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Some Pragmatic Advice to Graduate Students: A Hybridization of Stearns, Huey, and Binkley

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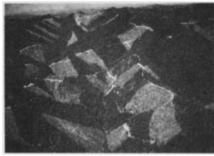
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# CONTRIBUTIONS

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## Commentary

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### Some Pragmatic Advice to Graduate Students: a Hybridization of Stearns, Huey, and Binkley

As a graduate recently completing a 10-year sojourn in post-baccalaureate study, I thought this forum appropriate to address the recent articles by Stearns (1987), Huey (1987), and Binkley (1988) on the complexities of a graduate career. I wish to reemphasize Huey's (1987) statement that there is no single best blueprint for a successful and productive graduate career. I believe, however, that certain elements must be incorporated into any tactical attempt at completing a graduate degree in ecology.

#### *Initial premise*

Although implied by Stearns, Huey, and Binkley, I believe that this fact should be made explicit: complete dedication is essential. Anything less than a total commitment inevitably will be counterproductive. If you aren't sure whether graduate school is the right choice for you, then it probably isn't. Nothing is more obvious to your major advisor, committee members, and graduate student colleagues than a halfhearted effort. You will alienate everyone if you waste their precious time. Most are willing and eager to help, but it is your responsibility to prove that you merit their assistance.

#### *Hope for the best but be prepared for the worst*

Herein lies the first hybridization. Somewhere between "nobody cares about you" (Stearns 1987) and "always expect the best" (Huey 1987) lies cautious optimism. You will learn quickly in your program who can be trusted and who is a bubonic siphonapteran. Trust your instincts. When in doubt, seek the advice of your mentor first, then that of experienced graduate students if necessary. After all, only your major professor can protect you in case of a disaster such as a disgruntled, uncooperative, or offended committee member. Establish trust and candid communication with your advisor as soon as possible; they'll go to bat for you if they're worth their salt.

#### *On psychological problems*

As Stearns points out, the pressures inherent in a graduate career (particularly from deadlines) are enormous. You must be psychologically stable. Emotional problems with your significant other, parents, friends, or pet python will at best delay and at worst ruin your chance for completing your thesis/dissertation.

#### *On financial stability*

Unfortunately, this highly sensitive and critically important subject is not given the emphasis it rightfully deserves by either Stearns, Huey, or Binkley. Eating and paying rent (and perhaps purchasing the occasional book) are not luxuries; they are necessities. Some graduate advi-

sors and committee members may lose sight of this fact. Financial problems are particularly acute for the contemporary graduate student who often must help support a family. Inadequate funding can exacerbate psychological problems or even force you to quit the program prematurely. I have listed below what I feel is a reasonable priority of methods to obtain funding.

1) Seek grant/fellowship support. If your department has a graduate coordinator, either they or their secretary may have a list of potential sources. If this fails, try the graduate school office of your institution. There is a plethora of possible funding sources, including NSF, NIH, and professional societies; quite often, in-house awards/fellowships are available (albeit highly competitive) from your own institution. You might also shop around your department (especially your mentor) for research assistantships.

2) Teaching assistant stipends. Although this option can provide invaluable assets such as enhancement of teaching skills (and thus your marketability), and it may provide long-term support, be forewarned that it is time-consuming. Furthermore, it probably will take you away from your research considerably more than option 1.

3) Seek part-time or, if necessary, full-time employment in an academic setting. Some universities allow graduate students to teach classes such as non-major science courses. A local junior college is another pos-

sibility. Use this option only when all else fails (and it may). This option is still superior to packing bags at the local supermarket.

*Choose your major advisor carefully, before you select your institution*

Although Stearns, Huey, and Binkley all stress the imperative of mutual respect between mentor and graduate student, only Stearns mentions this most critical precursor: practice preventive medicine. Ask someone you trust, perhaps an undergraduate professor/counselor, about the ability of your prospective advisor to establish productive relationships with graduate students. Travel to their institution on a fact-finding tour. Meet with them personally (a phone call is not the same) and consult as many of their graduate students as possible. Chances are if most of the graduate students are notably disgruntled with their advisor, you may be as well, should you select that program.

*Rely on your major advisor for informed guidance*

In my opinion, any attempt to "manage your advisor" (Stearns

1987) may be misconstrued as arrogance. Although it is critical to establish your independence (particularly in terms of aggressive, logical thinking), remember one key fact: you become truly independent only after you graduate. Until you have that precious sheepskin framed and on the wall, your career is in their hands. The responsible advisor/committee member will encourage increasing levels of independence as you progress. Inform your major advisor early about your perceived inadequacies and accept their guidance about which courses to take, timetables for completion of qualifying examinations and language requirements, etc. Ask to participate in their research projects. They will welcome the help and you may get a junior authorship out of the deal.

*Make yourself visible to the scientific community A.S.A.P.*

Publish both quality papers and minor efforts. At this point in your career, even something as trivial as a note (new technique, behavioral observation, range extension, etc.) will familiarize your future colleagues with your name. I am in complete agreement with Huey in that attend-

ing conferences, giving papers, and joining professional societies will both hone your skills (e.g., oratorical ability) and enhance your chances of completing your degree and obtaining gainful employment in your chosen profession.

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