

# The Grad School Grind

FINDING A DELICATE BALANCE

BY MIRIAM SAULS

**A passion for thinking seems to be the common denominator among graduate students. They must be driven by something deep to weather the long journey to a Ph.D., with very little money or time for outside interests along the way.**



*Married with challenge: Grad students Antony John and Audrey Odom, who wed in May, stand on the threshold of balancing two academic careers*

To catch a glimpse into the harried life of a Duke graduate student, ask Audrey Odom '96 about her wedding weekend. Odom, an M.D.-Ph.D. student, describes how after she and her British fiancé, Antony John—a Duke graduate student in music—set their wedding date for early May, she learned she had been chosen to receive the prestigious Weintraub award for excellence in graduate study in the biological sciences. The meeting at which she and twelve others from across the nation were to receive the award was the same weekend as her wedding, but on the other side of the continent. No problem. Odom flew to Seattle on Thursday, gave a talk Friday morning, flew home on the red-eye, drove straight to her wedding rehearsal in High Point, and the next day said, “I do.”

Or ask Marco Davila, another M.D.-Ph.D. student, who had his heart set on proposing to his girlfriend at her graduation from her master's program at Columbia University in New York. Davila was too busy in his lab to do a lot of shopping around, so he purchased a diamond ring from the Internet. But he couldn't have it shipped to himself in Durham because on the way to his proposal, he, too, had a meeting in Seattle. No problem. He had the ring shipped to a FedEx office he had noticed near Columbia on a previous visit, took the red-eye back to North Carolina, walked across the airport, hopped another plane to New York, dashed to the FedEx office to pick up the ring between the graduation ceremony and reception without even being missed, breathed a sigh of relief that the ring had arrived and was as beautiful as advertised, and popped the question in Central Park. “She said yes.”

While these stories may be extreme examples of the pace of graduate life at Duke, they're typical of the level of dedication that can be found in campus labs and libraries where 2,200 graduate students quietly, almost invisibly, conduct their research. Cathy

CHRIS BILBRETH

N. Davidson, vice provost for interdisciplinary studies, welcomed the new class of graduate and professional school students last fall semester: “We are living in a cultural moment where adventure has been equated with speed, rapidity, innovation, change—extreme sports, extreme machines, extreme commerce, extreme success. At this glittering, speeded-up, excited, frantic, and frenetic moment, you have made a major commitment to opt out of the whirlwind in order to take time to become educated. Given the myths of our moment, I cannot imagine a

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“It is so rewarding to live and breathe a subject and finally make a contribution,” says Rob Deaner, a Ph.D. candidate in biological anthropology and anatomy. “And when others say, ‘This is interesting,’ or ‘I wish I had thought of that,’ it feels great.”

Biological chemistry stu-

comes back to the lab after her children’s bedtime. “We try to remain as flexible as possible,” she says. “And it’s hard sometimes. But I think I’m a better mom when I’m working. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be happy.”

Dwyer and her husband are used to taking turns. Midway into her graduate work at Johns Hopkins University, she took five years off from the rigors of academic research while her husband completed his Ph.D. She continued to work in labs, so she didn’t fall behind in her field or lose her rhythm, and she started back to school at Duke when her husband got a job in Research Triangle Park. “It helps to have a husband who has been through it himself, so he is very supportive. We planned and saved a long time for this and he has a good income now.”



PHOTOS BY CHRIS HILDRETH

more daring possibility than the one you have chosen. Let’s call it extreme thoughtfulness.”

A passion for thinking seems to be the common denominator among graduate students, whether they study cell biology or cultural anthropology, philosophy or theology, biomedical engineering or environmental engineering. They must be driven by something very deep to weather the six- or eight-year journey to a Ph.D., with very little money or time for outside interests along the way.

While maintaining focus on a subject for more than half a decade can be tough, sometimes the real challenge is to disconnect from the work. “I love science and I love bench work, and it can be difficult to pull myself away,” says Davila. “The most difficult thing for me is to be able to recognize that I have responsibilities outside of my education. I get infinite pleasure from my work.”

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ing her dissertation on the United States’ occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, says she feels privileged to have spent her twenties in graduate school. “It’s not a luxurious life, but I got to sit around and think big thoughts and write about them, and get paid for it.”

