

Leadership in graduate school: assess your skills and get involved

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We are pursuing our graduate degrees during a time of significant challenges in society and in the evolving workforce. Every graduate student, no matter what field of endeavor, is in a constant process of learning and will face a variety of challenges that go beyond writing a paper, submitting a grant proposal, or collecting and analyzing data. Challenges of this nature usually require leadership competencies. Learning how to cope with leadership-related challenges is a critical factor in organizational and career success. One may question whether leaders are born or made, but be aware that leadership skills can be shaped, and graduate school offers a variety of opportunities to hone those competencies. In this article, we present a list of opportunities and how students can get involved to develop leadership skills throughout graduate school.

What Are Some Leadership Principles?

Before getting into how to get involved in leadership opportunities in graduate school, it is important to understand some principles of leadership. Here we present a few of them, adapted from [Harvard Business School](#)¹:

- Understand your motivational drivers, emotional intelligence, and communication methods to establish a personal leadership style.
- Apply or adapt your leadership style to meet specific challenges.
- Manage the conditions that drive team performance.
- Coach colleagues and share feedback in ways that enable them to develop and deliver.
- Handle stressful and demanding leadership situations.
- Take charge of your professional development as you navigate the challenges of transitioning from an individual contributor to a leader.

Assess Your Leadership Skills, Prepare, and Set Goals

Leadership skills are more than extra lines on your C.V., resume, or statement letter. In reality, these skills are only truly developed through active involvement. Assessing your current leadership skill status can help you to align your personal and professional goals with your academic expectations and responsibilities. The self-assessment survey in Table 1 allows you to evaluate your current strengths and weaknesses in management and leadership skills. Simply check the boxes according to your ability. You may target this year's goals by checking the "goal" boxes in the skill categories that are relevant to you.

Table 1. Self-assessment survey

Other ways to assess your leadership competencies are by participating in the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA (ACS) [Graduate Student Leadership Conference.2](#) This is an annual conference centered on leadership skills for students pursuing graduate degrees. It is organized by the [ACS Graduate Student Committee3](#) and takes place during the ACS International Annual Meeting. Watch for announcements in spring for the opening of the Leadership Conference application submission process.

In addition, other tools and leadership tests exist. The leadership test known as the [DiSC assessment4](#) is a well-known method to assess our profiles and skills. DiSC is an acronym that stands for the four

image

a1 means low ability; 4 means high ability.

main personality profiles described in the test: Dominance (D), Influence (i), Steadiness (S), and Conscientiousness (C). In previous years, the ACS Leadership Conference has

made this available to participants.

Practice Leadership by Taking Action

Based on the assessment of your leadership skills, it is time to create attainable steps for fulfilling career goals. The following sessions cover leadership opportunities, based on our own experiences, which can help you build leadership competencies, knowledge, and resources for your career. These considerations are meant to prepare you for meaningful personal or professional opportunities after graduation.

Join Student Associations

Student associations create an environment for students to meet and interact with one another on social and intellectual levels. Such opportunities normally exist within departments, colleges, and universities. These associations help to develop leadership skills by encouraging students to participate in professional activities such as organizing student-led seminars, fundraising, gatherings, and workshop series. These associations also explore and promote academic and career resources to help students gain managerial and out-of-syllabus experience. Thus, they offer opportunities to start developing soft skills in our careers. Start by joining the regular meetings to gain an understanding of the structure, mission, and goals of the various associations available to you in your school. If these align with your personal and career interests, a good next step is to volunteer for roles or positions in these groups. FIND, JOIN, and INVOLVE!

Be an Active Member of Professional Committees

Cultivate leadership skills through service on professional committees for organizing workshops, conferences, symposia, or summits in your department, college, or school. When you want to take your participation to the next level, consider making a contribution of your time and serving in volunteer leadership positions within ASA,

CSSA, and SSSA and other professional societies. From short-term volunteer projects to committees and board services, ASA, CSSA, and SSSA offer a variety of ways for student members to get involved. With every new volunteer, societies grow more energized, diverse, inclusive, and better equipped to reach common goals and challenges. Visit www.agronomy.org/membership/committees/volunteer to learn more about ASA, CSSA, and SSSA committees and to volunteer. We encourage you to deepen your engagement here. THINK, PRIORITIZE, and LEAD!

