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A Guide for Early Career Success in Academic Research

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A Guide for Early Career Success in Academic Research

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Abstract - Balancing the research, teaching, and service facets is important to achieving success in academia. Doctoral programs should prepare their students to successfully navigate and balance all three of these facets. We focus on the research facet in this study and draw from the experience of a panel of accomplished researchers within the discipline, to compile a set of guidelines for doctoral students and new faculty. Analyzing the qualitative results from the panel interviews, we find that to ensure success within the research facet, one must effectively manage three emergent focal distinctions; a relationship with: oneself, others, and with the work.

Keywords - Research-success, research-education, doctoral-education, publication-success, academic-success

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners – This work is relevant to marketing educators and future marketing educators. We present a set of guidelines for conducting relevant and impactful marketing research, by distilling best practices from established researchers within the discipline.

Introduction

Concurrent with the evolution from the “experienced executive” to the “scholar-teacher” model of business education, research assumed an all-important role in business schools. On the path to building a successful career, the modern academic constantly attempts to balance the three facets of research, teaching, and service to the academy. While the importance ascribed to each of these facets is institutionally and discipline dependent, one can deduce that in business and its subdisciplines, research has mostly been given the role of primacy (Bearden et al., 2000). Within this research-first framework, pre-tenure, recent PhD graduates are experiencing more pressure than ever to produce quality research. This heightened pressure did not simply materialize but came about as a result of the rapidly evolving educational macroenvironment. In the 1990’s several research endeavors predicted major changes in: university funding, faculty sizes, class sizes, and the rapid advancement of knowledge and technology, as well as heightened expectations regarding research and teaching (Hair, 1995; Conant et. al, 1998). While teaching innovations to keep up with a rapidly evolving business world have garnered a lot of recent interest (Dixit et al., 2013; Pass, 2013; Alam, 2014; Hunt & Madhavaram, 2014; Parker, 2014), at a significant number of institutions, research is perceived to be the most important factor in promotion/tenure and merit pay decisions. Pre-tenured professors still, however, struggle to allocate the commensurate time to research endeavors, as the pressure to perform in the other two facets is also heightened (Ganesh & Tripathy, 1996; Boya, Robicheaux, and Dotson, 1992).

The meta-research on business research tends to suggest that the heightened focus on research in business schools has led to a disassociation from real-world relevance to students and practice, in favor of academic credibility and prestige (Evans, 2001; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Bennis

& O'Toole, 2005; Burke & Rau, 2010; Pearce & Huang, 2012; Banerjee & Morley, 2013). This study does not intend to rehash the well laid out arguments, but rather to give business doctoral students and young assistant professors a set of guidelines for managing their research in the oft-tumultuous early stages of their academic careers.

Several articles have attempted to light a path for young professors and doctoral students by: a) addressing how they can successfully balance teaching and research for the first few years post-graduation and throughout their careers (Lusch, 1982; Conant et. al, 1998; Loyd, Kern, & Thompson, 2005), b) showing how they can successfully write better research articles to compete in the 'publishing game' (Motes, 1989; Fawcett et. al, 2014), and c) how doctoral programs can better design their programs and select candidates to ensure research success (Obilo & Alford, 2015).

This study contributes to these path-lighting endeavors by focusing primarily on the ever-important research aspect and putting forth a framework to serve as a helpful guide for young faculty and doctoral students. We introduce a holistic approach that addresses both the research process and balancing all the relationships that influence the process. The following sections address the contributions of the previous works in this area, and then introduce three distinctions derived from analyzing data collected from established researchers in the business discipline.

Literature Review

The importance of maintaining publication success in an era of heightened expectations in research, teaching, and service has not escaped the greater business discipline. The major national and regional conferences are replete with panel sessions addressing this very issue. The research realm has similarly addressed the issue from several perspectives.

Lusch (1982), which is often touted as a solid guide for newly minted faculty, gives guidelines for managing the three areas of research, teaching, and service. On research specifically, Lusch gives general advice on being a better researcher such as: relating projects to each other to create a logical stream, writing with clarity, learning from reviews, positioning articles properly to journals etc. Motes (1989) also suggests creating a logical stream of related research and recommends that authors adopt a multi-level journal strategy i.e. working on and submitting research at various levels ranging from regional conferences to A-level journals. Conant et al. (1998) explore the reasons that new faculty succeed or fail in their research agenda. They find that faculty who seek out research mentoring and engage in scholarly socialization are the most successful. Their findings also suggest that institutions that adopt an apprenticeship philosophy and maintain a research culture usually produced successful new research faculty.