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dent John Hatten agrees. “It’s exciting when something works. You start with a theory and prove it and learn something no one knew before. That’s the greatest joy.” But no matter the joy, Hatten can’t stay in his lab all the time testing theories. His time is divided between his research; his family of a wife, a three-year-old, and a one-year-old; and a part-time job doing genetic sequencing to make ends meet. “I’m working on new broad-spectrum antibiotics for tuberculosis,” he says. “I enjoy the work, but I feel a great personal loss if I don’t see my kids for an entire day, so often I come home and eat dinner with them and then go back to the lab after they’re in bed.”

*Food for thought: Hatten at dinner with his family before returning to work in his lab*

Molecular physics student Mary Dwyer knows how that feels. She juggles her long hours in the lab with rearing three children, ages eight, five, and three. She and her husband take turns with afternoon duty, and on the days she takes the afternoons, she often

Dwyer would like to follow her husband into industry, but many students want to stay in academe. Kylie Prymus, a Duke Endowment Fellow, James B. Duke Fellow, and University Scholar, has known for a while that he wanted to study philosophy in graduate school and then teach others. During his senior year of high school, an English teacher turned him on to philosophy, so he decided to major in the subject at Howard University. Then, through the Institute for Recruitment of Teachers (IRT), whose mission is to help minority students seek advanced degrees for careers in teaching, he found out about the graduate program in philosophy at Duke. Duke is a consortium member of IRT and has made a commitment to recruit IRT students. “What I enjoy

is enlightening other people to philosophy,” he says. “Besides, with a Ph.D. in philosophy, you can only teach or stand on a street corner and ask for change.”

Nayeli Garci-Crespo, an international student from Mexico in the film and video Ph.D. program, has seen her own interest in teaching wax and wane during her graduate

Duke is clustered with North Carolina Central University, Guilford College, Durham Technical Community College, Elon College, and Meredith College, and graduate students can make site visits or establish mentoring relationships with faculty at the sister institutions. Pedagogical workshops are held to teach the basic elements of teaching, and Fel-

and ethnic backgrounds, to gay and lesbian students, to students with disabilities, and to many other groups by making sure they know about the resources available to them. A recent issue of *The GRIND*, the graduate student newsletter published by the Student Affairs office, presented a long list of student groups, including the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association, Duke Chinese Students and Scholars Association, the Native American Student Coalition, Queer Grads, the Turkish Students Association, and Women in Science and Engineering.

“After only four issues of *The GRIND*, our newsletter has become a true community builder,” says Jacqueline Looney, associate dean of the Graduate School. “We wanted to have a publication that reflects the academic rigor and complexity of graduate student life, while providing useful information about university services.”

The university community is an important part of the graduate experience, especially for reaching students who often hole up with their research for hours or days on end. Students are reminded that Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) is available if they are feeling overwhelmed or feel a sense of isolation in their work, and they are advised to develop outside interests and relationships beyond their departments. As Kylie Prymus says, “Philosophy department parties always start out as nice social events, but soon degenerate into philosophical discussions. I say, ‘Don’t you people ever do anything else?’”

“The only thing that has gotten me through these intense years is having outside interests and friends,” says Garci-Crespo. “And sometimes I ask myself, when was the last time I read a novel for pleasure? I have to remember to do things I enjoy.”

Tips for coping with the “dissertation blues” or establishing a good mentoring relationship are also offered. In fact, one whole issue of *The GRIND* was devoted to mentoring, because having a good mentor can make all the difference in a rewarding and successful graduate school experience.

“I’ve realized so much of how successful you are in grad school depends on the relationship with your adviser,” says Julie Kappelow A.M. ’00, who is writing her dissertation on the development of post-traumatic stress symptoms in sexually abused children. “It is tricky to negotiate your research topic as you evolve as a student.

“I’ve been lucky to have two excellent mentors. My current mentor, [public policy’s] Ken Dodge [Ph.D. ’78, A.H.C. ’79], is the busiest man I’ve ever met in my life, but the minute



*Logistics of graduate love: Marco Davila planned his marriage proposal with a timetable in mind*

career. “Graduate school can be quite a soul-deadening experience when you’re taking your initial coursework in subjects you’re not necessarily passionately interested in,” she says. “But then when you’re done with exams and have more freedom writing your dissertation, you can focus on your real passion. At first I wasn’t interested in academia, but I’ve come around.”

