

The Struggling Academic's Guide to Research

A leadership and management story

Joanne J. Ho

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This manuscript is currently available for \$2 with a suggested minimum donation of \$5 to support the ongoing development of this book. In return for your early support, you will have access to all future versions and editions of this book free of charge. (The price will go up as the book progresses.) To ensure that this book is the best that it can be, I welcome your feedback and suggestions at joanne@powerhouse360.com.

P.S. Please excuse the typos and grammatical inconsistencies during the early stages of this manuscript.

Introduction: The Research Adventure

You have committed yourself (or are about to commit) to a research project that will take years to finish. It might be undergraduate research, a Masters degree, or a Ph.D. Regardless of whether it takes one year, two years, or eight years, it is *your* valuable time and money you are putting on the table, and you better make sure that your time and money is well spent.

You are about to embark on a long journey in academic research. Think of this journey as an adventurous road trip. A road trip and academic research isn't so different. You're doing it because you're interested in achieving something more than simply getting from point A to point B. You want to discover new things along the way, and you want the journey to transform you into a better person. The only difference is, while you start at point A (where you are today), in research, you can only hypothesize the location of point B, and you can only become increasingly more certain of point B's location as you further your research. This is the nature of discovery, just as Columbus set voyage to to find a new trade route to the Indies, he arrived in America instead of India. He didn't find what he was looking for, but he discovered something else valuable– the trade winds (citation). You are on a discovery journey, and this book is designed to help you prepare for it.

What you need for this journey:

- A hypothesized destination
- A list of scenic destinations along the way (secondary goals such as knowledge or skills you want to pick up along the way, relationships you want to build)
- A roadmap
- A reliable vehicle and a trunk full of necessities (methodologies, books, lab equipment, a computer, an office space to do your work)
- Cash
- A plan to make more cash on the road in case you run out
- friends to bring on the journey (colleagues who work in your field)
- friends who stay at headquarters in case you need to call “Houston, we have a problem.”

Who should read this book

While this book focuses on the path to getting a Ph.D., many of the techniques and solutions apply to undergraduate and Masters level research as well. There are fundamental similarities to research, regardless of the discipline or title others prescribe to you. Learning to conduct research is a process, which gives you a set of leadership and managerial skills that you can apply professionally and personally beyond academia. Developing a broad vision and communicating that vision is a skill of great CEOs. Project management skills are an asset no matter where you work— academia, government, non-profit, corporate, or even at home.

Aim of this book

Each university operates differently, offers a different experience for their students, and sets different requirements as a rite of passage for students to become doctoral candidates and doctorates. Rather than focusing on the details of how-to, this book offers you the skills and tricks of the trade to formulate your own path, find your resources and manage them to your needs, so that you can make the best of your academic experience.

About methods conveyed in this book

During my first year as a doctoral student, I had friends working in the private sector. Over dinners and on social occasions, they told me about management and leadership skills they learned on the job and urged me to explore those skills and seek mentorship outside of academia. I sought help from people of all sorts of industries, and received advice from young managers up to seasoned CEOs. I read books on project management and slowly started treating my doctoral career as a start-up company with a single product— my dissertation. After graduation, I became formally trained as a certified ScrumMaster, a position that drives efficiency within a team. I continued to develop these management skills after I finished my Ph.D. Many of the management techniques and concepts provided in this book are inspired by Agile Development, a framework and set of tools evolved from the Toyota Production System into a popularly used methodology in software development. In Agile Development, we focus not only on the goal and the path to achieve that goal, but also the people and the process you create for yourself to help you get there easier, faster, and happier.

My Story

People are surprised when I tell them I finished my doctorate degree in three years and a quarter. On the contrary, I am surprised people dedicate as many as eight years to graduate school. Getting a masters or doctoral degree is only a stepping stone to a far and greater place. In other words, there is no reason to dwell in school any longer than it takes to move on to the next place. For many, graduate studies is a time of struggle. If given the chance, they would minimize the amount of unpleasantness they experience during that time of their lives. That is why this book focuses on two major themes: 1) streamlining your work so that you achieve everything you want from graduate school as quickly as possible, and 2) actively manage the process of achievement so that you can turn this into a positive experience.

When I started my doctoral studies, I choose the school and department not only because they possessed the professional expertise I sought, but also for the level of personal commitment the faculty showed to their students. This turned out to be a great asset that set me up for success. Because of their personal commitment, I was able to form a committee– a group of five professors– who had my best interests at heart. They wanted me to graduate before I lost steam. They didn't want me to fall into uncontrollable financial debt. They cared about my professional future after I graduate. One professor advised me how to navigate through the narrow channels of departmental politics while avoiding getting caught in the web. My advisor cared about me so much that he would irregularly throw curve balls at me to make sure I'm on my toes.

When I started my graduate degree, I didn't have any concrete

goals for why I wanted to do a Ph.D. My only goal was to satisfy my personal curiosity, which was to resolve my metaphysical quandary about how humans should relate to and impact the greater environment. Compared to other species, we have disproportionate impacts to the environment, but we are undeniably a part of this ecosystem. I found my metaphysical answer by my second year. But professionally, I needed to develop some technical skills to help me transition to the next stage in my career. Those were my two goals for getting a Ph.D., and I was conscious that everything I did in those three and a quarter years brought me closer to achieving those goals.

Despite having spent four undergraduate years doing research, my undergraduate thesis was far more difficult to write than my masters or doctoral dissertation because I was still learning the ropes of the game and the skills and intuition to identify viable paths down the road. Those confusing and sometimes worrisome years paid off, as I figured out my own strategies and became more comfortable and felt in control of my environment.

Research is like a field sport. The first time you step onto the field, you might worry that you'll get hit by a ball. You might even embarrass yourself. As you play, you'll gradually feel more comfortable and trust your instincts. One day you'll even realize you're great at the game. Nobody becomes a pro without taking those first few nervous steps. Moreover, being a newbie gives you a free pass to look like an idiot. (You'll *really* embarrass yourself if you put off those stupid questions to ask at a conference or your final exam.)

This book is a collection of all the wisdom I have collected over the years from professors and professional mentors. With the guidance of these mentors, I felt bullet-proof throughout the nine

years of my academic journey. I share this wisdom in hope that every academic student will feel empowered to take charge of his/her journey, and actively pursue what he/she came to look for.

Part I

Goals