The aforementioned research presents very broad ideas on how to balance one's research as part of the overall academic package. On the other end of the spectrum, Fawcett et al. (2014) hone in on how to write any specific research project, by showing how the characteristics of the research phenomena and the context selected determine whether a conceptual, survey, or qualitative research is warranted.

While all of these mentioned works have merit, none of them gives a comprehensive view on what it takes to be successful in the research and publishing. In this study, we attempt to add value to the literature by pooling best practices from extensive personal research knowledge by posing the following research questions to a sample of well published business scholars:

1. What are the most essential things to know about publishing in academic journals?
2. What are the biggest barriers to successful research/publications?
3. What are the biggest 'musts' of crafting a research manuscript?

In addition to our findings, we provide readers with reflective insights which may facilitate young scholars on their journey to successful publication by comprehensively covering the domain of advice for successful publication. First, on the broad level, by addressing positive drivers and negative hindrances to successful research, and then on a narrower level by offering advice on crafting a manuscript. The study detail is presented below.

Methodology

This study was designed to garner best practices for publication success from established researchers within the discipline. Using the authors' answers, we compiled three major distinctions as guides to early career scholars. The responses were drawn from a group of scholars with significant experience in business research, focusing particularly on their experience with research and the publication process.

To address the three research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight business professors from various research-focused universities. Collectively, the respondents represent over 220 years of experience as academics, with over 400 published quality refereed journal articles, including over 60 articles in journals on the Financial Times' top 50 journal list. In addition, respondents have collectively served numerous terms on the editorial review boards of major journals, including the aforementioned elite journals, as reviewers and/or journal editors.

Interviews were conducted electronically, as the respondents were given a script to respond to by the authors. The general structure required that respondents answer a series of questions to elicit their fundamental guiding principles in each of the areas of concern. Following the basic premises for conducting qualitative interview research, (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), responses were coded to identify a structure underlying the collected responses. Unlike qualitative studies where the emphasis is on theory, the focus here is on simply categorizing the collected responses in a conceptually orderly manner that provides insightful guidance for the reader. Emergent distinctions were assessed by the authors until consensus was achieved.

Results & Discussion

The guidance put forth by the respondents resulted in the emergence of three broad distinctions. Distinctions are lines of demarcation which act as frames to guide behavior (Zerubavel, 1996). Understanding distinctions in the present study allows for gaining insights not previously seen in the literature on scholarship and publishing. Taking this perspective also reduces a complex network of issues affecting successful publishing to a simplified mental model of relationships that capture the essence of expert guidance for publishing research. These pertain to three focal distinctions that must be managed effectively to ensure publication success: (1) a self-focused relationship, (2) a relationship with others and (3) the relationship with the work itself. The following sections present the results in order of the distinctions. At the end of each section, we provide a table organized in the format of the emergent structure.

Distinction 1: Relationship with the Self

This distinction highlights findings concerning “you as the author” and the publishing process. Responses gathered here primarily address how researchers need to manage their own personal characteristics and issues during the research process. Issues addressed include:

- a) Developing relentlessness in the face of difficulty or rejection

“Even the most established scholars get rejections; if you aren’t getting rejections fairly often, you might not be pushing the envelope enough.” (Respondent 2)

“Be relentless in interrogating your own data [...] how am I wrong? How could it be different? What are the boundary conditions?” (Respondent 1)

- b) Not managing one’s time effectively

“Procrastination/failure to focus and finish - poor time and personal management.” (Respondent 4)

- c) Focusing on polishing oneself to ensure contributions are as intended

“If you don’t write well or are not a native speaker, hire a copy editor.” (Respondent 3)

“You must have a clear story that fits your data and has important ramifications for someone.” (Respondent 1)

Table 1 provides a full list of guiding principles for researchers to follow regarding managing their self-focused relationships in pursuing research.

