

Graduate School is 1/3 George Strait, 1/3 Kanye West, and 1/3 Paula Radcliffe

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Abstract

This essay provides a set of lessons to help students cope with the pressures of graduate school. I think surviving graduate school is a combination of lessons that we can derive from George Strait, Kanye West, and Paula Radcliffe. George Strait's song lyrics help students understand that the lower pay in the academy is compensated with intellectual freedom. Kanye West's lyrics provide insights into how to deal with what often seems like a constant barrage of criticism. And Paula Radcliffe's training regime suggests a useful way to approach to working in graduate school without fetishizing work for work's sake.

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1 Introduction

Graduate school can seem intimidating, scary, and exhausting. I know when I arrived at my program, I was unsure what to expect, how much to work effectively, or about the trade offs I was making in pursuing a career in the academy. This essay distills some lessons that I've learned along the way. My hope is that it will help graduate students feel more comfortable in their new career paths.

As I've thought more about how to approach graduate school, I've become convinced that George Strait, Kanye West, and Paula Radcliffe best define life in graduate school. George and Kanye's song lyrics and Paula's training approaches convey three core lessons that all graduate students should keep in mind. Those three lessons are:

- 1) Academics tend to be paid less than their counterparts in industry. But we also have incredible intellectual freedom. Never sacrifice that freedom. You'll be most successful when you choose projects that you find interesting.
- 2) Academics tend to face a lot of criticism. Understanding that everyone faces criticism will help you cope with it. As a corollary, hard work is almost never rewarded on its own.
- 3) Graduate students (and some professors) fetishize work for work's sake. This is a mistake. When working graduate students should work intensely and focus: I call this enduring *sustained agony*. But breaks and recovery are essential so that you can sustain agony.

Perhaps it is surprising that lessons about the academy are found in the lyrics of a great country music singer, the verses of my generation's greatest musical genius (that's Kanye), or from the training habits of the greatest distance runner ever. But, the pressures and concerns academics face are the same ones that anyone who is pursuing a challenging career path. Recognizing this commonality has always given me comfort and helped me to appropriately understand why I was facing some pressures.

Before diving into the advice, I want to offer several caveats. Perhaps the biggest: everything in this essay just comes from my own observations about the world, so the extent to which it applies to your own experience might be limited. And I'm certainly not claiming to have systematic insights into what happens in grad school. This is just my own arm-chair musing and the reader should take the advice with a fair bit of caution. Another caveat is that the advice I'll offer often takes the world as fixed, but I don't want the reader to take my advice as justifying the current system (even if I think some things work well!) I strongly believe we should make sure graduate students are well paid, we should avoid adjunctifying higher education, that we must foster cultures of productive criticism, and that there is no trade off between encouraging hard work and ensuring healthy work habits. But I recognize that graduate students are entering a world where all those things might not be true, so my advice explains my approach to navigating this imperfect world.

With those caveats in mind, I'll now explain why graduate school is 1/3 George Strait, 1/3 Kanye West, and 1/3 Paula Radcliffe.

2 “I Ain’t Got a Dime, But What I Got is Mine”

George Strait is the most successful country music artist of all time. He has had numerous number one songs and his musical influence expands well beyond country music. If you haven’t had the chance, I recommend listening to his music.

My favorite George Strait song is “Amarillo By Morning”, which Terry Stafford wrote in 1973 and George Strait popularized in 1982. “Amarillo By Morning” tells the tale of a rodeo cowboy who has sacrificed everything to chase his dream of making it in the rodeo. The lessons in this song do not come from the decision of a rodeo cowboy who shrugs off his wife leaving him.¹ Rather, it comes in the song when George Strait sings “I Ain’t Got A Dime/But what I got is mine/I ain’t rich/But lord, I’m free”.

This is ostensibly about the life of a rodeo cowboy, but I think it much more accurately describes an academic’s life. It is true that academics often make little money and are underpaid. But, we have freedom. Our freedom is the envy of many in the corporate world. (If you don’t believe me, go talk to a friend who is a big law associate or working at a corporate job). Academics get to think about what they want, to work on the papers they find interesting, to teach (some) classes that they find compelling, and to (often) set their own working hours. Indeed, this freedom is so important that it is enshrined in a key facet of our work: academic freedom. The freedom to make public arguments and to engage in public debate is something that few other positions can guarantee.

