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## The Many Roads to Success: Classifying Doctoral Students into Archetypes

by Varun Grover, Clemson University

Over the past 25 odd years, I have had the privilege of working with numerous doctoral students. Each of these experiences has been delightful in its own idiosyncratic way. This is because doctoral students come with their own personalities, styles, competencies, and quirks. Each one presents different challenges and opportunities. Most of them succeed in their unique way and to their own degree by publishing papers, teaching challenging courses, and gaining a foothold in professional associations.

As I reflect on these experiences, I find that I am still not very good at anticipating or predicting the degree of success of doctoral students a-priori. When we assess applications, we get a good sense of competency level through test scores and GPA. However, we do not get a good sense of true motivation (despite candidates' claims of motivation). Nor do we get a good sense of the ability to handle high pressure, rejection, long feedback cycles, multitasking, and other contingencies that characterize doctoral student and academic life. After all, candidates do not have a true understanding of what such a life entails, so they often make assumptions or extrapolate from prior experiences. Post-hoc, however, it is easier to characterize doctoral students into archetypes based on their skills and behaviors during the doctoral program. Below, I describe five archetypes of doctoral students. Let me preface my descriptions by indicating that I enjoyed every one of these relationships. I make no judgments on which archetype is "better" or has a higher likelihood of "success."

I can classify students into five archetypes. Of course, these are not pure forms—each one reflects numerous dimensions, many of which I cannot begin to articulate. They do reflect my own mental cluster analysis—a rough approximation of how I perceive things. Students fall heavily into one archetype, but might have attributes of another.

### The Conservatives:

*"We'll do whatever it takes"*

Conservatives are doctoral students who are wedded to books and journals. They work extremely hard and gain tremendously from the doctoral program, but primarily through their dedication to reading and organizing. These students may not be the sharpest, but they more than make up for that in terms of perseverance. They work without complaint and take direction the best they can. Sometimes, they work inefficiently by investing too much in an area—because they get lost in the trees and lose sight of the forest. Ironically, despite their hard work, they could take longer to finish their project. These students often select dissertation topics that are extensions to existing work, but not "outside the mold." Either through their culture or personality (or both), they generally have the right focus toward doctoral study.

### The Pragmatists:

*"We just want to get it done"*

Pragmatists are the doctoral students who want to get their degrees and move on in their careers. They could work as hard as the conservatives, but with one



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basic difference. They are more interested in making sure their work gets through the committee than in assuring its quality. Often, if managed well, pragmatists can produce good quality dissertations. These students take advice and try to figure out how to implement it at a level that will satisfy, but may not delight, the advisor. The dissertation topics selected by these students are often relatively structured and any innovation is measured and implementable. Some students in this mold struggle to meet expectations either by taking too many shortcuts or not working or thinking hard enough. These students truly imbibe the oft-quoted saying, "The best dissertation is a done dissertation."

**Abstractionists:**

*"I've got a new idea"*

Abstractionists are the students who are good conceptual thinkers, but struggle with research methods and implementation. Often, their forte, thinking and structuring of concepts, is their weakness since they are not satisfied and are always innovating or trying to improve their model. Abstractionists need some attributes of all the other groups, like perseverance or method skills, lest they flounder. Therefore, managing abstractionists is a challenge, because they need to be kept on focus and bounded in order to complete their project. Having good methodological guidance on the committee is often a critical success factor. These students often take on innovating and challenging research topics that can be conceptually developed, but might need to be toned down for testing. Abstractionists can do some remarkable, even controversial research, if they can complete their projects.

**Toolers:**

*"Let's find the problem for this technique"*

Toolers, in many ways, are the opposite of abstractionists. They have prowess in a methodology, tool, or technique and are determined to find a problem where they can apply the tool. These students might

be solicited by others for their knowledge and even added for their skills to other research projects. Toolers often struggle with theory and abstraction and could take ages to develop a viable research model for testing. However, once over the theoretical hurdle, these students revel in implementation. Typically, their dissertations have weak theory but tend to employ powerful methods. Many of their topics may use brute force techniques, with massive data sets, in order to meet the scope requirements for a dissertation. Depending on whether their skill set is applicable to a broad repertoire of problems, Toolers could develop a powerful research program or be highly solicited to join others on their research projects.

**Get-its:**

*"Let's shoot for A-level pubs"*

Get-its are those who "get" the research culture. Often they come into doctoral programs with a good understanding of what they are getting into, occasionally even having dabbled in research themselves. Get-its have attributes of all the other groups—they are hardworking, practical, and have reasonable conceptual and methodological skills. More importantly, they have a sense of what it takes to package a research paper targeted at a premier journal. These students are often self-driven and do not need excessive guidance. Their dissertations tend to be of good quality, slightly innovative but building on an existing body of work. Get-its can be too ambitious or may set unrealistic expectations that need to be checked. These students generally have the right approach to a research career.

So, what can we do with this taxonomy? It could be useful for a student and advisor to sit down and have a conversation based on this classification, at the beginning of the dissertation process so that, together, they can come up with a plan. For the advisor, it is useful to understand the critical factors in managing different types of students through the process. Conservatives might need to be directed toward a bit more innovative thinking and constantly redirected to-

ward productive avenues so their work bears fruit. Pragmatists might need to be challenged with higher expectations in order to ensure a quality product. Abstractionists need to be bounded in their conceptual thinking and complemented with methodological guidance. Toolers could benefit from closer management of their conceptual product and may need to be sensitized to any misfit between the problem and the tool. Get-its can be hurt by micromanagement and need broad but constructive guidance, keeping ambitions as realistic as possible.

For students, it might be useful to self-classify themselves—or even divide themselves into each category on a percentage basis. This might sensitize them to their strengths and weaknesses so that they can take a preemptive stance to dangers even before they embark on their project. For instance, students who categorize themselves primarily as Toolers might be extremely sensitive to their theoretical limitation and try to take insurance in a well-established theoretical based. Similarly, Conservatives might want to constantly ask themselves if they are not only working hard, but "smartly," and what that work is going to yield and whether it is worth it. Abstractionists should always be asking themselves whether the interesting is implementable. Pragmatists should be sensitive to quality issues and calibrate any short-cuts they might consider. The Get-its might need to hone their expectations lest they take on too much and get burned out, or they shoot for only high risk publications and neglect to build a balanced portfolio.

In conclusion, I feel very fortunate to have had these diverse experiences. Sure, at times, over the course of hundreds of interactions with each student, there were frustrations. In the end however, I think the process generally worked and I learned from it. The best part is when I see my former doctoral students having significant success and becoming valued colleagues and friends. So, regardless of their "archetype," I genuinely look forward to hearing about their continued accomplishments. ■