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**'A Common Time to Get Stuck'**



Image: Brian Taylor

By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong

*Editor's Note: Have a career question for our columnists? Send in your queries to careertalk@chronicle.com, or post your question in the comments section below. It will be considered for future columns.*

In [last month's column](http://chronicle.com/article/Finding-an-Internship-to/137007), a reader commented that the third year of a Ph.D. program is when students are most likely to get frustrated and decide to stay or go. We agree that the third year is, as the reader put it, "a common time to get stuck," and it's also a good theme for this month's column.

**Julie:** Last fall, at an annual event where advanced doctoral students give advice at my university to first-year Ph.D. students, I was struck by how many of the speakers mentioned that the third year was a real challenge. A student in earth and environmental sciences said he almost quit his program in his third year because nothing seemed to be working out. He said to me later, "That's why I made the point about perseverance—it's hard to have perspective when you haven't ever seen a successful project all the way through."

A student in communication told me that the third year was when she fully committed to her Ph.D. program. "By the end of your third year," she said, "you're done with coursework, you're about to do your exams, and then you're A.B.D. So it feels like a make-or-break moment. You're also exhausted from coursework but not sure if you're ready to go out on your own and plunge into a dissertation."

**Jenny:** The transition from coursework to dissertation writing is tricky regardless of when it happens in a doctoral program. The familiar rhythm of reading lists, paper submissions, and semester-long deadlines gives way to a more ambiguous challenge—developing an original research project that meets the standards for scholarship in an academic discipline. At the same time, many students are taking their qualifying exams.

Those two things often combine to create challenges that are both intellectual and emotional. As the reader who inspired this column put it, "It feels like you are spinning your wheels."

**Julie:** It is also a time when students have to start answering to themselves more than to their professors and mentors. After comprehensive exams are passed they need to become their own taskmasters and work without, in many cases, external deadlines and demands. For some graduate students, particularly those in the humanities, this also marks the beginning of a long period of spending less time with others and more time on your own.

**Jenny:** Working on a long-term project with few, if any, hard deadlines or short-term rewards in the form of grades or evaluations, is an intellectual and motivational challenge for almost everyone. Even on a good day, and even when you are passionate about your research topic, all of those tasks that will add up to a completed dissertation—reading, writing, running experiments, coding data—still feel like endless work.

It can be hard to resist the temptation to procrastinate. So set a schedule for your dissertation project and then start working. Don't postpone the start as you wait for inspiration to strike—you may find it never will. In this [terrific article about motivation,](http://www.nature.com/naturejobs/2011/110407/pdf/nj7341-127a.pdf) Hugh Kearns and Maria Gardiner point out that inspiration is more likely to arrive once you've gotten started on a task.

**Julie:** We recommend this book—*Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis* by Joan Bolker. It's the classic guide to working consistently and productively on your dissertation, although we are sure there are many others that readers might suggest. In addition, there are some terrific Web sites out there, such as Grad Hacker and *The Chronicle'*s [ProfHacker,](http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/) that regularly deal with the challenges of being productive in the academic world and offer some tech-savvy tips for dealing with a world filled with easy (online) distraction. A recent GradHacker post on ["Getting More Done in Less Time"](http://www.gradhacker.org/2013/02/18/getting-more-done-in-less-time) was particularly helpful, and includes a list of apps that "will boost your willpower."

Finally, if you haven't done so already, you might meet with the subject-specialist librarian at your university to make sure you are up to speed on all of the research-support tools available to you.

**Jenny:** For many doctoral students, it's not the scholarly challenges but the psychological ones that make the transition from coursework to dissertation writing so hard. It's difficult to motivate yourself to work when you're facing an uncertain job market or are unsure whether completing your dissertation will lead you down a rewarding career path.

**Julie:** The Ph.D. student in communication added this about her third year: "In terms of how I survived—well, I integrated a lot of different experiences into my graduate-school career, which helped me feel like this time was about personal exploration as much as it was about professional growth and development. I also finished my coursework in my third year (in my program, it usually goes until halfway through your fourth year), so it gave me some wiggle room to integrate my other selves into my academic persona (an internship, working with underserved youth and doing campaign stuff)."

Her comments highlight something we've talked about before—the need to make time for activities that enrich you personally and professionally but aren't necessarily connected to your graduate program. Doing so can help you to feel more balanced and fulfilled, and can sometimes even give you insight into career possibilities beyond the tenure track.

**Jenny:** In an e-mail, the Ph.D. in earth and environmental sciences summed this up perfectly, noting, "It is important to find other sources of meaning in your life. ... Watching episodes of *Downton Abbey* isn't enough (though I certainly support this). Your hobby should be something that brings you personal growth."

He also asked us to remind students that help is available at their own universities. He took advantage of both personal and group counseling at his campus counseling center. "It's much better to go to resource centers and to talk to friends than to present your frustrations to your adviser or committee, who will likely be writing recommendation letters for you in a few years. ... It's in your interest to maintain a businesslike working relationship with your adviser, who is not and should not be your therapist."

And it's just plain useful to get insights about a complicated situation from people outside of it.

**Julie:** Even so, a good adviser can help students through the dissertation process or, alternatively, help them look for other career choices if they decide not to continue in their programs. That is what being a mentor truly means.

As many graduate students know, however, not everyone has an adviser who truly acts as a mentor. Many faculty members don't know enough about nonacademic positions to help steer students toward a path other than in academe. And some students are too afraid to even ask their advisers for such help.

**Jenny:** If you are midway through your Ph.D. program, and you're asking yourself whether to stay or leave, it's important to get advice from several places: friends and family, people working in nonacademic careers in which you're interested, your adviser and committee members, and counselors, career or psychological ones.

It's also important to listen to yourself. In *Outside the Ivory Tower: A Guide for Academics Considering Alternative Careers* (a terrific book that is sadly out of print but available in many libraries), Margaret Newhouse phrases this problem very nicely, saying: "Try to separate the 'shoulds' from your own true voice." At the same time, she cautions graduate students, "Get as much information as possible about the practical consequences of either choice for a career in the fields you are considering."

No one can make this decision for you. But you can make an informed choice that balances your personal and professional goals. If you're really having trouble deciding, take a leave of absence and use that time for career exploration. We've known Ph.D.'s who took a break from academe only to return and go on to successful academic careers. We've also known many students who have left academe (with and without a Ph.D.) and successfully moved on to nonacademic positions.

**Julie:** The third year is especially challenging for female scientists. A blog post on *The Guardian'*s Web site last May focused on the question of "why women leave academia and why universities should be worried." It cited some alarming statistics from a report on a study done by a Britiish center for women in the sciences, engineering, and technology and the Royal Society of Chemistry: By the third year of their doctoral programs, only 12 percent of the women in the study and 21 percent of the men listed academic careers as their preferred choice, down significantly from what both the women and men had reported in their first year.

That's not news to anyone who works with young scientists on career issues. In that British study, female third-year Ph.D. candidates cited various reasons for giving up on academic careers: The had problems with their supervisors; they preferred to focus on achieving experimental results rather than mastery of methodologies; they believed an academic career would be all-consuming, solitary, and unnecessarily competitive; and they lacked female role models, especially ones who seemed to have lives outside the lab.

**Jenny:** We urge mentors and university support offices to be particularly sensitive to the challenges that Ph.D. students face at the midpoint of their programs. Department colloquia should feature faculty members speaking, not about their research, but about their lives and the joys and challenges of research, teaching, and raising a family while going up for tenure. Departments and career centers should also organize panels of alumni speakers from a variety of careers. Celebrate the richness of having Ph.D.'s working in both the academy and in many other fields.

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