When discussing this with my graduate students I refer to my use of this freedom as my “academic rent”. At times in my career I have certainly empathized with George Strait when he said that “I ain’t got a dime”. But, as an academic “what I got is mine”. I get ownership of my ideas and where I direct my thoughts. This is my most cherished freedom. As soon I sacrifice my academic rent and merely work on projects because I think other people are interested or that the market will reward it then I might as well work in the private sector. My job gives the chance to work on what I find important. This has been essential to my happiness as an academic.

My defense of the academic rent is also instrumental. My experience has also been that when graduate students work on the projects they are most interested in they are more productive and ultimately more successful.

So it is foolish to enter the academy to be rich. But academics have a different kind of wealth, because “lord, I’m free”.

3 “Screams from the Haters Got a Nice Ring to It/I Guess Every Superhero Needs His Theme Music”

I have long admired Kanye West’s music. Not his personality, which can be abrasive, nor his public actions. But he is a musical genius. He has the ability to create sounds

¹I do not recommend sacrificing personal relationships to be an academic. Please stick with me.

and songs quite unlike any other artist. His music is infectious—like the best pop songs—while also pushing into new genres and innovating. If you somehow haven't heard West's music, download his best album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and listen closely.

West is a self-conscious man. This is hard in hip-hop communities, where criticism and bravado are regular features of the music. But he provides a road map for how he deals with the criticism. On Kanye's song "Power" (found on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*) he explains that "Screams from the Haters, got a nice ring to it/I guess every superhero needs his theme music". Not only does the criticism not bring Kanye down. It is essential to his experience. In fact, it is so important that if he were a superhero, it'd be his "theme music"!

Kanye's strategy is a useful coping mechanism for criticism in graduate school. We exist in a field where our work is intensely criticized. In graduate school our seminars are often about tearing down the very best work.² As graduate students we are exposed to criticism as we craft our dissertation, as we are on the market, and when we first receive journal reviews. It can often seem like we're deluged with feedback. And rarely does that feedback tell us we're doing a great job.

In every instance, we are subjected to "screams from the haters". But once we recognize that criticism happens to everyone, we can have a much healthier relationship with that criticism. Someone not being excited about your work does not devalue you. In fact, one of the best signs that you are having an impact is that lots of people have strong opinions about your scholarship. Then those criticisms can become your theme music. And a lot of criticism will make your work better. So someone intensely criticizing your project, as long as it is constructive, is actually a gift.

Kid Cudi, another genius rapper who regularly collaborates with Kanye, helps to explain one other closely related facet of graduate student life. Cudi remarks in "Mojo So Dope" that "These motherfuckers can't fathom the wizardry". As a graduate student you will often work hard on a problem. But unfortunately, hard work on its own isn't rewarded. Papers that are written quickly with little effort can be highly influential, while research that requires extensive work might fail to be published in a prestigious journal. In graduate school, I often felt that people failed to appreciate the effort in producing an estimate or a measure.

In each instance, I feel like my colleagues "can't fathom the wizardry". The criticism in those instances taught me a valuable lesson. Fancy methods, extensive data collection, or creative qualitative work on their own aren't enough. Rather, to write important papers you have to work hard at learning how to select problems, how to use research designs that optimize your work, and ultimately how to convey your work so that a broad community of scholars can read it.

And to make matters even worse, academics have a bad habit of rarely telling people they are doing a good job. Given all this, the key for me has been realizing that everyone is criticized and to seek out the wisdom in the criticism. This isn't easy. And we can do better. But knowing that everyone is criticized is helpful for knowing that criticism just means you're starting to form important ideas.³

²I wish they weren't, but that's a separate essay.

³The obvious corollary is that you should tell other people they are doing a good job. Read

4 Sustained Agony

A common piece of advice students receive at the start of graduate school is something like: “graduate school is not a sprint, it is a marathon”.⁴ I have always found this remark extremely discomfoting.

To see why this shouldn’t make you feel better about graduate school, consider the greatest marathon runner ever—Paula Radcliffe. Since 2003 she has held the Women’s world record for the marathon. Her world record time is 2:15:25 (2 hours, 15 minutes 25 seconds).

