



# Succeeding in Graduate School

Tips from graduate students with disabilities

Women, people with disabilities, and some racial/ethnic groups—blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians—are underrepresented in challenging fields such as science and engineering. They constitute smaller percentages of science and engineering degree recipients and of employed scientists and engineers than they do of the overall U.S. population. Additionally, scientists and engineers with disabilities are more likely than those without disabilities to be unemployed or out of the labor force.

## Real World Advice

*AccessSTEM* and *AccessComputing* project staff, with funding from the National Science Foundation, are working toward increasing the success of students with disabilities in earning degrees and securing careers. In both projects, staff seek advice from individuals with disabilities who have “lived it” to better understand contributors to success and share advice with others.

In an active e-mentoring community, individuals with disabilities and mentors shared advice included in this publication about how individuals with disabilities can be successful in graduate coursework. Their disabilities include vision, hearing, mobility, learning, mental illness, attention, and other chronic health. Their experiences, perceptions, and advice can help others, including those with disabilities, transition to, succeed in, and graduate with advanced degrees. Advice related to transitioning to a graduate program are included in the companion publication *Moving On: Transitioning to Graduate School* at [www.uw.edu/doi/Brochures/Academics/grad\\_trans.html](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Brochures/Academics/grad_trans.html).

Note that some of the comments shared below have been modified for clarity.

## Graduate School Success Overall

- “Read about graduate school. I recommend the resources at the Chronicle of Higher Education and the books *Getting What You Came For* by Robert Peters and *How to Write a Lot* by Paul Silvia.”
- “Be proactive. In my experience, people who succeed in graduate school are extremely self-motivated and proactive in asking for what they need. In contrast, undergraduate work can be more passive—professors tell you what to do and how to do it. In graduate school, you’ll learn to make many decisions for yourself and be an independent scholar.”
- “Attend talks, both practice and formal, from other students in the department. You will learn how to structure talks and develop your own presentations.”
- “If possible, avoid locking yourself into a specific topic and working with a specific faculty member too early. A professor’s work might seem right up your alley, but you may find that your working styles are incompatible. Additionally, your opinion of subfields might change or funding for your research might not be available.”
- “Remember that you will continue to grow and develop as a person in graduate school. Your experiences will shape your interests and might lead you down a different path than initially anticipated.”
- “Be flexible and willing to adapt. Some advisors may not show up to meetings, and sometimes unforeseen circumstances may get in the way of your research.”



- “Set reasonable goals. It is good to challenge yourself, but remember that long-term stress isn’t healthy. You may be able to do anything you set your mind to, but you can’t do everything at once.”
- “Apply for scholarships and fellowships. Students with disabilities might be eligible for certain financial support opportunities such as the Google Lime Scholarship or might receive priority consideration for other types financial assistance.”

### **Supportive Relationships**

- “Choosing your advisor is crucial! Finding someone who is a good scientist, whose research you enjoy, and who is open-minded is a challenge, but worthwhile. I was so desperate to get into a program that I didn’t pay any attention to my advisor apart from the fact that she studied marine geophysics. I was her first graduate student and she didn’t have a project or funding for me. I had to make my own way. It worked out, but I recommend that you communicate with your potential future advisor before you arrive and maintain that communication once coursework begins.”
- “One of the most important aspects of graduate school is developing relationships with classmates, officemates, and others you spend time with. Most will probably be students in the same year as you, but don’t limit yourself. Older classmates are fonts of invaluable wisdom. Also make friends outside of the department. Never forget the value of a good lunch! Sitting down away from the office or a computer is a great chance to openly talk about your work. Most of the bigger challenges I faced in my own research were resolved from a long lunch talking with other students.”
- “Find mentors. There are different types of mentors. The first is your advisor; I highly recommend telling him or her about anything that might affect your work effort,

including medical needs due to your disability. Throughout your time as a graduate student, be sure to ask your advisor to push you and hold you to your responsibilities. A second mentor may be your department’s graduate advisor. This person serves all graduate students in the department and helps them navigate through graduate school. This includes making sure that the appropriate paperwork is filled out, requirements are met, and you are making adequate progress. Because of their job, graduate advisors likely have experiences working with a wider diversity of students than your research advisor. Third, consider finding a mentor through a formal mentoring program at your school.”

- “Seek assistance when needed. Know what your strengths are, discover what you can and can’t do and communicate that. There’s more independence in grad school, but that doesn’t mean you must do everything alone.”

### **Accommodations**

- “Decide when to disclose your disability and to whom. It depends on the situation regarding whether or not it is a good time to disclose. It is personal choice.”
- “When I provide my accommodation letters to my professors, most of them have a positive reaction and some of them show curiosity about how my learning disability affected the academic subject that they were teaching.”
- “In graduate school, I requested some standard accommodations; extended time on exams and a peer note taker.”
- “I didn’t want to have to request accommodations but I needed them, especially for the comprehensive examinations.”
- “I don’t try to hide my disability, but I prefer not to mention it either, unless I have time to explain my situation.”