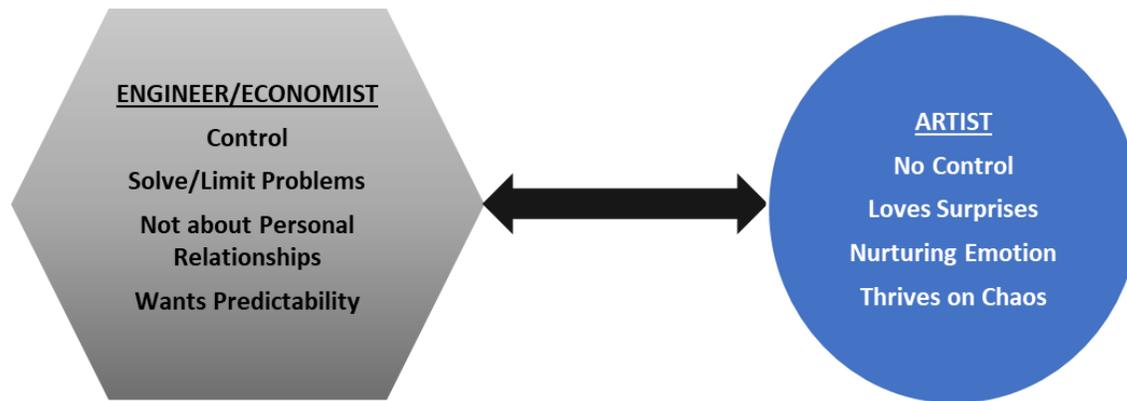
Table 1: Guidelines for Managing the Relationship with Oneself

Distinction 1	Relationship with the Self
Essentials for Academic Publishing	<p>Think long and hard before you go down one path in terms of research area. Picking what you research will have a big role in determining failure or success regardless of your training as a researcher or your talent.</p> <p>Be prepared for a long journey: in the end determination pays off</p> <p>Even the most established scholars get rejections; if you aren't getting rejected fairly often you might not be pushing the envelope enough</p> <p>Be relentless in interrogating your own data, asking how am I wrong? how could it be different? what are the boundary conditions?</p>
Barriers to Research Success	<p>Not persisting and putting in the time to do high quality research and storytelling</p> <p>Writing and submitting without friendly review and mentor support</p> <p>Procrastination/failure to focus and finish - poor time and personal management</p> <p>High teaching loads, service obligations, and other parts of life that take you away from revising</p>
Manuscript-Crafting Musts	<p>You must have a clear story that fits your data and has important ramifications for someone</p> <p>You must be careful and thorough in your analysis and write-up</p> <p>If you don't write well or are not a native speaker, hire a copy editor</p> <p>Don't submit your manuscript until it is fully ready. You only get one chance for a first impression</p>

The findings show that due to the arduous nature of the research journey, one must both look deeply before leaping into a research area, and also stay determined through the process to create excellent work. Simply settling for average research will likely result in average rejections from reviewers. While persistence and determination ultimately play a strong role in determining the success or failure of research endeavors, reflection on which road to discovery best suits an individual's nature can also be influential on research success.

All individuals, by their very nature, fall along a continuum anchored on one end by an engineer/economist mindset and on the opposite end by an artist's psyche (Block, 2001). As can be seen in Figure 1, the mindsets of each polar opposite frame their world views and ultimately the approach each might take to the same research problem.

Figure 1: Mental Models (Block, 2001)



Each mindset will determine how the research problem is framed, the type of data needed, and the likely acceptable journal outlets. Reflecting on table 1 and figure 1 leads to one to think that in addition to internalizing the advice about carving out time and space, avoiding distractions, and being disciplined; one also has to know yourself to select the proper path to publication. Individuals with an engineer/economist mindset are more likely to be attracted to narrowly defined problems which may be addressed by existing data sets favoring model building methods where results are predictive in nature. Researchers closer to the artist end of the dimension may prefer exploring issues concerning human nature where individual responses, quantitative or qualitative, are the primary data for analysis. From a reflective viewpoint, young researchers should certainly consider their own mental characteristics and what research problems are amenable to their way of thinking.

Distinction 2: Relationships with Others

In this distinction, there are two relevant others: those close to you and others who are distant. Responses here deal with how researchers manage their relationships with these “others” while pursuing research success. Issues addressed include:

- a) Managing relationships with reviewers, co-authors, and also the reading audience:

“Don’t try and hide things from reviewers, provide all the statistics so they can see your story.” (Respondent 3)

“Work in author teams that are fun and productive...” (Respondent 6)

“Get brutally honest feedback on the first solid draft - you must find people who will tear it apart; not that easy.” (Respondent 5)

- b) Managing working with difficult others:

Barrier: “Working with co-authors who don’t pull their weight.” (Respondent 3)

c) Recruiting “friendly-eyes:

“Get peer-reviews then rewrite and rewrite.” (Respondent 5)

