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*Editor's note:* This article is the first of a two-part essay. Part 2 will appear in the July 2010 issue of *Decision Line*.

# The 10 Mistakes Students Make in Their Doctoral Program Revisited: The Student Response (Part One)

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In 2001, Varun Grover offered advice on how to avoid 10 mistakes doctoral students make in managing their program (see *Decision Line*, May 2001). Since the publication of this article, Varun has received numerous responses from doctoral students indicating that the article was useful. Others indicate that the mistakes raised were inevitable—and avoidance was unrealistic. Still others indicated that the mistakes need caveats as there are alternative ways of accomplishing doctoral goals.

At the minimum, this article spawned considerable attention and discussion. For this reason, we decided to follow-up on the article. We thought it would be useful to see if these problems were still perceived as relevant by recent graduates from Ph.D. programs. To do so, we assembled a panel of five informants from participants in the 2008 and 2009 ICIS doctoral student consortiums. Our informants were drawn from business schools in three different countries and all were within a year of finishing their Ph.D. programs. Each student was provided an instrument with each of the “mistakes” articulated. They were invited to provide an open-ended evaluation of whether they observed the 10 mistakes among their contemporaries in their Ph.D. program and to offer additional advice or insight into how to succeed in a Ph.D. program.

In reviewing their responses, we supplement the mistakes with some caveats that might be relevant to help-

ing current doctoral students' succeed in their programs. While we mainly focus on the panelists' reactions to the mistakes, we also leverage our experiences working with doctoral students to provide advice. Due to the length and richness of their responses, we will present this article in two parts. Part 2 will be in the next issue of *Decision Line*.

### Mistake 1: Doctoral students do not create synergy

Students take a piecemeal approach to opportunities and projects that they do in the program—doing what is expedient or expected without creating a synergy that enhances the creation of better products, in-depth study of literature in an area, time management, and identification of a dissertation topic.

Our informants reported that doctoral students who created synergies were the exception, not the rule. One remarked on an exceptional peer who:

“entered the program knowing exactly what he wanted to do his dissertation on. He actually mapped out the n-paper model for his dissertation, with the help of the faculty member he had selected to be his advisor, before the first day of classes had even begun. This enabled him to focus very early on, such that whenever we took a class that required a research paper, he was able to carve out small segments of his dissertation to conceptualize and investigate. I should mention, however, that I did not meet any other students in my

four years in the program who were this focused going in. Most were still exploring and trying to figure out what interested them the most.”

To create synergies, doctoral students have to develop a clear vision of what they want to study and think strategically about how to integrate their work. To do so, some students take an aggressive approach to managing their studies. As one respondent noted,

“The one student who sought synergies was very deliberate in identifying those projects that aligned with a specific research interest and then actively negotiated for the revision of expectations where such synergies were not evident.”

Although aware synergies were important, our respondents suggested that the piecemeal approach to doctoral studies was a function of circumstance and advising.

“I believe a piecemeal approach is less risky from a student point of view as well as from an advisor. Because students are at the beginning of the program, most of the time, they don’t know what they want to do or how to choose a topic. It therefore becomes a good option to take on a piecemeal offer. However, I believe such an approach limits the opportunity for a more comprehensive research.”

Another agreed and underscored that:

“changing research interests, differences in the personalities of the individuals overseeing projects, and the unique demands of each project resulted in relatively little opportunity for such synergies.”

More importantly, one student suggested a pragmatic reason for a piecemeal approach early in doctoral studies. He argued that:

“the publication life-cycle is far too long to wait until the third or fourth year. This means that not all of your projects will create synergy. Early on, I urge you to get involved in research and learn about the process. Later . . . this mistake is to be avoided. You will be moving from the laborer type work in the research to the project leader.”

Interestingly, all of our respondents suggested that finding synergies was neces-

sary as Ph.D. programs come to a close. One reported:

“my dissertation did grow out of a paper I wrote in my very first semester of the program. But I never had any clue that would happen at the time, and in fact rebelled against the idea for two full years . . . . At first, I didn’t like that pressure, but as time went on . . . . I used the topic of my first paper (which I had already presented at 2 conferences).”

**Caveat:** Overall, the panelists endorsed the importance of creating synergy – but indicated that it may not be feasible upfront. We concur, and would suggest that the first year is typically a time to explore in a doctoral program. Students should be cognitive of synergy, but they need to balance this against the need to explore different areas and hone their interests. However, the earlier synergies can be created in the program, the better off students will be.

