

How to be a Successful PhD Student

Amanda Wulf
The University of Texas at San Antonio
1 UTSA Circle
San Antonio, TX
amandakwulf@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article explains how to be a successful PhD student. It goes year-by-year into what the successful student should be doing to ensure he or she will get the most out of their career as a PhD student.

1. INTRODUCTION

Being a successful PhD student isn't easy, but it is rewarding. The secret to success lies in making the best use of one's time.

Successful students make yearly goals which they then break down into monthly, weekly, and daily goals. Any bigger project that needs to get done should be broken down into intermediate, daily tasks. They might write these daily goals down as a to-do list each day with five to six small daily goals.

If you make plans, follow them as closely as possible, and adjust them when they fail, there's no way you can't be successful.

2. THE FIRST YEAR

The main concern of the first-year PhD student should be passing the qualifying exam the first time.

First-year students are also TAs, and they are adjusting to this responsibility. They need to make sure to adequately prepare for the class(es) they teach and get their grading done, while not neglecting the classes they're a student in.

3. THE SECOND YEAR

Second-year students are getting to the point where they're doing more research, and figuring out what their research tastes are. They should set a goal to read a certain number of papers in their field of interest each day so they can develop research tastes.

At this stage, students should also begin doing RA work rather than TA work so they can begin getting a feel for what research is like.

4. THE THIRD YEAR

In the third year, students will write and present a thesis proposal. This will be challenging because it is difficult to pick a problem that's the right size. Students should be meeting with their advisors each week and asking them about potential thesis topics, and bringing any questions they might have so their advisor can help them.

Then, the student will write the proposal. Once the advisor signs off on it he or she will present it in front of several faculty members. Preparing for this requires good communication skills, which third-year students can develop by becoming a member of Toastmasters and getting lots of practice.

Students in their third year should also be beginning to pursue research in their lab, coauthoring papers, and presenting posters or papers at conferences. They should aim to attend at least one conference per year.

5. THE FOURTH YEAR

Fourth-year students are focused on RA work, research, continuing to publish and attend conferences, and most importantly writing the thesis. They should make sure to prioritize their thesis and spend some time researching and writing for it every single day.

Their weekly advisor meeting will allow them to ask their advisor questions when they get stuck on their thesis.

6. THE FIFTH YEAR

Fifth-year students are focused on defending their thesis and graduating. They should also be asking their advisor for help on the post-graduation job hunt.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The well-organized student who breaks these year-by-year concerns into monthly, weekly, and daily goals and does their best to accomplish them will do well in their PhD program.

8. REFERENCES

- [1] R. T. Azuma. So long, and thanks for the ph.d. a.k.a. everything i wanted to know about c.s. graduate school at the beginning but didn't learn until later. 1997.

- [2] M. desJardins. How to succeed in graduate school: A guide for students and advisors. *Crossroads, the Online ACM Student Magazine*, 1(2), December 1994.
- [3] M. Dredze and H. M. Wallach. How to be a successful phd student (in computer science (in nlp/ml)). March 2012.