of ways to keep motivated. With real enthusiasm and spurred potential, PhD students will probably achieve great success in doing research.

If students do not attend research activities with self-motivation, no one would ask, even including their advisors, since professors are very busy in teaching, writing proposals, collaborating with other researchers and doing their programs and projects. Whenever one of the students is found not self-motivated or suitable for research, he or she might be fired soon.

3.2 Time management

Time is precious, especially for PhD students. They need attend courses, read a lot, think independently, write proposal and paper, and participate in the programs. How to fulfill all these things efficiently? Time management is the key. Firstly, it is helpful to make regular hourly, daily, monthly and annual schedules (desJardins, 1995; Chenevix-Trench et al., 2006). Then, students could rank the importance of the assignments or tasks and fulfill them one by one. Once tasks are finished in time, there would be sufficient time for new ones. What's more, time for exercise, relax and enough sleep should also be included in the time schedule.

3.3 Creativity and braveness

PhD study is not just about learning the existed knowledge, moreover it is about extending the boundary of human knowledge, which means creating and finding new things by the students themselves (Might, 2013). Whenever they do anything related to the PhD research, they should think more about the process, the reason and whether

it could be done better. Creativity might be the most challenging part for a successful PhD, and fearlessness of mistakes or authorities should also be a necessary quality. Students need learn from the mistakes (Dredze and Wallach, 2012). When people are finding new ways, they probably find a wrong way or a difficult way. Don't be afraid to make mistakes and fight with authorities even your advisor when you thrive to be creative.

3.4 Perseverance

Indeed, it is not easy to extend the boundary of knowledge. In terms of the difficulty, students might feel tired, stressful, unhappy even exhausted during the process. This situation is normal in the middle of the whole PhD study (about the second or third year). To survive those blue emotions, PhD students should persevere to wait for the end of the hard days. Don't give up! Actually, it is better to consider as a vacation. When they gain enough strength gain, they would find more enthusiastic in study and research than before.

3.5 Building a great relationship with advisors

The relationship between a PhD student and the advisor is the most significant relationship for him/her in graduate school. A great relationship with the advisor could affect the achievement during PhD period. When students receive the offer from their admiring advisors, it does not mean they will work well together. Students should try best to know their advisors' supervising styles, working styles and even personalities so that they could get along well with their advisors. For example, my advisor is a hard-working professor, and he has specific time plan for everyday' work. He meets us twice a week, besides if we want to see him, we must make an appointment via email. After understanding his style, we could discuss thoroughly during the ordinary meetings and contact him by email when having other problems.

A great relationship also contains the feedback on the supervision of the advisors. PhD students should tell advisors their study achievements, working results, difficulties, things to do and ask for help as well. Knowing exactly the needs of the

students, advisors would understand how to supervise and support them better. An efficient communication way with advisor ensures an easy environment for successful PhD research.

Another importance in this relationship is how to deal with disagreement between the two sides. Of course, teachers would not be always right. If PhD students have disagreements with their advisors or advisors are indeed wrong at some aspect, students should discuss with advisors immediately and comprehensively with all respect.

3.6 Connection with others

Besides advisors, there are other important people in Graduate School, such as student officers, other professors and students. Officers provide various services and guides for student to live a smooth life in several years' study. Seminars and lectures held by other professors also could provide a great communicating platform. Talking to other students (no matter with the same or different advisors) and making friends with them might bring students new information, inspire new thoughts, strengthen the team spirit and feel happy having friends. From my perspective, a successful PhD is first a happy PhD.

Interestingly, connecting with others will let others know you and your research then (Pitts, 2013). It is beneficial to discuss about your research with others because they would give you some advice, learn from you and even collaborate with you. What's more, being known in your research area would be helpful when you seek a research position after graduation.

4. Accomplishment of PhD life

4.1 Becoming an important part in the research programs

Participating in advisor's research programs and project is the most efficient way to learn how to do research. In fact, every PhD student is assigned to participate in the research programs based on his/her interest and ability. If PhD students want to learn

more from their advisor, they must try their best to fulfill their tasks and become an important part in the research program.

4.2 Writing dissertation proposal

After participating in the research for a period (about 1-2 years), PhD student should find an interesting topic for dissertation after a series discussion with advisor. Technically, the topic should be interesting, practical and creative (desJardins, 1995). With the support and guidance of advisor, student begins to write thesis proposal on the chosen topic. In the proposal, the importance, practicality, creativity and potential results should be discussed specifically to convince the academic committee. Only if passing the proposal defense, a PhD student can be called PhD candidate. It is a big step for successful PhD when becoming a PhD candidate.

4.3 Publishing new findings

Researchers and scientists tell people what they have done or found through publishing. As a potential expert in some area, a PhD student also need publish papers on journals or conferences to release new findings worthy known by outside of the research team. Your interesting research findings could be helpful to other people even the whole world. That's the value of a real researcher or scientist.

Let's talk about how to write a publishing paper. Every time an idea comes to you, please write it down and then think about it thoroughly. Working on interesting ideas would help to make a big discovery. When they prepare to write a paper, they should write an outline first, and then write the main body like method and process, and fulfill it with results and conclusions at last. Every paper should be revised and improved several times by students themselves, advisors and even reviewers. Be patient! A good researcher is judged based on the quality of publications, not the quantity. Thus, a successful PhD should publish high quality papers in their relative journals or conferences.

4.4 Attending academic conferences

PhD students could attend academic conferences by submitting papers or being volunteers. There are two essential benefits attending conferences. First thing is to know the “big guys” and their latest works in your research area. Secondly, you could introduce yourself and your work to others and know their feedbacks immediately (Dredze and Wallach, 2012).

4.5 Fulfilling the dissertation and defense

Some students might think they should begin to write the dissertation when they get the perfect results. Actually, they should start to write as soon as processing and getting stage results. It often takes one year or more to fulfill the dissertation. When finishing it and thinking clearly about future career, a dissertation defense could be applied. After passing the defense successfully, a doctoral degree will be awarded.

4.6 Plans for future

Students are supposed to think why they want a PhD before applying and what they want to do as a career before receiving PhD. In another word, plans for future is also critical to a successful PhD. Trained and developed in specific areas, PhD could realize their values in suitable positions.

5. Conclusion

PhD study is a new and wonderful journey, with preparation, beginning, input, accomplishment and hope for a better future. A successful PhD grows through this challenging journey. This training paper demonstrates what a PhD student need do and they will achieve to be successful. The author is a new PhD student in Computer Science in UTSA. Thanks to Dr. Korkmaz, I rethink and read to find how to be a happy and successful PhD.

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