Seek Mentoring and Teaching Opportunities

Even though you are leading a project by yourself (with the mentoring of an adviser and research committee), often you need extra assistance to complete field and lab responsibilities. Supervising undergraduate students, student interns, or hourly staff helping on projects is a common component of the graduate school journey. This opportunity will expose you to chances for delegating tasks, building accountability within your crew, and teaching technical and transferable skills. Talk to your adviser and explore ways to establish networks and collaborations for your graduate school programs.



Student associations help to develop leadership skills by encouraging students to participate in professional activities such as organizing student-led seminars and workshops. Source: Adobe Stock/Anton Gvozdikov.

Outside of the research gear, becoming a teaching assistant (TA) is another excellent way to cultivate leadership. These positions help train you to teach, communicate,

collaborate, lead, grade, and guide students with their learning processes. Talk to instructors of classes that fit your interest, and start exploring these possibilities. Courses related to your research and expertise area are a good starting point. MENTOR, TEACH, and GROW!

Foster Teamwork and Collaborations

Dreaded by some but loved by others, teamwork typically aims to achieve goals by building accountability, networks, and trust among peers. Another soft skill that is inherited from leadership is the ability to work and collaborate with others. Today, big goals are not achieved by individuals alone, but by teams who come together and members who bring different perspectives, backgrounds, ideas, and expertise. Teams agree on a goal and work towards it. For more insights on this topic, please visit the CSA News magazine article entitled "[Seven Graduate Student Tips for Enhancing Teamwork Skills in Research Groups](#)." **5** JOIN, FOSTER, and COLLABORATE!

Embrace Community Service

A good leader is a good contributor, not only to a department or school but also through a deep and lasting commitment to the community. Many volunteer-based programs are conducted to assist others with different needs. For example, public schools and their programs normally seek volunteer judges in various fields, e.g., yearly science fair events. Ministries and sports, for example, could be great options to get involved within the community as well. All of these represent great opportunities to create impact in the lives of others, act as an ambassador, and be a positive influence. SEEK, EMBRACE, and INFLUENCE!



Teaching assistant positions help train you to teach, communicate, collaborate, lead, grade, and guide students with their learning processes. Source: Adobe Stock/dglimages.

Finding the Balance

In addition to balancing your coursework and research responsibilities, do not miss the opportunity to undertake leadership roles that fit your interests and time. Many goods come at a cost, and leadership is not the exception. Taking on leadership roles requires time, commitment, and effort. When moving in this direction, it is critically important to set priorities and ensure a balance by learning how to say “no” when needed and

“yes” when possible. COMMIT, BALANCE, and LEAD!

Recommended Reads

Leadership is an all-encompassing package that remains difficult to master. Over the years, many authors bring their perspectives to the task and keep the subject fresh for us. Our selections below include some of the leadership bestsellers that you might want to keep in your libraries:

- *The First-Time Manager* by Jim McCormick, Loren B. Belker, and Gary S. Topchik
- *The Leadership Challenge* by Barry Posner and James Kouzes
- *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey
- *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie

Other recommended and shorter reads with tips on how to enrich your graduate school experience include:

- *Navigating Grad School*: <https://bit.ly/35yCmmY>

- *Outreach and Engagement Education for Graduate School*: <https://bit.ly/2LMqBC5>
- *Building a C.V. During Grad School*: <https://bit.ly/3qhFivU>

Closing Remarks

Above all, everyone follows a pursuit. That pursuit can be named in many ways, but if you feel connected with the personality type that likes to part take and go beyond, developing leadership skills can contribute to your career and influence those who encompass your circles. In any career path (i.e., academia, industry, or public sector), leadership is of great importance when building robust relationships. And leadership actions can be truly rewarding and enjoyable experiences!

Dig Deeper

Tania Akter, Mohammad Shahidul Islam, The Relationship Between Leadership Styles and Crisis Management Strategies: The Context of University Education in Bangladesh During the Covid-19 Pandemic, *Innovation, Leadership and Governance in Higher Education*, 10.1007/978-981-19-7299-7_15, (277-295), (2023).

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