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Thank You for Your Support

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CATALYST

Career advice
for scientists

To finish a dissertation, you are expected to move toward distant goals with few concrete milestones. For many, the instinct is to go it alone. Grinding it out in isolation, however, is unlikely to produce your highest-quality work most efficiently.

But, you may ask, what choice do you have? A graduate student's support system can be thin. Getting time with the busy professors who ostensibly provide our main guidance is not easy. Even if they are accessible, it makes sense to use their time efficiently. They may expect to review only polished products and engage in only crucial conversations, rather than assist with everyday decisions.

The only way to finish your dissertation is through forward progress in the face of uncertainty. Fortunately, there is a secret weapon to guide you through the confusion, improve your writing, and help you spend your time wisely. It comes in the form of your peers.

Creating a dissertation-support group made up of fellow doctoral students can enhance your productivity. How to begin: Find one or two colleagues who are at about the same stage of research as you are. Meet once a week with the goal of furthering one another's progress.

Having a regular group of people committed to trading services with one another can pay off hugely through collective improvement in many areas:

- **Faster progress:** The insights of your peers can be invaluable as you are developing ideas or writing. Having an audience for practice presentations and brainstorming sessions is helpful as well. Let's face it: Students' time is cheap compared with precious faculty hours. Maximize your meetings with professors by preprocessing with your support group the first stages of a decision or research question. Consistent, regular input can help you break through stagnant periods, and harness the productive ones.
- **Structure:** A regular audience will force you to set more detailed goals and periodic deadlines. Frequent deadlines force you to break your dissertation into more manageable, bite-sized chunks.
- **Psychological support:** Strong morale in grad school depends, in part, on a sense of forward motion. Many of us fail to acknowledge to ourselves the worth of the incremental work we do toward our larger goals. An accountability group can provide ongoing

acknowledgment of your progress, including intangible results such as building your confidence in the direction you have chosen for your research. A happy student is a good student, and your peers can help to reduce the psychological dissonance common among those enrolled in graduate programs.

It sounds easy but needs to be done right. A poorly structured group can end up just wasting good hours.

I know of one group of students that ended up dominated by one member's troubles. I know of other groups that are little more than organized gossip sessions. Wasting time, or just not maximizing the effect of your group, is the default state. If you want your group to fail, put minimal attention into planning and goal setting.

Execution is critical for good results; so are being intentional about what you need and being disciplined about sticking to those goals.

Consider the group as a means to exchange professional services. Explicitly agree that each member is responsible for getting what they need out of the meetings. Ask yourself frequently, "Is this getting me any closer to turning in my dissertation?" If the answer is no, bring that up with the group and then excuse yourself if things do not improve.

Setting the Stage

Based on my experience with my own dissertation-support group, here is how I would recommend you proceed:

- Limit the size of your group to a maximum of three people. Any more than three will dilute the amount of time available for focused personal attention.
- Choose your co-conspirators carefully. Don't form a group with your friends. Do form a group with people you respect and admire for their productivity and savvy. Approach colleagues once you have thought through your needs, and get them on board for the goals you have developed.
- Disciplines don't matter -- much. Your colleagues can have very different research projects and backgrounds. Some congruence of interest and background is helpful, of course, but weekly discussions and shared written drafts will quickly make the members of your group the people who most deeply understand the ins and outs of your work.
- Each member of the group should be at approximately the same stage of progress in their dissertation.
- Opposites attract. Maybe one member of your group is unusually creative, another is highly organized, and a third is a sharp strategic thinker. Your varying strengths can complement one another.
- Be businesslike. Treat your group as a professional relationship and separate your professional interests from your personal ones.

- Meet weekly. An ongoing understanding of the content and process of one another's research is the value of these meetings. That continuing support is what you won't get through occasional meetings with a professor, a lab group, or journal club. Less-frequent meetings will dilute your ability to participate in the substance of the other members' work, as you will need to spend more of your time catching up.
- Emphasize product. Make a point of pushing one another to exchange written work frequently, even before you think you want to start writing the dissertation itself. Sharing outlines and unfinished subsections will help you clarify your thinking as you write.
- Limit your time. Meetings of an hour to 90 minutes are long enough, and will force you to stay on task.
- Organize each session. You can divide up the time so each member gets an equal share to discuss whatever is most important to them. Alternatively, you could focus the session on whoever has the most pressing needs that day; just make sure everyone feels well served over the long run.

Week to Week

Once your group has been created, the challenge is keeping it working well. Below I describe an approach to the weekly meetings that has benefited my own group.

In the first 5 to 10 minutes of each session, each person states what they accomplished during the previous week, what their main goals are for the coming week, and what major items they see on their academic horizon.

Finishing a Ph.D. can be as much a psychological test as an intellectual one, and I have found it useful to acknowledge my incremental progress each week to someone other than myself in the mirror. For unmet goals, use the group as a place to identify reasons you are not on track, such as sources of procrastination, lack of commitment to the goals, overcommitment, or whether it's not the right goal in the first place.

Next, set an agenda for the remainder of the session. Each member should express their immediate needs. For example, "I would like your feedback on a choice I need to make about research methods, and to ask your advice on how to handle a committee member's critique of a manuscript. Also, I'm working on a draft of a fellowship application. Would you be able to review it for the next meeting if I get it to you on Thursday?" Or, "I've been studying for midterms all week, so I don't have much to discuss now. I'll cede my time today, but next week I will want some group time to help plan my spring field season."

Finally, dig into the meat of your session.

Let me pause here to comment on a popular graduate-student pastime: complaining about grad school. Vent if you need to at your meetings, but do it constructively and keep a cap on it. Access to a friendly, understanding ear can work wonders on your stress level. But it's easy to spend more time kvetching than making progress. Beware the fine line between angst and depression, and see a counselor if that is really what you need.

That's it. Now repeat each week and watch your productivity spiral upward.

Forming dissertation-support group is a commitment to involvement in others' work. But the members of my group all agree: Our meetings are some of the most valuable time we spend on our own Ph.D. work. Having a core community that is familiar with not only the details of my current research, but also where I came from and how I have justified getting there, is priceless.

A less isolated research path has made for a better graduate-school experience over all for me. Being happy in grad school is a beautiful thing, and that may be the most powerful secret weapon of all.

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