### **Mistake 2: Doctoral students are too reactive**

Students react to, rather than control, their environment—taking a series of courses and checking off a list of boxes. Proactive students . . . keep the broad objectives of learning and cultivating research and teaching skills while simultaneously focusing on program requirements.

Our panel was split on the issue of being reactive and proactive. Most noted that:

“reactive and proactive management styles were evident both across students and in the behavior of individual students . . . reactive students have tended to be more successful [in the short term] because the milestones established by a PhD program serve as the baseline for success (pass comprehensives, defend proposal, submit research in progress to conference, etc.). Broad focus on learning and cultivating research may be important in the long run but tends to slow progress in the short run.”

Although leading to short-term success, one student noticed that a reactive strategy did not readily translate to earning the skills necessary to be an independent scholar. One commented that:

“a colleague of mine often was saying, ‘I am afraid to start my data collection and analysis, because I don’t know what to do.’ I also noticed that many students are treating the PhD degree like another coursework degree. They do not realize a PhD is a project in which they are at the same time the project managers and the people working in the project. Nobody else is going to do it for them. This is one of the biggest mistakes I see around a lot of students.

In fact, many of our informants suggested that being proactive was necessary for securing top notch training—through mentoring and coursework:

“I proactively involved myself in several research projects in my second and third years and was able to get a few papers from these projects. I also proactively found courses from other departments that helped me understand topics that are not typically discussed in courses in my discipline.”

Another suggested that being proactive meant more than simply finding courses or collaborating with faculty. He argued that it required going beyond training to identify gaps or discrepancies in the literature:

“Doctoral students often look for research ideas as a response to a particular article rather than finding research gaps in the literature. Using a holistic approach to finding and designing research questions provides a stronger stream of research that is far more interesting. As far as the doctoral studies, an important skill is time management. Being reactive and not thoughtfully planning your studies will lead to unnecessary hardship. Start with a yearly plan and reevaluate often. Talk to the senior folks and the new assistant professor to see what was part of their yearly plans.”

Although being proactive is important, one informant suggested the being too proactive could come at a price. She argued that:

“proactive students can be over-enthusiastic about their projects. They think they can manage anything, hence the issue of scoping the PhD project. In that sense they need to be brought back into reality, to un-

derstand that only certain parts can be done part of a PhD program. Not everything can be covered at one time."

As a result, this informant argued for a more tempered approach to managing a Ph.D. program:

"most students in my program lived by the motto 'shut up and graduate' but looked for research outlets that interested them personally, aside from working with faculty. In my case, this involved using my non-MIS electives and methods classes to write papers that interested me personally, but that the MIS faculty had no interest in. So perhaps I was proactive but in a different way."

Before leaving the topic of success and being reactive or proactive, it is important to note that one student challenged the assumption underpinning this lesson:

"How do you define 'success' in one's PhD program or in their post-PhD career? Is this based on how many 'A' pubs you have? Or on whether you achieve tenure at your first post-PhD institution? I would say that for some students, success is having a balanced life outside of academia, and therefore I don't fault those students who simply 'went through the motions' to get their degree, and were less focused on research / more interested in teaching and having a balanced life. They were being proactive about their education as well, but in a different (and not necessarily wrong) way. To each their own."

**Caveat:** The importance of being proactive was clearly recognized by the panel, but the nature and extent of "out of class" activities might vary depending on how individuals view and tradeoff their long and short term objectives.

### **Mistake 3: Doctoral students do not carefully evaluate opportunity cost**

Students who are noted for their competence and motivation tend to get more demands—to the extent that students have control over every opportunity set, every opportunity should be evaluated strategically—with each opportunity, they should question does this (new) project contribute to my doctoral education?

Our informants agreed that prioritization was important – yet noted that

they had used different approaches to prioritize their work.

"One individual relied on external pressure such that the priority was the one demanded immediately by a supervisor, a course, or some other form of deadline. Another individual continually asked whether the work fulfilled one of three objectives: complete the degree, get a job, or get a publication. Personally, I tend to rely heavily on a calendar that I use to impose 'artificial' deadlines for individual tasks. The risk is that sometimes completing these small tasks does not align with the broader perspective offered by the three objectives that guided my colleague."

Another suggested a useful way to approach to "right-sizing" your workload:

"You have to manage the number of your projects you are currently working on. I would suggest figuring out how much you can actively take on and eliminate the project that has the least amount of promise (n-1). This will accomplish two things. First, you are always able to take on a good project that comes along. Second, you will do a great job with your current projects. The key is balance and getting involved as much as you can while always being able to take on a good project."

