Sociology Graduate School Principles:
A set of critical, everyday practices

By Dr. Collins

By way of introduction to graduate school, I hope to offer you here some everyday practices that may help guide you as you learn the culture of graduate school and work towards getting the most out of your two years with us.

Your goal this Fall semester is three-fold: (1) Learn and apply these practices, (2) determine what your terminating option will be from the program – thesis, project, or comp exams, and (3) meet with all faculty and determine who will advise your thesis or project if you choose one of these exiting options.

- **Remain open to being challenged and to transforming your sociological perspective** – Graduate school is an intellectual journey. You may come in with ideas, interests, and skills but remain open to your intellectual trajectory changing in ways you would not have anticipated. Be careful of coming in committed to the idea that you have your two years carefully planned out because there will be an immense amount of learning and growth that will take place in seminars, in relationship to faculty, in your research and from your graduate cohort. Changing your ideas and interests as you go along is part of the intellectual experience of graduate school; embrace this journey!

- **Build and draw from intellectual & cohort communities** – Graduate cohorts are powerfully supportive communities that allow students to make it through graduate school. Build this community while you are here – share your work, read drafts, practice presentations, give constructive feedback & pep talks, share resources & ideas, make collective dinners, and show up to meetings and activist events! You all have skills so be sure to share them and ask for help when you need it.

- **Push yourself and get out there to learn things on your own** – You will be the author of all your work in graduate school and, though you may seek support and mentorship, in the end, you are responsible for starting, designing, writing, correcting, and finishing graduate work. Don’t wait for your professor to do this for you; become the best advocate and investigative researcher for your chosen trajectory – ask questions of older graduates, faculty, reference librarians, etc.; get to the library and try to figure things out on your own or to expand your knowledge in any given area.

- **Learn how to analyze and write about the theory and method nexus in sociological work** – Sounds abstract but understanding and writing about how sociological frameworks and method guide research and argument building is key to the work we do. Seeing and analytically expanding upon the theory-method nexus in other researchers’ work allows you to write better seminar papers, MA exams, literature reviews, and research questions.

- **Reject the urge to rush to critique** – in both your course readings and in your fellow graduate students’ work and ideas. Critique is the easy way out; it does not allow you
to build your ideas or your fellow students. Try to explore what is working with someone’s work and *why it works*. If something is not working, or is problematic, suggest an alternative; *how can this work be improved?*

- **Avoid the culture of complaint in graduate school; just get to work!** – Be prepared to read, write, and research A LOT. Never tell your professor that there is too much reading or that you don’t know how to get to the library to learn more about a topic; that is why you are here! Prepare to do reading on your own and in preparation for your thesis, project, or MA comp exams.

- **Learn how to identify & practice core professional competencies that will help move you through the program** – This is the “cultural capital” that Pierre Bourdieu speaks of. Much of what you learn in graduate school that ensures your future success are the subtle knowledge and practices that you absorb from your academic community outside of the classroom. For instance, how do you network with colleagues; how do you learn about employment, teaching, or grant opportunities? How do you speak about your work in such way that different audiences will be interested in it and to augment your publishing opportunities? Become a sociologist of your sociology program and look out for, analyze, and practice the core professional competencies that will ensure your success.