- “In the past, I’ve always registered with the disabled student services office. I don’t think you need to tell a professor your exact diagnosis if you don’t want to. All that professors need to know is how to accommodate you.”
- “Since I am deaf and use an interpreter or transcriber it is nearly impossible to keep that information private. Personally, I think it is important to provide as much information about your disability and needs to a professor as possible, especially if they ask for additional information. I think it is part of my job to advocate not only for myself, but for students who come after me. Providing information to those who ask is a good way to fight prejudice and dispel myths.”
- “Since my learning disability is an invisible disability and my verbal communication skills are strong, people always seem surprised when I tell them I have a disability and they don’t always believe me at first. I like to help break people’s stereotypes.”
- “As a graduate instructor, I sometimes disclose my learning disability to students. It has gone very well because it helped them see that it is possible to be successful in school even if a disability exists. It can be a positive trait to have a learning disability and teach because often teachers with this experience think outside the box when developing curriculum.”
- “Manage your time to achieve a balance. Structure your life. When you start out, there may be a lot of graduate classes you need to take, but as you move forward your time becomes your own.”
- “Create a routine. It is wonderful to make your own schedule; especially as an individual with a disability—the added flexibility is amazing. However, if you do not structure your time carefully, its easy to get distracted, fall behind, or feel lost.”
- “Get involved! It is hard to make time for this, but it is so important. Campus activities, student groups, seminars, workshops, conferences, and community outreach are just a few ways to put yourself out there, meet people, and make a difference.”
- “At least once a week, take a walk, read a book, see a movie, watch TV, or anything else that is just fun for you.”

### Writing Your Dissertation

### Course and Time Management

- “Avoid burnout. It is really easy to get burned out and discouraged. Make time to take care of yourself, and don’t forget to actually enjoy what you’re doing. Always keep your goals in front of you. As people with disabilities pursuing graduate degrees, we have the power to change the way people think. Others will see and hear about you and your work, and it will change their idea of what’s possible.”
- “Settle on a dissertation topic early and adhere to a timeline.”
- “When you have settled on a dissertation topic, practice giving an “elevator pitch.” This is a short, thirty second talk about one-to-two sentences that describes your work at a high level. The idea is that you’ve run into a stellar researcher in an elevator and have that moment to get his or her attention. Once you have this talk worked out, you’ll find that your research will be more organized and directed.”
- “Start an annotated reference list on your dissertation topic from day one. Include the material you need for referencing it in the future and give some detail about how you found the paper. Was it from a class? A reading seminar? In another paper?”



- “Go to the library and find dissertations from other students in your department. Pay attention to their length and writing style.”
- “Keep on target with your thesis, capstone project, or dissertation and try to relate what you are doing in your classes to what you want to accomplish in your final work.”
- “Backup your files. Backup your backups.”

## Engage in *AccessSTEM* and *AccessComputing*

### For Students

If you are a high school or college student with a disability and are interested in pursuing a career in computing or in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM), consider joining the *AccessSTEM* or *AccessComputing* team. These teams provide opportunities for you to connect with mentors online and gain experience in your field of interest through projects and internships. For the *AccessSTEM Team Application*, visit [www.uw.edu/doit/Stem/team\\_app.html](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Stem/team_app.html). For the *AccessComputing Team Application*, visit [www.uw.edu/accesscomputing/team\\_app.html](http://www.uw.edu/accesscomputing/team_app.html).

### For Educators and Employers

*AccessSTEM* and *AccessComputing* also host Communities of Practice (CoPs) where individuals share perspectives and expertise and identify practices that promote the participation of people with disabilities in STEM and computing fields. For the full list of *AccessSTEM* CoPs, visit [www.uw.edu/doit/Stem/cop.html](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Stem/cop.html). For the full list of *AccessComputing* CoPs, visit [www.uw.edu/accesscomputing/cop.html](http://www.uw.edu/accesscomputing/cop.html). For further questions on opportunities available through *AccessSTEM* and *AccessComputing* email [doit@uw.edu](mailto:doit@uw.edu).

*AccessSTEM* is directed by the DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) Center at the University of Washington (UW). *AccessComputing* is co-sponsored by the UW Department of Computer Science and Engineering and the DO-IT Center. The DO-IT Center serves to increase the successful participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs such as those in science, engineering, mathematics, and technology.

For further information, to be placed on the DO-IT mailing list, request materials in an alternate format, or to make comments or suggestions about DO-IT publications or web pages, contact:

DO-IT  
Box 354842  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA 98195-4842  
[doit@uw.edu](mailto:doit@uw.edu)  
[www.uw.edu/doit/](http://www.uw.edu/doit/)  
206-685-DOIT (3648) (voice/TTY)  
888-972-DOIT (3648) (toll free voice/TTY)  
509-328-9331 (voice/TTY) Spokane  
206-221-4171 (fax)  
Founder and Director: Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

### Acknowledgment

This publication is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant #HRD-0833504, #CNS-1042260. Any opinions, findings, and conclusion or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Copyright © 2012, 2011, University of Washington. Permission is granted to copy these materials for educational, noncommercial purposes provided the source is acknowledged.



**University of Washington**  
College of Engineering  
UW Information Technology  
College of Education