Lacking a heuristic for prioritizing work, several of our respondents noted that ambitious Ph.D. students tended to grow overextended and "either do a poor job or miss out on important research opportunities."

In fact, one noted a remarkable case where:

"One student had unfortunately not been informed of expectations for summer work in advance. She signed up for 3 different independent studies (meaning 3 different research projects) in her first summer, while also teaching 5 days a week (for the first time). Somehow she lived to tell about it ... but with a couple of incompletes to work off later."

To prioritize well, doctoral students suggested it is important to learn to:

"say 'no' to people a lot of times, particularly when those people are very powerful and well-respected faculty members, and they are asking you to

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do something because they think it would be good for you (or for your CV). I think a lot of students get in the trap where they think they need a couple of extra lines on their CV to compete on the job market. So they can't say no to anything."

Saying no and putting your work first becomes particularly important when you are

"trying to finish your dissertation and simultaneously beginning a new job. All of a sudden, priorities become much clearer and it is a lot easier to say 'no' when someone wants you to teach a new class, join a new research project, or write a review. So *desperation* and the *survival instinct* bring about proper prioritization when all else fails. I think some of the other younger, less experienced students in our program have learned prioritization through simple survival as well. At any rate, I have heard they are turning down all offers of new projects now that they are post-comps."

While we have emphasized prioritization as an important skill for successful doctoral students, we'd be remiss if we did not note that it is also important after leaving campus.

For example, one student noted that she:

"did not prioritize well after leaving the program ABD—rather than spending the summer before starting my new job focusing 100 percent on my dissertation, I allowed myself to be distracted with 2 paper submissions in a completely different area of research. It was hard to say no, though, since my advisor was one of the coauthors and she felt that I could handle both. Sometimes you just have to stand up to your advisor and say, 'It may be easy for *you* to do all this, but it's not that easy for *me*.' If you are considered a 'super star' student, you really need to make sure your advisor knows that even 'super stars' get overwhelmed and need a break. If you don't tell people you are maxed out, they won't know it and will keep coming back to you, making you feel under more pressure to say 'yes.'"

**Caveat:** There is little disagreement on the importance of evaluating opportunity costs and prioritization. However,

while saying "no" is important, students should prioritize people to which they say no. I've observed many cases where "powerful" people make unreasonable requests and a "no" has severely come back to haunt students. While most faculty have the students best interests in mind, there are some bad apples—and so the caveat would be to judiciously prioritize people along with tasks.

#### **Mistake 4: Doctoral students fall into a lull period**

Students fall into a lull for ... two months. Then three months ... between post-comps and the dissertation proposal ... which results in a loss of continuity and tremendous start-up costs in every interaction.

Lulls between comps and the dissertation varied across institutions.

Students fell into a lull because:

"especially after a milestone such as their confirmation in Australia they feel the need to relax and completely miss the fact they can lose the momentum. Unfortunately, in Australia we don't have a system in place to monitor students closely on their progress. There is only an annual progress that needed to be filled in. Regular meetings with the advisors will ensure more continuity, however a lot of professors can't afford that time on a weekly basis. Consequently, re-active students face big problems with such relationship management."

Although many students ahead of her fell into a lull, another student noted that the faculty re-structured the program to "encourage" moving ahead with the dissertation.

"The students who were a year ahead of me took way too much time off between written and oral comps (some over a semester). So the students in my peer group and going forward to the present never had to worry about that particular lull, as the faculty set very hard deadlines of only a few weeks beyond written comps for taking orals.

All in all, though, I think I avoided a major lull simply by virtue of having an advisor who placed extremely demanding deadlines on me for when

I was expected to have my proposal ready to defend (i.e., four months post-orals)."

In addition to relying on faculty for motivation, our informants noted different aspects of their programs that motivated them to move forward in their studies. One well-published student noted that:

"Most of the students, including myself, were actively working on multiple research projects after comps (outside the dissertation) as they were trying to find topics for their dissertation. I think working on research projects outside dissertation was the key reason for being able to avoid post-comps lull."

Another argued that funding became a driver for progress after comments. He suggested that lulls were unusual because "at our institution the funding structure gives students an incentive to defend a proposal within one year of passing comprehensive exams."

Finally, one noted that a more structured approach to avoiding a lull. He suggested staying on track by:

"writing up your ideal, and doable, CV for when you are on the market. Second, work backwards to see where your CV should be at the end of year one and two to accomplish your goals. You will find that with six months per revision cycle you have no time to sit on your research."

