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How Am I Doing? Checklist for Doctoral Students at Various Stages of Their Program

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Most doctoral programs inherently have a lack of structure associated with them. It's the nature of the business. While there might be course requirements and program guidelines, the process of developing competent candidates for the doctoral market is not well defined and is highly idiosyncratic for every student. Faculty are often asked by doctoral students, "How am I doing." Their response usually stems around the administrative components of doctoral study. "You seem to have your coursework in order," or "You are on schedule for your comprehensive exams," or "Why don't you consider doing this course?" Such responses are necessary, but incomplete. They do not reflect how doctoral students are doing as budding researchers (or teachers) at their current stage of the program.

I came across this amusing analogy between stages of doctoral study and the seven dwarfs (in the Snow White fairy tale). Doctoral students are like all seven dwarfs at different stages of their program. At first they are Dopey and Bashful. In the middle, they are usually sick (Sneezy), tired (Sleepy), and irritable (Grumpy). But at the end, they're called Doc, and then they are Happy (<http://www.cs.unc.edu/~azuma/hitch4.html>). While this may get a chuckle, I think the idea of stages of development in a doctoral program has merit. I have had the delightful experience of working with dozens of doctoral students in various capacities and in various stages of their program. And I have observed students go through a

maturity cycle of sorts as they develop their research and teaching skills. The pace and acuity of development might vary by student based on their capability, motivation, ability to manage their program (see "10 Mistakes Students Make in Managing their Program," *Decision Line*, May 2001) or manage their advisor (see "Interaction Between a Doctoral Student and Advisor: Making It Work!", *Decision Line*, January 2003). But the stages generally remain the same.

In my observations, students go through four stages, roughly reflecting the four years of typical doctoral study: Exploration, Engagement, Consolidation, and Entry.

The Stage of Exploration epitomizes first-year students. Despite the plethora of voluminous research many students do when searching for the right program, it doesn't really hit them until they are actually in the program. Here's when they realize that doctoral study is different—really different—from, say, a professional master's program. Here's when they hear their seniors tell them how hard they need to work, the battles of the job market, comprehensive exam pressures, and the importance of working on research outside the classroom. Many of these concepts are new to the students and they have to battle this noise as they deal with seminars and research articles not written for the common man, and statistical techniques that they never knew existed. It's tough—and to succeed they need to take a deep breath and explore, question and learn about where they are, what are



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they doing there, and where they are going.

The Stage of Engagement is further up the value-added axis. This is exploration with a purpose. Students begin to have a sense of doctoral study and their position in their institution and (perhaps) their chosen profession. This is the stage where students engage with faculty, with published work, and with research ideas. They also begin to sense their path of success through the program—the colleagues and faculty they will need to interact with, and a sense of research areas and methods they particularly enjoy. Of course, it's still a struggle for many to prioritize—opportunities are increasing and time is becoming increasingly scarce as students navigate between the broad view and the more narrow personal view of research.

The Stage of Consolidation is when ideas crystallize. Students in this stage are engaged tighter. They are committed. The institution is committed—irreversibly if the students pass their comprehensive examinations. By now, students should have a very good sense of their field and its structure, and the ability to position research within that structure. The student should be able to traverse up and down between the supra-system (the broad field) and the sub-system (individual research). Dissertation ideas should be developed in this stage, as the personal view of research dominates the latter part of this stage. Students should also develop their engagement with the broader profession as they package themselves for the job market.

Finally, *the Stage of Entry* is the final thrust before the student formally enters the profession as a peer. This could be a particularly challenging stage as the student has one foot in the home institution and another foot trying to move outside it. Broader notions of career, research stream, and tenure enter the student's consciousness, as do family, location, and job satisfaction. The "light at the end of the tunnel" keeps the student going as the process culminates with a doctoral degree.

Below, I have put together a quick checklist of the four stages that might be useful for students and faculty to respond to that tricky question—how am I doing? The stages roughly correspond to the four years of a typical program—although there could be variance in the nature of the programs themselves, the student's acumen and approach, and the alignment between time and stages. It's important to note that motivation is critical to keep going through these unstructured processes—and much of this stems from the excitement of a knowledge-centric career.

Finally, I would like to add that while the maturity cycle might be complete within the administrative framework of the doctoral program, it is far from complete when one considers that we continue to evolve and learn as we mature as researchers and in our respective careers.

Checklist for Doctoral Students at Various Stages of their Program

End of Year 0 (Just Before Entering the Program):

- Are You Motivated to Do This
 - Does a research and teaching career appeal to you?
 - Does the idea of generating and disseminating knowledge excite you?

DIAGNOSTICS - If you answered NO to these, QUIT NOW!

End of First Year in the Program

- Are You Motivated to Do This
 - Does a research and teaching career appeal to you?
 - Does the idea of generating and disseminating knowledge excite you?
- Do you have a sense of research in your area by reading articles in major journals in your field?
- Have you tried to write an original proposal or engage in a research project?

- Are you getting a sense of the variety of research methods, and getting in-depth knowledge in a few?
- Are you beginning to develop a local network of faculty and students with whom you think you can collaborate?
- Are you drifting toward areas that are more exciting to you?
- Are you organizing your program and developing plans of action for each year of doctoral study?

DIAGNOSTICS – Work on the tendency toward NO responses

End of Second Year in the Program

- Are You Motivated to Do This
 - Does a research and teaching career appeal to you?
 - Does the idea of generating and disseminating knowledge excite you?
- Have you completed a research paper for submission to a conference (or a journal)?
- Have you had the opportunity to present your ideas in a group setting?
- Are you getting a good understanding of a variety of research methods and tools?
- Can you see the integration of articles that you read as you begin to create your schema (structure) of the field?
- Have you established a small portfolio of projects with peers and faculty that are important to you?
- Are you converging through your readings and topics on an area that could be the foundation for a dissertation?
- Are you prioritizing your time and managing your various activities well?

DIAGNOSTICS – Work on the tendency toward NO responses

End of Third Year in the Program

- Are You Motivated to Do This . . .*
 - Does a research and teaching career appeal to you?*
 - Does the idea of generating and disseminating knowledge excite you?*
- Have you experienced a review process with your submissions?
- Have you had the opportunity to present your ideas at a regional/national conference?
- Have you had the opportunity to review a submission to a conference or a journal?
- Can you read articles more efficiently and rapidly integrate them into your stable schema?
- Have you passed your comprehensive examination?
- Have you developed an idea for your dissertation and defended your proposal?
- Are you very comfortable with your proposed methodology?
- Have you honed your presentation skills, particularly for the proposal?
- Have you entered the job market?
- Have you identified your dissertation chair/committee that is on-board with your topic?

- Have you had the responsibility for teaching a course?

DIAGNOSTICS – Work on the tendency toward NO responses

End of Fourth Year in the Program

- Are You Motivated to CONTINUE Doing This . . .*
 - Does a research and teaching career appeal to you?*
 - Does the idea of generating and disseminating knowledge excite you?*
- Have your articles been accepted in conferences or journals?
- Have you attended a national conference in your field?
- Have you defended your dissertation?
- Have you structured a research program from your projects and dissertation?
- Have you developed a set of competencies that you can bring to collaborative efforts?
- Have you interacted with peers outside your institution that share your interests?
- Have you got a job?

DIAGNOSTICS – Work on the tendency toward NO responses ■

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DEAN, from page 23

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