Planning ahead for academic jobs in psychology: Tips on preparing for the academic job market, beginning your first day of graduate school.

This information is intended to serve as a guide for psychology graduate students who plan on going to academia or are considering a career in academia. It provides suggestions for each year of your graduate program and recommends milestones to accomplish each year.

First and Second Years

In most doctoral programs in the United States the first few years of graduate school involve taking courses, working with an academic advisor, getting your feet wet conducting graduate level research, teaching or being a teaching assistant for undergraduate classes, ideally working on publications, presenting at professional conferences, applying for grants, and ultimately learning the methods and tools you need to cultivate your own academic identity. As you can tell, it’s a busy time! Learning how to manage your time in a way that is both productive and bearable will be an important skill to develop (though no doubt a challenge!), and will serve you well as you continue to progress in academia. Here are some tips and things to think about to optimize your time and opportunities your first couple of years in graduate school, with the intent of preparing for a job in academia.

Finding a good mentor: In many psychology doctoral programs you apply to and enter a program with the intent of working with a particular person. However, that is not always the case, and even if it is, there is no guarantee you will be a good match once you begin working together. Your academic mentor can have a huge impact on your experience in both graduate school and in your later search for academic positions, and the sooner you have a good match the better. That being said, it is also very possible that you will shift your research interests throughout your time in graduate school, or for other reasons determine that your initial mentor was not the optimal choice. Switching mentors later on, or having multiple mentors may be necessary and/or positive experiences. When considering possible mentors things you may want to consider are: Do your research interests match/do they have expertise in methods you would like to learn?; Do they have funding for graduate students/are they willing to help you attain funding?; Will they help you publish and make needed academic and community connections?; Are they willing to dedicate time to your professional development?; What is their reputation for how they work with students? Here are some links to websites with more information on selecting a good mentor:

http://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/news/seeking-and-selecting-mentor

https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/picking-good-mentor

Getting the most out of your classes: The classes you take in graduate school are likely going to be different in several ways from the classes you took as an undergraduate (being assigned a book a week per class is very much a possibility). So too should your expectations be of what you will get out of different classes. No longer should you be cramming information with the intent of performing well on an exam. Rather, you should now be gaining a breadth of knowledge, as well as an ability to critique and appreciate, areas of psychology and related fields in order to become a well-rounded scholar. And perhaps most importantly, you should be considering how the topic at hand speaks to your own research interests. When tasked with any writing assignments for a course, try to find a way to make the assignments inform your own areas of interest. There may also be instances when you simply can’t keep up with the mountains of reading that are assigned in graduate level courses. This link contains some tips on reading efficiently and effectively:

http://www.lifehack.org/articles/productivity/advice-for-students-how-to-read-like-a-scholar.html
Apply for grants/fellowships: It may seem a bit early, but you’ll want to start thinking about finding ways to fund your research early on in graduate school. Additionally, there are some grants that you can only apply for during your first and second year. If you’re eligible you certainly want to apply for the NSF pre-doctoral fellowship and/or the Ford foundation fellowship programs, both of which are prestigious awards that fund multiple years of graduate school. Smaller grants are also important to apply for both to fund specific projects, and pave a path to a fundable program of research. SPSSI has a list of funding opportunities for graduate students:

http://www.spssi.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=1350

Publish: One of the most important things to do while you are in graduate school, especially if you eventually want an academic position, is publish your research in reputable outlets. This is no easy feat, and hopefully, you have a mentor who will help guide you through this process (if you don’t you may want to consider finding a faculty member in your department who will advise you in publishing matters). During your first few years in graduate school it may be best to get involved in your advisor’s, or another person’s research to gain skills that will eventually position you as capable of publishing research more independently (indeed many research labs are set up this way). Collaboration is key! Whether or not you are the lead author, pay attention to the work that goes into all phases of producing the publication as these will be skills you will need when you do have a lead role. Pay attention to the outlets that are selected, and why. Pay attention to the framing of the article, and who is being cited. Learn about impact factors and rejection rates, though also keep in mind that sometimes the journals with the highest impact factors and/or most prestige do not reach the people you want to be in communication with. Publishing is challenging, but don’t be discouraged if you don’t have a publication within your first couple of years of grad school. Rather, seek to learn as much as you can about the process. This website has some excellent tips and information to help you begin the publishing process:


Present at conferences: Like publishing, you’ll also want to start thinking early about presenting your research at conferences relevant to your research interests. Again, ideally you’ll have a mentor who helps you in this process, but if not seek advice from other faculty members and more senior graduate students (or post docs) in your department. You may also want to google some researchers you admire to find out what conferences they attend. Also, choose wisely which conferences you want to attend – they can be expensive and exhausting. Like journals, some conferences are more prestigious than others, but you should consider several factors before you select a conference to attend (or submit a proposal to), ideally prioritizing how relevant the conference is your interests and what you can learn from attending. Additionally, plan very early if you would like to present at the conference. Most conference require you to submit a proposal (abstract) several months before the actual conference, sometimes 9-10 months in advance, in order for your presentation to be considered. For more tips on planning to present at a conference, see the following link:

http://www3.nd.edu/~dlindley/handouts/LindleyAdviceonAttendingAcademicConferences.htm
Service: In many academic jobs you are evaluated according to how well you are performing in three areas: research, teaching and service. Getting involved in service early on will give you exposure to the various hats you'll be expected to wear throughout your career. Moreover, being actively involved in service in your department demonstrates that you are a good colleague. In your first couple of years look for opportunities for service in your department and university – for example, host prospective students, get involved in student government, or join a committee. Opportunities will come up. If you’re one who is prone to overdoing service at the cost of your own time for research and professional development be aware and consult with others before overextending yourself.

Think ahead: One of the most helpful things you can do to increase your success in graduate school is start planning for what will come next early. Check out job ads, look up the CVs and contact academics you admire and learn what they did while in grad school. Consult with more senior graduate students and department staff in your own department as well – they often have lots of tips and information that is relevant for success in your own department!

Self-care: Though this is listed last in this section, it should not be your last priority. Life in academia can be frustrating, lonely, and discouraging at times. Figure out what you need to feel healthy and happy. Do yoga. Go hiking. Cook. Nurture your relationships with family and friends. Volunteer. Find/create social events for venting with other graduate students and supporting each other regularly. Find a community of people who aren’t in academia but have the same hobby as you or can relate to you in ways that are important/meaningful to you. Figure out what works for you and make sure you include it in your schedule. You don’t want to burn out or lose yourself in the academic world. The isolation of academia can be hardest among individuals from marginalized backgrounds who are underrepresented in academia. If possible seek out someone who can relate and learn about what they do to survive/thrive in academia, even outside your own department or institutions. This is where networking in professional organizations can be of great help. Similarly, be aware of impostor syndrome, how it affects you and remember that you aren’t alone.

Third and Fourth Year

As you move into your “middle years” in graduate school (which can certainly span longer than your third and fourth years) you’ll want to think more carefully about how you want to develop your identity as a researcher. Thus in addition to the areas you focused on in your first couple of years as a graduate student, you will want to get involved in activities to help you cultivate that identity. Even if you are still in the midst of trying to figure out your precise research interests, paying attention to the areas listed below may help you hone in on what types and aspects of research are most meaningful to you:

Defining you research interests: Now that you are finished with your first couple of years of graduate school, it’s possible that you are feeling the pressure to narrow your research interests into a coherent topic or area. This might be occurring, in part, because you have qualifying or comprehensive exams to plan for that require you to demonstrate mastery of literature in your area of focus (though the style and expectations of these exams vary greatly by university and program). It's certainly worth setting aside time
to think about your interests (while simultaneously knowing that they very likely will change more overtime).

Here are a couple resources to help you narrow your research interests and prepare for your exams.

http://www.postgradresources.info/student-resources14-topic.htm
https://gradstudies.ucdavis.edu/current-students/academic-services-information/acing-your-qualifying-exam

**Planning your dissertation:** In tandem with narrowing your research interests, you’ll likely also begin planning the research you will conduct for your dissertation. You’ll need to begin asking yourself, and very likely others, a number of questions including: What are the expectations about the scope of the project? What methodologies can be used and are you adequately trained in these methodologies? What constitutes an original contribution in your subfield(s)? Do you have the necessary community collaborations to conduct this work? Do you have a committee who can adequately support you in conducting this research? How will completing this dissertation position you when you begin applying for academic jobs? (in other words, will this dissertation enable you to demonstrate mastery in areas of psychology that you want to be considered a developing expert)? Are there any politics you should be aware of? Expectations, processes, and well, just about everything related to dissertations will vary drastically from department to department, lab to lab, and even student to student. Talking with your mentors about expectation early will (hopefully) aid the process. Here are some websites with tips that may help as well:

http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/how-to-create-your-dissertation-outline.html
http://www.theguardian.com/education/mortarboard/2012/may/02/dissertation-top-ten-tips