For students who want to know more about what to expect from a career in higher education, Duke participates in the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program, a national project to prepare graduate students for the multiple roles they may play as future faculty. The project brings together faculty members, administrators, and graduate students with colleagues at partner institutions.

low dinners, brown-bag lunches, and roundtable discussions offer opportunities to discuss the job market, research funding, publishing, and the academic community in general.

PFF participant Amy Gladfelter, who just earned her doctorate in the genetics department at Duke, says the program broadened her education at Duke, taking it beyond focused lab experiments and basic research. “PFF enabled me to cultivate skills that may not have developed within the framework of the traditional graduate-school experience.”

PFF and IRT are only two of many programs Duke participates in or sponsors to offer its students enhanced graduate experience. The Office of Graduate Student Affairs plays a role in establishing support services that address the specific needs of students, both in their personal growth and in achieving educational objectives. The office reaches out to students from different nationalities





*Work and play: The relationship between Rob Davidson, left, and his mentor, Joe Heitman, mixes scientific study with a dash of sports*

I say I need something, he's there. He's been a great model for how to get things done," she says. "An adviser needs to be able to tap into the student's interest instead of just projecting his or her own interests."

Mentoring is so valuable that graduate students are encouraged to seek out multiple mentors. "No single faculty member can be the sole mentoring resource on all matters for any graduate student," says A. Leigh DeNeef, associate dean for academic programs. "Certainly there are faculty members who are extraordinary mentors: They are always available for their students, they support and encourage development of the students' interests, they help students make wise professional contacts, they willingly share their own professional experience, they regularly involve students in collaborative projects, and they routinely offer sound advice on multiple career opportunities. But most faculty mentors are just normal people; they are good at some things and not at others."

Garci-Crespo has found it useful to have two mentors. "Their styles are completely different, but they are both dedicated to supporting their students. Jane Gaines is very good at pushing me to get things done and introducing me to new books in my area of film studies. Susan Willis is wonderful at supporting me in fulfilling my own aspirations, no matter what they are," she says. Both are professors in the literature program. "Graduate school can be very daunting, particularly in the later years when there is a lack of structure. It's really good to have someone rooting for you."

Some students have a sense that they've found their mentor before they even enroll at Duke. In fact, many students enroll at

Duke based on the reputation of its faculty members. Rob Davidson, a young scientist now in his fifth year in the cell and molecular biology program, felt he had found his mentor the first time he met Joe Heitman. "I just clicked with him in the interview. I felt a mutual respect. His lab was serious but laid back at the same time," he says. "My co-workers don't have tunnel vision—they can talk about more than science, especially during basketball season. I like that."

And the mutual respect has only grown. Heitman says of Davidson, "He has matured into a fierce scientist at the bench, one who is completely unafraid to tackle something new and difficult, and it's been a pleasure to watch him develop."

"Joe really teaches people how to finish research, not just start it and leave it tattered, but really polish it," says Davidson. "He shows by example, and not just how to research but how to share and show."

After he earns his doctorate, Davidson will stay on in Heitman's lab for a post-doc to finish a couple of papers they want to submit for publication. Then his options are wide open after an already well-developed résumé of publications, poster presentations, and invited seminar presentations at international conferences. "I've always been interested in studying law, and law schools are crying for scientists to pursue patent law now," says Davidson. "And then there's academia and, of course, industry, which might pay more, but you sometimes lose the individuality in your work."

On the home stretch of her dissertation, D'Arcy Brissman credits her adviser and mentor Alex Roland Ph.D. '74 with helping her keep her momentum. She took a risk by leaving the Duke campus before dissertation completion to become a government analyst in Washington, but she knew Roland would push her to finish. "I am surrounded in my

office here by ABDs," all-but-dissertations—graduate students who have completed course work but not the writing and therefore haven't earned their doctorates. "But Alex would never let that happen to me. He has high expectations of me and that's a big motivator."

"My subject [Haiti] has not been especially easy to pursue. I remember sitting at a table piled high with papers at the National Archives in Port-au-Prince and looking up to find chickens pecking at my backpack. But he never once dissuaded me or told me how difficult it would be."

Harvard graduate Carina Curto, also a Duke Endowment Fellow, James B. Duke Fellow, and University Scholar, came to study math and theoretical physics. She finds the combination of a strong mentor in string theorist Ronen Plesser, a physics professor, and bright fellow students to be perfect for her. "My preferred method of learning is talking to people, and Duke has been a good place for finding that dialogue," she says. "Grad school is better than I ever expected."

