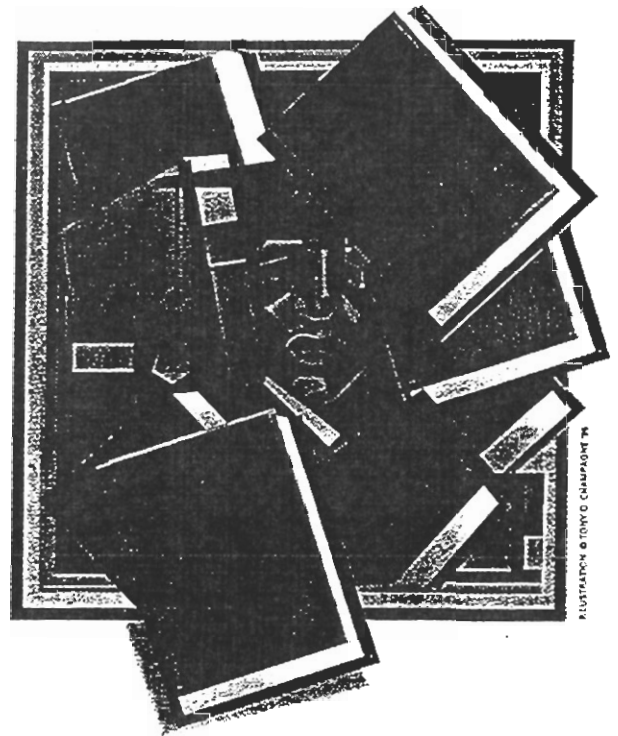


# How to Succeed In Graduate School

By Dereck J. Rovaris, Sr.



Many of you have already decided whether to pursue graduate studies. Either you are currently enrolled in a graduate program or you have decided to do so soon. (Note: If you fall into the latter group, do not allow "soon" to become "a long time from now.") If you have not yet decided to enroll, you should be reminded that regardless of your postbaccalaureate dream, today's equation for success requires training and education beyond the bachelor's degree.

Graduate school is no longer just "a good idea." Graduate education has become an entry-level requirement for many of the more desirable professional positions. Further, there is a critical shortage of African Americans with advanced degrees (especially the PhD) who conduct research, publish, or teach about the many issues and agendas that directly impact our lives. Your pursuit of graduate studies could have a direct effect on this urgent shortage.

If you have decided to go to graduate school, you have chosen well. If

you have not already done so, you should contact your favorite faculty member to discuss the graduate school process. It is not a process that can be taken lightly and, like anything else that is worth having, it will require a great deal of work. Nevertheless, it is not an impossible task, especially if you plan. Starting early is crucial, and consulting good resources also will be helpful. Several such resources include: Educational Testing Service's *GRE/CGS Directory of Graduate Programs*; the Council of Graduate Schools' *Graduate School and You: A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students*; and Daniel Cassidy's *The Graduate Scholarship Book*. These are all quite good, but perhaps the most comprehensive source of graduate school opportunities exists in the multi-volume set of books commonly referred to as "The Peterson's Guides." *Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs* can be found in most college library reference rooms. These materials will prove invaluable.

Upon completing your initial investigation about graduate school oppor-

tunities, you may yet be confused about application and admission. Although the process includes an assortment of tasks, it is fairly standard from school to school. It does require diligence and dedication; therefore it cannot be approached cavalierly. It also requires that you begin the process early! Do not procrastinate!

You should begin thinking about your graduate career as early as possible. It is not too early for freshmen or sophomores to start inquiring about options and planning. Successful graduate school applicants often will have participated in summer research internships and graduate recruitment fairs during their undergraduate careers. The wise student will begin the actual application process no later than one year before his or her expected date of graduate admission. (For more on the application process, see article by Elaine Copeland and Ave Alvarado.)

## Politics Of Graduate School

The following is a collection of suggestions for the successful navigation

of the graduate school process. For many students, this is an unfamiliar process and perhaps an unfamiliar environment. As a result, a great deal of confusion and uncertainty often develops. Some students quickly make the necessary adjustments, some get frustrated and respond inappropriately, and some never figure out what's happening. In any case, these pointers are provided to help graduate students anticipate situations and avoid potential problems.

### **It's All In The Department**

- DON'T underestimate the importance of the department. Think of yourself not as being enrolled in a university, but as enrolled in a *department*.
- DON'T get caught up in department gossip. Mess is mess.
- DON'T volunteer information about your graduate school funding or personal finances to people who have no influence on these funds. Your money is your business.
- DON'T leave your advisor in the dark. Keep him or her informed and keep notes of all agreements.
- DON'T assume anything. Always check information out and verify it in writing, e.g., policies, requirements, deadlines.
- DO identify faculty and student advocates to help you should the need arise. Identify them BEFORE a problem arises.
- DO establish good rapport with the secretaries. Your chairperson is important and so is your advisor, but the secretaries run the show.
- DO maintain positive relationships with the faculty, especially your advisor. You never know whom you will need.
- DO create a calendar that clearly plots the steps and self-imposed deadlines required for degree completion. If you don't plan, your chances for success are minimized.
- DO keep a file of all written correspondence and catalogs. Document everything; you never know what you might have to prove later.

### **How's Your Social Life?**

- DON'T let dating, partying, hanging in the gym, watching t.v., or other social activities interfere with your schoolwork. Make time for these activities, but keep everything in proper perspective.
- DON'T let relationship problems disrupt your studies or dramatically alter your academic pursuits. It ain't worth it.
- DON'T let family or friends distract you from your goal: True friends and supportive family members will understand.
- DON'T get so involved in your schoolwork that you neglect a healthy relationship. A truly healthy relationship will enable you to complete your program faster.
- DO get involved in study groups and other academic endeavors. Two heads are better than one.
- DO socialize with department associates. You don't have to like them a whole lot, but you do have to work with them.
- DO establish healthy, functional relationships that don't interfere with your academic progress. Life is not all graduate school, so you will need these relationships to sustain and reaffirm your goals.
- DO make time for enjoyable activities outside of academic work. All work and no play makes Jack/Jill a dull boy/girl.
- DO get involved in service to your community that allows you to share your talents. Your community needs this, and so do you.
- DO maintain a positive spiritual relationship. Above all else, your faith will see you through.

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### **Race Matters**

- DON'T assume that everything bad that happens is a result of racism. You may have brought the misfortune on yourself.
- DON'T take on the entire burdens of your race. You should not take blame for inappropriate behavior of people who happen to belong to your race.
- DON'T become the official spokesperson for your race. You don't have to answer questions that begin, "How do people from your race feel about..."
- DON'T fight causes you can't win. Choose your battles carefully and make sure they are worth your investment.
- DON'T exclude people from outside of your race: It often will be necessary to work with other groups in order to accomplish your goals.
- DO be supportive of others with similar backgrounds: There is strength in numbers; working together and sharing can often make all the difference.
- DO remember where you came from. When things get really bad, the folks where you come from will help you the most.
- DO research issues that are important to you: Your agenda might be very different from the mainstream.
- DO establish and nourish a strong sense of self: Knowing who you are will make life easier when you are challenged on the basis of your race, gender, religion, or other defining characteristics.
- DO go when invited. Go even if you don't want to listen to "that kind of music" or eat "that kind of food."

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### **To Thine Own Self Be True**

- Always respect yourself.*
- Always maintain your personal integrity.*
- Always help someone else when you can.*
- Always rely on your spiritual strength.*
- Always set higher goals.*
- Always meet deadlines.*
- Always check your work.*
- Always remember your primary goal. □*