

# Attitude Adjustment

By [James M. Van Wyck](#) / June 1, 2015

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**Note from T. E. Roberts, Instructor: While this essay addresses graduate students, I believe the author's advice can greatly benefit undergraduates as well.**

Three years ago I proudly waved my flip phone around and told anyone who cared (and many who didn't) that I hadn't a clue about social media, nor did I care to know about it, thank you very much. I liked reading my books, writing my papers and teaching my students.

Now, as a Ph.D. candidate currently working to help professionalize graduate students, I have a Twitter account, several suits and an iPhone. I've also undergone an attitudinal shift: I think differently about what a graduate student should know and do. Looking back on the flip phone version of myself, I'm struck by the disconnect between who I am now and who I was only a few years ago. What follows are some simple tips I'd have given myself if I could have tapped myself on the shoulder at graduate orientation.

**1. Twitter matters**, and you shouldn't wait till you are a fifth-year Ph.D. to realize this. You'll find a network of academic and nonacademics ready and waiting for you. So sign up and spend 10 minutes each morning and 10 minutes each evening learning the ropes and building a following.

**2. Networking matters.** Academics often don't like this word, but as [@elswafford](#) likes to say, "Networking -- it's just talking." Learn what an informational interview is and conduct at least two a semester. Learn to talk about your work in a positive, upbeat manner. Share your enthusiasm for your own work and that of others. Network with professors at colleges without graduate programs, or at institutions that have special collections and libraries with holdings in your subject matter, but no graduate students to claim the attention of archivists, librarians and other administrators. In other words, be strategic about your networking and set yourself up for success stories early in your graduate career. These smaller victories will set up larger successes down the road.

**3. Peers matter.** Network with your peers first. They typically make much better partners for much of the necessary work you'll do as a graduate student. Identify successful graduate students one to two years ahead of you and mimic their academic and social practices. Plus, as your peers progress, they'll become more and more valuable as contacts and resources. Forge lasting partnerships by caring about the work others are doing and helping them when you can.

**4. Skills matter.** If you're a Ph.D. candidate in the humanities, like I am, you'll have noticed that not everyone is securing academic employment. (Sarcasm alert.) In fact, most Ph.D.s don't end up with tenure-track positions. To prepare for compatible careers, you'll need to diversify your skills: if you need to take on part-time work while in graduate school, look for jobs that add skills to your portfolio rather than jobs that reinforce skills you already have.

**5. Planning matters.** Find an online calendar you can live with (I prefer Google Calendar) and make full use of it. When you see fellowship announcements or grant applications that you aren't yet qualified for, put down a reminder 10 months in the future. When the reminder pops up, you'll have two months to slowly produce a successful application or submission. Plan to acquire the necessary qualifications in the interim by identifying specific action steps and adding those plans to your calendar as well.

**6. Collaboration matters**, and it takes practice, so start early. Find a fellow graduate student (either within or without your own department) and cultivate a working relationship that has clear goals and outcomes (e.g., produce a pedagogical article, co-host an event, start a reading group, start a nonprofit).

**7. Undergraduates matter**, and not only because they'll review you at the end of the semester. They can give you valuable advice. For example, I often ask my classes for suggestions on subjects like technology, web development and what the next big thing in pop culture will be. I've found that even younger graduate students don't have their ears to the ground like undergraduates do. So ask questions of your students, especially about technology.

**8. Administrators matter.** At every step of your program, you should learn as much as you can about the people who work at your institution, from departmental administrators to the provost. Learn their names, find out what they do and always behave professionally online and offline when discussing your department, school and institution.

**9. Institutions matter.** While you'll need to manage your time wisely, don't ignore what is happening at your institution. Make sure you don't miss out on opportunities to network with visiting scholars because an event targets undergraduates. Also, use your contacts from every stage of your academic career, especially if you attended different types of institutions (public, private, religiously affiliated, etc.).

**10. Engagement matters.** Become adept at reaching out to volunteer agencies within and without your university. Find a service learning project on your campus and commit time and energy to a project that is outside the sphere of your dissertation's focus. Stretch your comfort zone in the classroom and beyond.

**11. Options matter.** You need to know that your best career path might not be a tenure-track job. You might learn to loathe the academy, or you might fall victim to its cruel calculus. Don't buy the myth that nonacademic careers are any less worthy than academic careers. You need, need, need to have multiple plans. Identify a few careers that align with your skill sets and cultivate opportunities and contacts that would help secure these jobs. Having multiple options will help you stave off fear and depression, two conditions that can stifle graduate students.

In some ways, I miss the flip phone days. And to be honest, I really only upgraded to an iPhone when my son came along: when it came to capturing cuteness, my old Nokia didn't cut it. The point isn't that you need to upgrade your gadgets, but that you need to approach graduate education as professional training. **In fact, it's better to regard yourself as a professional rather than a student. The sooner you begin acting like one, the better.** That's my two cents: please let me know in comments what you would tell yourself if you could travel back to your graduate student orientation session.