

Characteristics of Graduate School Superstars

Graduate school can be a traumatic experience. Some graduate students spend their time complaining about a heavy work load, uncaring attitudes of faculty, or constant pressure of being evaluated. These students quickly begin to devalue their graduate education, deny its relevance, and develop strategies that help them to "beat the system" (i.e., merely satisfying degree requirements without engaging in any actual learning). Graduate school for these people is an unpleasant experience to be endured, survived, and forgotten as quickly as possible.

Another group seems to thrive on their graduate education. According to Bloom and Bell (1979): "These are the few who proceed through the program with the minimum amount of difficulty and a maximum amount of quality performance. They are respected by the faculty, they receive the best financial assistance, they receive accolades, and as a group, they end up with the best employment" (p.231). These are the graduate school superstars. But what makes them so successful? Bloom and Bell identified four factors which were named most often by graduate school faculty to identify superstars they had known:

- *Visibility*: The most often mentioned behavioral characteristic was visibility. Superstars were observed to be physically present in the department, during and often after working hours.
- *Willingness to Work Hard*: The next most often mentioned quality was that they were hard working. It is important to point out that the superstars were perceived as hard working because faculty actually saw them working hard. Other students may have worked harder, but because they were working hard at home or in the library, they were not perceived to be as hard working as the superstars.
- *Reflection of Program Values*: A consistently mentioned quality was the faculty's perceptions of their professional values. These values were concordant with program values of research and scholarly excellence. Superstars also recognized the value of having contact with broad areas of psychology, even though their own programs might be highly specialized.
- *True Interest in Research*: Many students preparing for graduate school in clinical psychology may assume that clinical and counseling skills will be much more valuable to them in graduate school than their ability to perform research. However, potential clinicians should work equally as hard to develop their research skills in courses such as research methods, statistics, experimental lab courses, and directed research, as they do to develop their clinical and counseling skills. Superstars were engaged in ongoing research projects in addition to their MA and PhD theses. (Non-superstars did research because it was a degree requirement.) Superstars viewed research as an integral part of their discipline and a desirable and worthwhile activity for any professional psychologist. They were curious enough about a problem to want to see data on it.
- *Development of Relationship with a Mentor*: From the time they entered graduate school almost all superstars attached themselves to one or two faculty members with whom they

continued to work during the course of their training. Faculty reported that they "were easy to teach," "picked up things quickly," "could receive and use feedback well," "were not constant complainers," and "were able to grow into colleague status without taking advantage." In essence, the superstars listened, learned, grew, and produced through close working relationships with faculty.

Note that the above characteristics do not include intelligence, excellent grades, or writing ability. Perhaps these qualities are simply assumed to exist in superstars. The lesson to be learned from these findings is that success in graduate school is due to more than just raw brain power. It is also strongly affected by dedication, hard work, seriousness of commitment, clarity of goals, and a willingness to embrace the values of a program.

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