

Surviving and Thriving in Graduate School

A) Beginning Your Studies:

1. How are your financial needs going to be met? Will you be supported with fellowships, Graduate Student Research or Graduate Student Instructor or Reader positions, loans, or will you have an outside job? It's good to ascertain, if possible, how you will be able to finance your graduate study for the duration of your stay at Cal. Ask your department or advisor if they can provide financial support if you did not receive a fellowship. You will probably need to keep applying for fellowships during the duration of your graduate studies to augment current support or limited time fellowships. For more fellowship information, go to: grad.berkeley.edu/financial/fellowships/.
2. Given the goals of your intended degree, know the coursework required as well as other requirements (including particulars of prelim/master's qualifying exams) to complete the degree. Find out the normative time to complete the degree. Find out what it takes to enter the Ph.D. program if you've been admitted to the MS/MA degree and would like to continue. Find out if you need 1 or 2 minors and what the limitations are.
3. Meet with a Diversity Officer if the department/division has one, and also speak with current students, supportive faculty, and the Graduate Student Affairs Officer (GSAO) about what courses to take. If possible, avoid professors who have reputations for being non-supportive to students during your first semester. Adjusting to graduate school is difficult enough without having to contend with these kinds of difficulties.
4. Attend the Department orientations at the beginning of the school year. They can be very informative.

B) Your First Semester:

1. It is important to do well during your first semester (3.5+ GPA) if you can, so the *type* of courses you select, and the *number* of courses you select, have to be carefully thought out. You don't want to overload your first semester but you also want to show you're cut out for the program. Consult with your diversity officer, faculty advisor, graduate assistant, or current graduate students for advice. Consider taking a seminar, or 299/601 units to lessen the load.
2. If you're planning on pursuing the Ph.D., and have to take either a prelim/Master's exam, ask around about good classes to take to help prepare you. The graduate students and faculty usually know these answers. There may also be old exams to study from.
3. Learn what your weaknesses are, or where you have limited knowledge and take the proper courses to rectify. (Note, this may encompass taking an undergraduate class--possibly more than one.) This is being strategic about insuring your graduate school success.
4. During the first semester begin speaking with professors and their graduate students about their research to see if you are interested in working with that particular professor for your research project. Look up the professor's work on the web and read a couple of their publications before you speak with them.
5. Focus on your intellectual passions, the topic you're really excited about. This is your driving force and will propel you to greater happiness in grad school. *Hopefully you'll find a match of your intellectual passion and what you're good at.* Graduate students are the chief innovators of invention and thought on this campus. They often inspire their very own research advisors!

C) During the First Year:

1. If you have difficulty with midterms or final exams, see the professor to discuss how you did and what you can do to improve and learn from your mistakes.
2. Try to have a research project picked out by the end of the first semester or the beginning of the second semester. (This may not pertain to all departments.) If you will be working with human subjects, make sure to fill out an application with the Office for the Protection of Human Subjects at least 3 months prior to your research. Go to: cphs.berkeley.edu/ for more information.
3. If taking prelims/Master's exams, anticipate studying a significant amount of time (20-30/hrs per week) to prepare. Try to get copies of old tests (some depts. provide them), and have study partners. Try not to prepare for this test alone. Also, find out how many chances you get to take the prelim/MS exam.
4. When choosing a research advisor, look for a match of the advisor's research/project, personality, his or her support and **most importantly, belief in you**. This is very important to your happiness and success at Berkeley. You may also need a co-advisor if your research bridges the expertise of your primary advisor. Make sure to communicate well with both advisors.
5. Have an agenda when you meet with your advisor. This way you get all your questions answered and issues covered.

D) Continuing On:

1. Make sure you meet regularly with your diversity officer, the Graduate Diversity Program Director, or someone you can trust to bounce off ideas. Join student groups for other kinds of support. Berkeley has many different student groups. Go to the Graduate Assembly to get the current list of graduate student social groups. They are a great organization: ga.berkeley.edu/.
2. Don't isolate yourself from the department. Go to social functions, retreats, serve on committees, and so on. Form groups to co-support each other—especially if you're learning theory, taking exams, or writing your thesis/dissertation.
3. When conducting your research, make sure you put in the time required (or more), work hard, consistently, independently, but also as a team player. Don't be afraid to be innovative and creative in your thoughts. Sometimes the best innovations occur by accident. Learn new data or language programs as necessary. Do supplemental reading if you think it will help you. Don't be afraid to make a mistake. Some of the best innovations occur from people taking risks, making errors, and learning from them.
4. Make sure you get a desk/office space once you've got a research advisor.
5. Go to conferences and present your research. Have your advisor see your paper before you present it. Do an excellent job when presenting your work. Graduate students presenting a paper can apply for funding from the Graduate Division. To apply for conference travel details, go to: tango.berkeley.edu/applicant/app/start.
6. Learn to write grant proposals to fund your work. This is good preparation for funding your work in the future and very important for pursuing life in academia and elsewhere.
7. If applicable, begin writing up your results in conjunction with your advisor for publication in research journals. It is very impressive to have publications as a graduate student. These are looked upon as an indicator of your future potential.
8. Prepare for your oral/qualifying examination. Know your subject area(s) and your research project well. Understand how and why things work. Professors on your exam committee will be testing you on conceptual understanding of the material, and may ask you about specific books/ topics/ journal articles. Be prepared to speak well about the research you're undertaking for your dissertation.
9. Conduct practice sessions for your qualifying exam with a team of graduate students or sympathetic faculty, so you become adept at answering questions orally. Do this several times until you are comfortable with this process. (Note: taking an oral exam is very different than taking a written one—practice is essential.) Find out the particulars of your qualifying exam, as it varies by department. Practicing ahead of time is very important to passing oral exams.

E) The Dissertation:

1. Seek a dissertation fellowship, if available, the year prior to your final year. This frees your time to write. It's much harder to try to work and write your dissertation.
2. Put yourself on a timeline to finish. Get buy-in from your advisor regarding this so that you both agree on the timeline.
3. Anticipate delays. Machines break down, things often don't work as planned. Be patient but persistent.
4. Be nice to the GSAO in your department. It can make a world of a difference in how pleasant your graduate school experience goes.
5. Work one day at a time. Try not to look too far ahead. Tell yourself to do work today *for* today.
6. Consider joining a dissertation support group. These can help keep you on track and motivated.
7. Have fun; play an intramural sport, start a new hobby. We have fabulous hiking trails in the hills, and an amazing Cal Recreational Sports Program. Find a sense of community whether on or off campus.

F) Planning Beyond:

1. Before your last year, think about what kind of job you want or where you'd like to teach so that you can begin preparing for the job market. Berkeley has great advisors and workshops for graduate students at the Career Center.
2. If pursuing an academic position, you'll need a C.V. (curriculum vitae), an application letter, a statement of research interests and future research plans, a statement of teaching interests, and teaching evaluations. You should be able to give a one hour lecture on a topic related to your research. Academic interviews often take at least a day. Consider signing up for the Grad Division Summer Institute to learn more about applying to a faculty position. For more information, please visit: gsi.berkeley.edu/programs-services/workshops-seminars-institutes/.
3. Make sure you find a mentor to help you through the tenure/new professor process if possible. Or, if you fail to find one, stay in contact with your former advisor. You may also have contacts in other schools to speak with. Try to stay in touch with your fellow alums in case you need to help each other in some way.
4. Post-docs may also be an appropriate undertaking in some departments. Consider applying to both post-docs and teaching jobs to maximize your options.

Enjoy your time at Cal!