Table 2: Guidelines for Managing the Relationship with Others

Distinction 2	Relationship with Others
Essentials for Academic Publishing	<p>Think about how people will act/think differently based on what you find</p> <p>Know and respect your audience when you share your story, thoughtful positioning is key</p> <p>Don't try to hide things from reviewers, provide all the statistics so they can see your story</p> <p>Work in author teams that are fun and productive</p> <p>If you feel you must contact an editor during revision, do so professionally. It is a critical "impression point" in the the process</p> <p>Editors that give you an R+R want you to succeed - communicate with them</p> <p>Ask others if idea is interesting before you start; if they just show polite interest or don't understand what you are doing, that's a bad sign.</p> <p>Be ready to receive and reply to some hard but ultimately constructive feedback</p> <p>Always get a friendly peer review of your paper before submission</p>
Barriers to Research Success	<p>Working with coauthors who don't 'pull their weight'</p> <p>Reviewers - the number one barrier to successful publication</p>
Manuscript-Crafting Musts	<p>Get peer-reviews then rewrite and rewrite</p> <p>Get brutally honest feedback on the first solid draft - you must find people who will tear it apart; not that easy</p>

As one may infer from table 2, distant others refer the various stakeholders who are commenting on your work, reviewing the work, and those in the journal review process as well as future readers of the article. In essence, being sensitive to the perspectives of the various stakeholders means accepting critical feedback and thoroughly responding to viewer comments is paramount. Some young authors who are asked to revise and resubmit an article may not realize that their comments back to the editor and reviewers might be, in page length, longer than the original manuscript.

Responses may also include gathering additional data just to satisfy a particular reviewer's comment but not be published in the final manuscript. As an example, a reviewer's comment in a revise and resubmit manuscript questioned whether *salesperson listening* was the same as the *intuition* construct in a proposed model. In response, the coauthors differentiated the two constructs conceptually and empirically. After conceptually differentiating the constructs, two empirical

studies with two new data sets using two well documented listening scales showed that the two constructs were indeed different. In essence, the researchers felt compelled to not just offer their rationalization for the differences, but to thoroughly document empirical differences. Their conceptual reasoning and empirical findings were not added to the paper revision but rather included in a thorough response to the reviewer and editor's concerns.

While distant others determine the fate of an article's submission, those close to an author may, in fact, be more instrumental in its ultimate success. Obviously, coauthors must pull their own weight by doing the work in a thorough and timely fashion. But, a deeper issue is the "chemistry" and "rhythm match" between co-authors. Avoid at all costs the ping-pong effect between coauthors as well as with faculty advisors. An author may get caught between coauthors who simply return a draft with little or no added value. In essence, the draft is "ping-ponged" back and forth without any real value added in successive iterations.

The question for personal reflection is "How do I like to work?" It may be quickly and efficiently or with less structure, and how is it for potential coauthors? Everyone has a workstyle personality which includes the ability to work with others, their workstyle, and attitude concerning working with others (Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2015). For example, if you are an intensive worker who wants to hammer out a legitimate first draft, you might consider the challenges of working with another person who is at the artist end of Block's mindset dimension in Figure 1. Workstyle is so important that it shapes our entire lives so matching with a coauthor's style will likely ease the path of researching and writing by establishing a compatible rhythm.

Distinction 3: Relationships with the Work

Responses here deal with how researchers manage their relationships with the actual research being carried out, and address issues such as:

- a) Making sure the work is interesting, makes a significant contribution, and relates to the existing body of work:

"...research question must be interesting [...] first two pages must capture the reader's interest." (Respondent 3)

"Your literature review should show how ideas relate to existing theory – it should not just be a laundry list of previous ideas." (Respondent 7)

"There must be theoretical, substantive, or methodological contribution; the reader should feel they know more at the end of the paper than at the start." (Respondent 4)

- b) Barriers that might hinder success:

"Flaws including bad methodology, poor writing, and poor data quality." (Respondent 4)

"Lack of understanding of the norms and expectations of each journal." (Respondent 7)

"Studying questions that everyone already knows the answer to or don't care about." (Respondent 2)

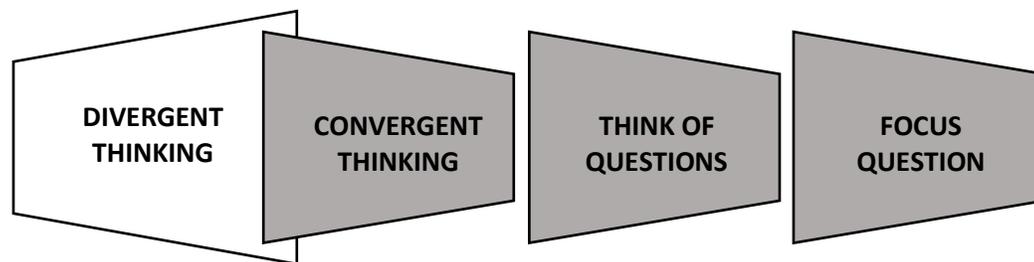
Table 3: Guidelines for Managing the Relationship with the Work

