

Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum
Informal Advice from a Few Faculty
(Professors Sadler, Mocanu and Afrouzi)
Based on a Meeting of Faculty and Graduate Students
Fall 2023

As a reminder, here is a blurb on what “the hidden curriculum” means:

A pervasive concern among graduate students is that there is little transparency or explicit guidance about individual things that would help one succeed in academia. For example: How does one acquire an advisor, or find RA work? When is it best to work as a TA as opposed to work as an RA? How does one get involved in writing referee reports for journals? Which conferences are best to attend? Answers to these questions often rely on students having informal networks among themselves, which can encourage structural disparities in knowledge.

In this document, we want to make things a little more transparent and equalize the playing field. The primary topics are: presentation tips, securing GRAs, and finding the right advisor.

Presentation Tips

- The ultimate goal is to figure out what is the best way to communicate your research to the faculty who are in the colloquium and who will eventually be part of your dissertation committee, and plan your presentations accordingly. The goal of the presentation is not to show how much work you’ve done, but to be able to communicate what your research question is and explain the method to answer that question, the results, and why it’s important.
- Think about what kind of feedback you want to get out of the presentation.
- Attend presentations of fellow students, even if they’re not completely related, and learn from things that work and things that don’t work.
- Common pitfalls:
 - Students presenting with the assumption that the audience already knows the background to your research question. Ask yourself: what is the minimum amount of information you should share with someone who has no knowledge of your field.
 - Make sure your audience knows where your presentation is going: state in the beginning what your findings are. Repetition is not a bad thing. Start off with the main points and findings, and then follow with the details on how you got to these findings..

Securing GRAs

Should we pursue GRAs in other fields that we’re not as familiar with?

- It’s a good idea to engage in exploration, particularly earlier in the program (2nd year). It will help you in crafting research later on that has a broader appeal.

- You can get familiar with other fields through RAships or attending seminars/colloquia. Though seminars/colloquia are more recommended since they require less of a commitment than an RAship.

Finding the Right Advisor

- Diversify: Don't only talk to one person or rely only on your main advisor. Try to get multiple perspectives when it comes to your defense committee.
- As a main advisor it is useful to have a senior faculty because their recommendation letter will be worth more. But be sure to talk to junior faculty as well because they are more involved in current research and. Usually senior faculty are good at giving you advice on the direction of your research and how well it would be received. Junior faculty will be stronger at advising you on the techniques. Also keep in mind that senior faculty might not be able to give you as much time as junior faculty - so reach out to both.
- Be pushy - faculty are busy, so if they don't respond - follow up. Reminders are much appreciated.

Additional Questions

1. Picking classes after your second year:

Depends on field and prior preparation. Could be an opportunity to fill in some gaps so you build a broader toolkit. You may be exposed to novel ideas that you can then incorporate into your own research. How many classes you take depends on the opportunity cost and whether this will affect time committed to your own research. Auditing is a way to get something out of the course without having to commit fully to the workload.

2. What is a good research question for a paper?

Get comfortable with the fact that you're going to come up with a lot of ideas and many of those ideas are bad - it's part of the process. When you read papers and attend presentations, try to ask yourself what makes this a good research question; ask faculty as well what they think of the papers and this will help you learn to evaluate research questions, you'll start to get an idea of what makes an idea good or bad. When it comes to the ideas that you come up with, ask yourself : why is this a bad idea? If you can't come up with a reason why something is a bad idea, then it's probably a good idea.

If you really believe in an idea, talk to as many professors as possible. Don't get deterred by one negative opinion. It could be that you're not communicating your idea clearly; use their feedback to clarify your research question and repitch your idea.

If you have a lot of ideas, talk with your fellow students first before talking to your advisor - talking to your peers first can help filter out the weaker ideas and encourage those that are more promising. Also, give new ideas a week to marinate before you approach your advisor.