**Caveat:** No disagreement here. Students should actively avoid the lull simply by being cognizant of it both a-priori and ex-post comps. A-priori, the project portfolio and their deadlines, along with planning (i.e., a well thought out dissertation idea) can keep activity alive. Ex-post, the advisor and pressure from the market can reinforce the awareness of a potential lull. Dead periods can be avoided if students feel they are going downhill after comps and not negotiating another mountain when the exams have sucked out most of their energy.

#### **Mistake 5: Doctoral students do not manage their advisor**

Students should be proactive in managing their advisor ... if they go in prepared with the issues, their possible solutions, and solicit their advisor's advice, they

will use their time more efficiently ... alternately, hiding [from the advisor] is a pathological behavior, particularly if they cannot deliver on a project.

To manage an advisor, a recently graduated student suggested that two elements were essential. First, students need to be excited about their work because your excitement rubs off on the advisor. Second, students need to turn to their "project management class for strategies. This includes keeping the project team (your committee) informed of your milestones, timelines and deliverables."

However, many of our respondents reported that managing an advisor is more difficult than one might expect. One reported that he was not:

"sure how other students managed their advisors. In my case, the only approach I had was to keep an open and honest communication channel with my advisor. I tried to contact my advisor almost every day, if possible, and tried to get his feedback on different things (e.g., papers, dissertation topic ideas, new research ideas, other non-academic issues). I had a friendly relationship with my advisor, which I think is important for any doctoral student. However, developing a good relationship with the advisor takes time and requires a strong work ethic."

Another reported that there was no universally effective strategy for managing an advisor. Really, this person argued that completing a dissertation hinged on either the advisor or the student taking accountability for managing the process. He argued that:

"I have seen advisers 'manage' students who would otherwise not be particularly successful. I think the only time there is a real problem is when neither the student nor the adviser can manage effectively. And, by 'manage' I am generally referring to efforts to keep the dissertation process on track. This involves establishing timelines, clear deliverables, priorities, etc. and then making sure that these are adhered to. Of course, once again there are a number of subtleties surrounding the difference between short- and long-term success."

In contrast, a type "A" personality reported frustration with her attempts

to manage her advisor. As a result, she attempted many different approaches to managing the relationship. She reported that:

"my advisor is too damned busy, yet despite that, she still has final authority over everything that goes into my papers (since she is a coauthor on all of them). So it's a difficult balancing act. We've been through every variation of meeting structures known to mankind since I began this project—from 'drop in any time' meetings with no agenda beforehand, to regular weekly meetings designed to keep me on task (but which I didn't always come prepared for), and finally to 'meetings on demand' when I get stuck and need very specific advice about how to move forward. The latter method has been by far the most productive (even if least practiced) of the three approaches. It lets me work at my own pace, but forces me to think through problems and plan out very specific questions before spending time with her. I have no idea how (or if) the other students in the program with me managed their advisors."

Another reported that managing the advisor might be problematic, because students lacked the necessary skills.

"I think such management skills should be part of the doctoral education. Currently we do not receive any formal education in this area. Students who have previously worked in industry are more mature and probably better at management, as opposed to the freshmen. Often students complain that their meeting with the advisors has not achieved anything, but they did not see the fact that they did not have an agenda/items to achieve. In many situations students come with their issues without proposing any solutions or alternative paths, expecting the advisors will resolve the problems for them. Or they refuse to meet on a regular basis because they are behind in their work, hence the inability to deliver what was supposed to be done. This is very common among re-active students.

I think it is a problem of managing expectations—what is really expected from an advisor and from them as students. There is a misunderstanding

of the relationship in the first place. I think a certain level of education in relationship management would benefit students and save lots of time for both sides."

**Caveat:** The panel generally agreed that students should manage their advisor—but felt that doing so was easier said than done. A bit of planning and honest, open communication can go a long way in managing expectations for each meeting, as well as for the project. Students should also assess what works and adjust accordingly for the different types and styles of advisors. Also see the article in the December/January 2003 issue of *Decision Line*, "Interaction between a Doctoral Student and Advisor: Making It Work!"

## Conclusion

In this first installment that revisits Varun Grover's "10 Mistakes," we presented the student's view on many of the challenges encountered by contemporary doctoral students. Our respondents underscored the importance of students creating synergy, pro-actively managing their programs, and managing their advisors. However, they emphasized that many of their suggestions are easier said than done. To succeed in doctoral studies, students must learn to rely on themselves (i.e., not fall into lulls) and gain insight into how to successfully build relationships with their advisors. Although each respondent's program of studies was unique, there was surprising consistency in their advice—that doctoral students are ultimately responsible for ensuring their success. In Part 2, we will visit the remaining five mistakes.

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