Distinction 3	Relationship with the Work
<p>Essentials for Academic Publishing</p>	<p>Focus on an important unanswered research question instead of how can I publish</p> <p>Research question must be interesting; first two pages must capture reader's interest.</p> <p>There must be theoretical, substantive, or methodological contribution; reader should feel they know more at end of paper than at start.</p> <p>The most interesting papers start with a real-life question that you're curious about</p> <p>Your literature review should show how your ideas relate to existing theory - it should not just be a laundry list of previous ideas</p> <p>Single-source, cross-sectional data is getting harder and harder to publish</p> <p>Get to know your target journal - understand its tone, focus, and culture beforehand</p> <p>Target quality journals - that doesn't mean only A-level (unless your school forces this), but it IS possible to go too low - remember that your CV brands you via the journals you list on it</p>
<p>Barriers to Research Success</p>	<p>Studying questions that everyone already knows the answer to or don't care about</p> <p>Not connecting the paper to the ongoing conversation in the literature</p> <p>Context - the context of the data collection in most cases can be left to the method section. If your paper is about music downloads from iTunes, this is not good; it must be about creative/hedonic products.</p> <p>Flaws including bad methodology, poor writing, and poor data quality</p> <p>Limited generalizability</p> <p>Lack of understanding of the norms and expectations of each journal</p> <p>Too broad a project or too ambitious a research question. It is better to go in-depth narrower on a new, important, and relevant question.</p> <p>Making the manuscript all about the method and not the story</p>
<p>Manuscript-Crafting Musts</p>	<p>Be able to articulate a useful contribution clearly, succinctly, and for a broad audience</p> <p>Write to communicate, not to impress or deceive</p> <p>Frame your argument to intrigue the people whose work you cite</p> <p>Make sure your work isn't just descriptive; it should change our understanding of theory and practice</p> <p>Tell an interesting story; hook the reader immediately in the introduction</p> <p>Don't just end by listing the paper's limitations. Explain how a stream of research and thinking can evolve from this new addition to the field</p> <p>This really is an exercise in teaching to experts but it is still teaching; Each paper should focus on a simple but important (new) message</p> <p>Even the most abstract/sophisticated paper must tell a powerful story. It must be interesting in itself to read and change the reader i.e. would anybody do anything differently after reading this</p> <p>Find a great journal match for your work</p>

Table 3 provides a full list of guiding principles for researchers to follow regarding managing their relationships with the work. All researchers, and particularly those with less experience, are challenged to find that focused research problem which will lead them to a compelling story and ultimately a quality publication. The issue that emerges is “how do I get to that question?” Finding an appropriate research question requires employing one’s creativity to include new and interesting areas. Expanding a person’s horizon may be aided by divergent thinking, as contrasted to convergent thought processes which narrow the focus to conventional questions (Runco and Acar, 2012).

Divergent thinking allows for seeing relatedness between concepts and is a path to original topics (Vartanian et. al, 2009). However, both divergent and convergent thought can work together (Runco, 2007). Figure 2 provides insights to show a progression of thought processes leading to a focused research question.

Figure 2: Progression of Research Thought Process



One’s thought process may initially be divergent in nature where the broader landscape of an issue becomes apparent. At some point, thinking shifts to begin converging by narrowing the perspective to a list of candidate questions. By being critical at this stage, a researcher may frame one or two focused questions. As an example, divergent thinking may lead to the broad questions of how technology, artificial intelligence, and robotics are affecting society. Convergent thinking could then lead to narrowing the issue to mechanomorphism and its impact on labor markets. Mechanomorphism refers to projecting machine qualities on to humans and treating them as machines (Rushkoff, 2019). Further narrowing the topic may lead to a question such a “What happens to individuals where technology intrudes on personal and work life? A focused research question such as “ how does mechanomorphism affect the service provider, and how does management balance the interaction of service providers and the machine, so the customers are satisfied, and workers have meaningful employment?” The thought process shown in Figure 2 is reductionist in nature but serves as a guide for the inquisitive mind in search of focused research questions.