Psychology Ph.D. candidate Alison Aubrecht has had a roller-coaster ride with mentors. She has had four advisers in three years. Her first didn't get tenure and left, her second took a job at another university, her third was the head of the department who stepped in to help until her fourth one joined the faculty. Aubrecht lost a whole year of research in the transitions, but says—with surprisingly little bitterness—that the faculty have been supportive and have made every effort to help her through the unusual situation.

She would like to stay on an academic research/teaching track in the future, but says she has learned something of the fragility of positions in academe through her adviser experience. And she's not sure how easy it will be to combine family and career down the road. Her fiancé is a post-doc in physics



at UNC, so they will have the added challenge of finding academic positions in the same area.

This is a familiar challenge to many students who have met and married other grad students. Audrey Odom and husband Antony John have developed a strategy. Music composition is a field in which there are annually perhaps a half-dozen openings in academe nationwide. Odom has veto rights over any possible positions John would pursue, because she must be assured an excellent medical facility that trains residents when she graduates from the M.D.-Ph.D. program. The one thing they have ruled out is a long-distance marriage. So if he lands a job in a place she can work with, she will follow. If not, he will follow her where she chooses to do her residency work and delay at least some of his professional gratification.

Delayed gratification is a theme that plays over and over again. Rodney Sadler Ph.D. '01 says he has always wanted children, but he and his wife, Madeline McClenney-Sadler Ph.D. '01, couldn't imagine having children and working on their dissertations in the religion department at the same time. Now after graduating last May, they say they are looking forward to catching up on missed milestones and events.

"I haven't been able to go to Bermuda and see my family in two and a half years," says Sadler. "I missed my great-aunt's funeral because it fell during exam period, and I've missed watching my nephew and nieces grow up. I feel like there's a large part of my life unaccounted for."

The Sadlers are ready to get beyond the financial struggles of student life. "Graduate

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NAYELI GARCI-CRESPO  
*Doctoral candidate in film and video*

school is not designed for a two-grad-student family," says Sadler, who is now teaching at Duke. "Living on stipends places you near the poverty level. And most stipends aren't year-round, so you end up with minimum-wage summer jobs when you wish you could be continuing with your research. The end of May is a period of dread for students."

The administration is well aware of the need for more dollars for scholars. Five years ago, the school set goals for raising the amount of money available for funding graduate students. Those goals have largely been met. By the beginning of the 2000-01 academic year, the Graduate School was able to commit to seeing that all Ph.D. students at Duke would be supported (from a combination of institutional funds and external awards, such as research grants or national fellowships) for at least their first five years of Ph.D. study, and with stipends that met the academic-year cost-of-living in Durham.

"We have been able to achieve this goal largely through reducing the overall Ph.D. population in a number of disciplines where applications have been dropping nationally and job markets have been tight," says Lewis Siegel, vice provost and dean of the Graduate School. "As we survey further needs of our graduate students, particularly in humanities and social science disciplines where the Duke median time-to-degree is seven years or so—generally still one to two years below the national averages for those disciplines—we have undertaken to try to see that students in those disciplines can be supported for six academic years, beginning in 2001-02.

"We have introduced a program of com-

*On the town: Garci-Crespo, center, has learned to make room for socializing in her hectic grad-school schedule*

petitive summer research fellowships that will permit students in those disciplines to conduct research on their dissertation projects for up to two summers. We are also raising the stipends of our Ph.D. students at levels significantly above inflation in order to position Duke at the midpoint of the stipends offered by the twelve elite private universities we consider to be our peer group."

As financial issues are addressed, the Student Affairs Office tries to anticipate other needs and seeks to make sure current and incoming students understand expectations for graduate education at Duke. It shares with students a handout that clearly delineates the roles of faculty, students, and administration.

While there may be the occasional grumbles about money or heavy teaching loads or interrupted work or changing faculty, most students seem to be too busy to complain. Or perhaps they intuit that they are experiencing one of life's unique opportunities. As Cathy Davidson reminded the new recruits last fall, "A research university is one of the only places where society permits the creation of knowledge for its own sake."

"The university, in its mission," she says, "declares itself a place where new ideas are generated free of ideology or the need to turn a profit. Those constraints will enter your lives soon enough. For now, you have license to indulge a promiscuous curiosity....You are leaving behind the safe waters of the predictable in order to compete in the most extreme sport of all: riding the swells and furrows of the possible." ■

*Sauls is a freelance writer living in Raleigh.*