

How to Have a Bad Grad Student Career (And How to Avoid One)

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IV Commandments on to Have a Bad Graduate Career

I. Concentrate on getting good grades

- Postpone research involvement:
might lower GPA
- Aim for PhD class valedictorian!

Alternative: Maintain reasonable grades

- No employer cares about GPA
 - » Sorry, no valedictorian
- Only once I gave below B in grad course
- What matters: Letters of recommendation
 - » From 3-4 faculty & external PhDs
who have known you for 5+ years



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II. Concentrate on graduating as fast as possible

- Winner is first in class to PhD
 - » Only care if have PhD & GPA, not what you know
- Don't spend a summer in industry: takes longer
 - » How could industry experience help with topic?
 - » Or letters of reference?
- Don't work on large projects: takes longer
 - » Have to talk to others, have to learn different areas
- Don't do a systems PhD: takes longer
- **Alternative: Your last chance to learn (mostly outside classroom)**
 - Considered newly “minted” when finish PhD
 - » No youth credit post PhD
 - Judged on year of PhD vs. year of birth
 - To person in their 40s or 50s or 60s, $26 \approx 28$



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III. Don't go to conferences

- It costs money and takes time
⇒ could delay graduation
- You'll have plenty of time to learn the field after graduating
- **Alternative: Chance to see firsthand what the field is like, where its going**
 - Talk to people in the field in the halls as well as go to talks
 - If your advisor won't pay, then pay it yourself
 - » Prof. Landay (Stanford) paid his own way to conferences while grad student
 - » There are student rates, can share a room
 - » Quarantine ⇒ virtual attendance option new normal



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IV. Don't trust your advisor

- Advisor is only interested in his or her own career, not yours
- Advisor may try to give you work to do, which uses up your time ⇒ could interfere with GPA & delay graduation

- **Alternative: Try trusting your advisor**

- Primary attraction of campus vs. research lab is grad students
- Grad students are the reward for academic career
 - » Faculty careers judged by success of their students
- Why not try taking advice of a successful Professor?



Alternatives to a Bad Graduate Career

- **Advice from a very successful “student”;**
Remzi Arpaci (now Wisconsin CS Chair)
 - Dave: Why do you think you did so well?
 - Remzi: Advice you gave me first week I arrived
 - Dave: What did I say?
 - Remzi: 3 observations, still good advice
- 1. **“Swim or Sink”**
 - “Success is determined by me (student) primarily”
 - Faculty will set up opportunity, but its up to me leverage it
- 2. **“Read/learn on your own”**
 - “Related to 1), I think you told me this as you handed me a stack of about 20 papers”
- 3. **“Teach your advisor”**
 - “I really liked this concept; go out and learn about something and then teach the professor”
 - Fast moving field, don’t expect Prof to be at forefront everywhere