Further, a well framed piece of research and the resulting article should intrigue the audience, have a theoretical foundation and tell a compelling story. The findings in distinction 3 indicate that all publications, whether quantitative or qualitative, tell a story. The clearer the story, the more likely the success. If a reviewer is on page 5 of a manuscript and has to ask, “ what is this paper about?” the author has drastically reduced the chances of the manuscript moving past the initial stage of the review process. A good story hooks the reader early and the story builds on from that point throughout the manuscript. If reviewers have to wonder why a manuscript seems disjointed, the author is asking the readers to work too hard to make sense of a poorly told story.

Finally, the aforementioned concept of rhythm relates to another problem in writing; the Sisyphus Effect. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus is a king who is punished by being forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to it roll back down when it nears the hill top. Sisyphus then starts the uphill task over and over again. With respect to drafting a manuscript, the authors who have not “rolled” the manuscript to a plateau of a solid first draft by allowing too much time to pass without attention, are likely to bear the Sisyphus plight of starting over again. Time is a friend if a reasonable rhythm is established but an enemy if it requires starting over and over again. Once the first rough draft is completed, a short resting period will improve the effort in successive drafts. A helpful hint to coauthors is in reading a draft aloud to each other so that inconsistencies, ambiguities, and breaks in the story line become apparent.

Final Thoughts

The above findings represent invaluable success-aiding guidelines passed down from a highly reputable collective of scholars. While this information can be referenced at any point in an academic career, two groups of individuals will derive the most value from this: young professors in the early stages of their career and doctoral students embarking on their academic journeys. While fostering the motivation to do research is essential, the importance of giving specific guidelines about navigating the research process early in an academic’s career cannot be overstated. To this effect, in addition to the guidelines provided above, the collective used in this research also provide summary career-guiding advice for young professors and doctoral candidates.

Advice to Young Professors

One can achieve a truly rewarding research experience by having: a burning life-changing research question, the persistence to keep at it, and the desire to share your answers as you learn them. One burning question will lead to other burning questions for all your life. So, don’t ask how many publications I need to get or keep a job rather, ask ‘how can you help me help myself to answer this important burning question that keeps me awake at night?’

While the above holds true, research is still a numbers game to an extent. To this effect, you need to have multiple projects at any given time. However, make sure to ask colleagues/mentors if a project is interesting before committing heavy resources to it. Always get friendly reviews before submitting to fix any problems and don’t feel the urge to submit a paper before its time just to show activity on an annual report. That being said, don’t try to outguess reviewers; write a good paper and let the reviewers tell you what they want, rather than holding on to the paper while trying to anticipate every possible comment.

Further, as you build your team of collaborators, be certain to find people with a compatible mind-set and a stellar work ethic. Also, while the contemporary ‘development networks’ model (Mathews, 2003; De Janasz & Sullivan, 2004) adopted from the mentoring literature establishes the importance of having various mentors to provide different types of expertise, as a new researcher, it is typically better to be known for and embedded in one or a few areas rather than spreading too thinly into too many areas.

Finally, although some schools are not very transparent, to the best that you can, find out what the norms for achieving tenure are and exceed them. In addition, you want to consider being

at an institution that supports research, not just financially, but also in terms of believing your work is important and deserves attention.

Advice to Doctoral Candidates

As you begin working on your dissertation and approach completion of your doctoral studies, there are a few key points that will aid in your success. First, don't try to boil the ocean, a good dissertation is a focused one; if you can't explain it in 90 seconds or less, you will have a tough time in job interviews. Choose your research questions carefully because you find them interesting and not because you think they are publishable. If you aren't interested in what you are doing, it is a grind, and there is a good chance that reviewers won't be interested either. In addition, you need to start building a pipeline of projects that will set you up for tenure in the future. Your dissertation should be easily split into two or three projects.

Further, accumulate the best toolkit you can while you're still a PhD student. Studying important problems and contexts in the current climate filled with big and fast data requires a better grasp of theoretical developments and more awareness of contextual differences. However, focus intently on your methodological training, as this new data-rich climate also requires knowledge of a broader range of methodologies. One can always read up on and learn new theories, but self-teaching new methodologies is unquestioningly more difficult.

Finally, although your dissertation topic and advisor's area of expertise will guide much of your initial research, once you graduate and are in your first few years of professorship, you need to start exploring other ideas that are intrinsically interesting. Never forget, we are in the best career in the world, as we are paid to think and write about things that interest us and we have the "honor" to teach others for a living.

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