This is crazy fast. For 26.2 miles Paula Radcliffe completed a mile every 5 minutes and 10 seconds. Seriously, just incredible. This is approximately a 19 second 100 meter dash 422 times in a row. Or this is like going around a standard high school track in 1 minute and 17 seconds—105.4 times in a row.

If you still aren’t impressed, ask someone you know who runs marathons and ask them about that time. They will be impressed. Or, if you are physically able to run, strap on some shoes and go to a track and try to see how long you can hold her pace.

So, you see, I always get nervous when someone offers the marathon advice.

My nervousness aside, you might still be wondering: what does Paula Radcliffe’s elite athletic ability have to do with graduate school? A few years ago, I was working on compiling advice for incoming students and, just coincidentally, I had an advisee who was an elite track runner at Stanford. In other words, he was (is) a world class distance runner. I had recently gotten into running and had developed a curiosity around understanding how someone like Paula Radcliffe could train to accomplish her impressive feat. When he came to my office, I saw a chance to get some free running advice.

(For the record, he seemed much more interested in how to satisfy the program requirements.)

After some prodding he explained how modern training works. I’ll paraphrase what he said (I didn’t have a tape recorder running so you’re reading a quote filtered through about 5 years):

“Distance running used to be just about running far in training and then hoping adrenaline would carry you on race day. Now it is much more tactical. Running is all about strategy and being able to push your body at the right moment to win. To do this, in practice we work much harder. We push ourselves to endure *sustained agony*: the feeling where your entire body just wants to stop, but you keep going. ”

I nearly fell out of my chair when I heard the phrase “sustained agony”. As an Assistant Professor, it seemed to perfectly describe my life. And during some of the toughest periods I had in graduate school I felt like I was enduring sustained agony.

I don’t tell you this to scare you, but you too will endure sustained agony. Graduate school will help you find your limits. You’re going to have to work harder

their work closely. And mean it when you give them a compliment.

⁴If you ever run a marathon I strongly recommend making this joke at the starting line.

than you thought you could and you're going to face deadlines that will require you to produce output faster than you ever thought possible.

Trust me. You can do this. You have an incredible capacity to focus and do good work. Don't be afraid to work really hard.

But sustained agony only works if you rest like an elite distance runner. This is the key second part of my advisee's insight into running. He went on to explain that another development has been that distance runners had learned the value of rest. When they aren't running, they focus on recovery and relaxation. Junk miles don't help you run blazingly fast for an incredible distance. Working really hard when you're training and relaxing just as intensely when you're not running is the key to great times.

The same is true with graduate work. Merely logging hours at a computer isn't going to help you produce your best work. Rather, the most productive people that I know are the people who have figured out how to be focused while at work and then take regular breaks. Have a hobby. Exercise regularly. Maintain or develop a social network of people who aren't academics. And have someone you can talk to about your frustrations. Graduate school can be stressful, frustrating, and challenging. You should utilize counseling resources that your school provides and confide your worries in close friends, family, or your partner.

So Paula Radcliffe teaches us how to approach our job. When you're working, work hard. But you also have to relax. Recuperate. And take care of yourself. It is the only way to endure the "sustained agony" that can be parts of the graduate school "marathon".

5 George, Kanye, and Paula

Graduate school is 1/3 George Strait, 1/3 Kanye West, and 1/3 Paula Radcliffe. Academics are underpaid, but we're free. So pick projects that make *you* happy.

Graduate school is riddled with criticism. Remember, that we're all criticized and any evaluation of your work doesn't devalue you as a person. Also, we can all do better to make the academic world a kinder place with more productive criticism.

And finally, graduate school will force you to endure *sustained agony*: working very hard for a sustained period of time. But don't log junk hours. Focus when you're working and relax when you're away from the desk. Be sure to find someone you can talk to, exercise regularly, and take breaks.

George, Kanye, and Paula can teach us a lot, but one final lesson is about your cohort. Remember that you're all in this together. You'll be professional colleagues for the next 40 years and the members of your cohort are likely to be your best friends and most trusted confidants. Build strong networks with each other.

There is no sense that you're in competition with each other. (Your competition is at some other program, reading a much less introduction intro to graduate school). You'll all do better if you support each other.

"Be kind" should be the first rule of your cohort.

And remember, the opportunity to work hard in graduate school—to endure sustained agony—is an incredible privilege. Don't waste it.