Also, once you finish your dissertation, consider applying for The SPSSI Social Issues Dissertation Award!
http://www.spssi.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=724

**Thinking about Policy and Community Change:** The thread that unites graduate students interested in SPSSI is an interest in conducting research that serves society in some manner. It’s very unlikely that it will be expected for you to have actually conducted research that concretely accomplishes this aim when you are on the job market. Nevertheless thinking about how you might do so early on can increase the likelihood that your research will eventually contribute to the change you would like to see, as well as being personally fulfilling, and perhaps impressive to others. There are myriad ways you can use your research to influence change, and you should spend time thinking deeply and consulting with individuals both inside and outside of academia who are affected by the topic you are focusing on. Below are a few resources to help you think about how you might engage your research in change making processes:

Writing op-eds: http://newsoffice.duke.edu/duke_resources/oped

Conducting research to influence policy: http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/advocacy-research/influence-policy/main
Introductory information on Participatory Action Research (speaks specifically about health fields, but can easily be applied in different contexts): http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2566051/

Getting engaged in academic communities: Instead of simply attending conferences and becoming a member of academic societies, now is a good time to be thinking about how to get more involved in the academic communities you have been gaining interest in. Many academic societies have groups specifically for graduate students that you should consider joining. For example, this is a link to SPSSI’s graduate student committee page. You should also start thinking about who regularly attends the conferences you are interested in, and consider seeking to build connections with these people. They very likely have similar research interests and values to your own, and can be great people to go to for advice throughout your career.

Online presence: It is becoming increasingly common for academics to be active on various web platforms including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, as well as networking sites specifically for researchers (e.g., Researchgate and Academia.edu). You will have to decide for yourself to what extent you want to become involved in public online platforms, but whatever you decide, remember that when you are on the job hunt you will be googled and your words will be found. Having a website is a very good way to have control over what is read about you. Additionally, even if you only have a personal facebook page, “liking” the pages of sources such as Chronical of Higher Education or SPSSI, or organizations/people connected to your research interests can bring lots of interesting articles and sources easily to your attention.

For more information on developing an online presence in graduate school visit: http://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/news/cultivating-online-presence

Fifth Year to Job Market Year(s)

It may not actually be your fifth year, but eventually you will make it to the point that you are ready to put yourself on the academic job market. Congratulations! Making it this far is no easy feat! At this point you will definitely want to visit the website: The Professor Is In. This website contains tons of information on things you should do to prepare for the job market (as well as advice for how to navigate a career in academia).

According to the author of the Professor Is In website, Dr. Karen Kelskey, these are some things that the most competitive applicants have done before they go on the job market. But before you read the list, a WARNING: This list can be intimidating. Most likely you have not done everything on this list. Nevertheless, see what you have done, and think about ways you might go about participating in other pieces:

- Received national or international grants;

- Presented their work at conferences;

- Published in a refereed journal. Remember, think about everything you write as a potentially publishable work;

- Made several connections with colleagues within and outside of your home university so that they get to know you as a scholar, not just as a grad student;
Taught a class as the sole instructor and served as a teaching assistant;

Engaged in self-promotion: Go to conferences not only to present but also to meet people and tell them about your work. Keep in touch with these connections and keep them updated on your major accomplishments.

Attended job talks in your department: Study what others are doing right and wrong. Record the questions that are getting asked.

Searched job ads for positions that are of interest: Even well before you apply, see what kinds of scholars colleges and universities are looking for. Identify potential matches so that you can prepare to apply.

(note: this list is a modified version of what was listed in: http://www.brandeis.edu/gsas/news/mastering-academic-job-market.html)

Although this list is intended to provide a general framework to think about as you prepare for the academic job market, keep in mind that there are many different paths to securing an academic job. Additionally, there are many different types of jobs (primarily research, primarily teaching, etc.) that look for different skills, values, experience, interests etc. Obtaining an academic job isn’t just a matter of “checking off” requirements. It is a holistic, complex process that involves good fit on multiple dimensions.

GOOD LUCK!

After you graduate and get a job:

CONGRATULATIONS! Now start planning how you will get tenure 😊

This material was compiled by Anjali Dutt.