

# **The Power of PhD Student Case Studies**

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If you're a PhD student, you are in great company, and you're not alone. Your bumpy PhD experience is surprisingly universal across different schools and different programs. If you're a PhD student in microbiology, you have more in common with a PhD student in history than someone in medical school. If you're a PhD student in economics, you have more in common with a PhD student in physics than with an MBA student.

Despite this universal experience, many, many PhD students feel very alone. They feel anxious about their uncertain future, anxious about their abilities, and anxious about a personal life that seems to be passing them by.

Having been an informal confidant to many PhD students in different majors or with different advisors, I've found that many of their real concerns are difficult for them to talk about. This further magnifies their feeling of isolation because they don't realize how many other people have faced and often conquered a similar problem. There's power in knowing someone else found a path out of the same woods you feel you're in.

For about 20 years I taught an interdisciplinary PhD course at the University of Illinois and then at Cornell. Aside from the academic objectives, one of my personal objectives of this course was to help students begin to conquer these anxieties. One way we tried to tackle this was by asking students if they wanted to volunteer to write a short description about a "friend" who was facing a troubling problem. Many weeks we would discuss one of these anonymously written "case studies" for 10-15 minutes during class.

Two good things happened almost every week. First, the 8-16 students in the class all realized that they weren't alone in some of the problems they faced. Second, they heard a wide range of rational (non-emotional) solutions and perspectives to each problem they probably wouldn't have heard from an officemate or a partner.

There are three examples of PhD Case Studies on the following pages, and they can be used in a number of ways.

- If you're a professor who teaches a PhD seminar, use these if you think they will help your students. One of them could be used as a class filler on a slow day, or they could be used as topics of discussion on the last class session in a course.
- If you're in counseling or mental health services, use these if you think they would be helpful in group discussions.
- If you're the PhD student in charge of your workshops or seminars, you might find one or two of these to be a useful change of pace to your usual sessions.

There's power in knowing there are a lot of different ways a PhD student can get out of the woods.

## Maybe I'm in the Wrong Program

Tracy had arrived to the university fresh-faced and wide-eyed, excited about the new life she would start as a PhD student at one of her dream schools. She felt like she'd made it – she was enrolling in a prestigious university, working with a well-known professor, and conducting research in a field she loved, microbiology.

And she did love her life there... at first. She befriended the other, similarly excited students at the lab and started out with grand visions of the amazing research papers she would publish. Like other first year PhD students at the Lab, her first assignment was to write a review that related to her individual research project. After several months, she finished the review and figured out a more innovative method of conducting her research. This further fueled her excitement for the project – she couldn't wait to talk to her advisor about this new method. However, as she talked, the lines in his forehead grew deeper and deeper. It was clear that he didn't like her idea. He hesitated before speaking, then asked her what was so bad about the original methodology. He suggested that she follow the traditional method and not try anything too risky with her project. He told her that results were much more important than the method, so it was best to go with the tried-and-true. After trying once more (and failing) to convince her advisor, Tracy finally compromised.

So there she was, back at square one. The more Tracy worked on the research, however, the more she began to hate the outdated methodology the professor had implored her to use. Though she would obtain positive results eventually, it seemed like her professor's advice had taken away her shot at publishing the paper in a good journal. She grew more and more frustrated, yet she continued to work hard, trying to convince herself that her professor had more experience, that he was right in thinking about results over methodology. She treated the cells like she would a baby... and often this translated to her having absolutely no social life or time to herself.

But as time went on, nothing seemed to go her way. For almost every step of her research, she needed to treat the cells with specific drugs that needed to be approved and purchased by her advisor. Whether her advisor was busy travelling or

just being forgetful, he hadn't once gotten the drugs to her on time. Tracy tried every single possible way to get in touch with him – she tried reminding him through email, through text, through phone calls. But nothing ever proved all that effective, and she didn't dare push her advisor too much. After all, he was the person who would ultimately decide whether she could graduate or not.



She was starting to get the feeling that she would have been happier elsewhere, perhaps in a smaller lab, with a lesser-known professor. Tracy constantly thought about switching out, but she had already devoted herself to this project for two years. At this point, she couldn't even begin to imagine what life would be like if she had to start from scratch in a new lab. She thought about her sad, small studio apartment; she was almost 27 and still single. The topic of every phone call she'd been having lately with her parents revolved around questions like, "So are you seeing anyone?" and "He's *just* a friend?" It wasn't that she was unwilling to start a relationship; she just didn't have the time or energy to jump start her lackluster dating life. Tracy was at a loss for what to do: should she try to switch her advisor and – accordingly – her lab? Was it worth it to throw away her entire first two years of work to start anew? Should she give in to her parents and start writing up her profile on okcupid.com?

## The Case of the Absentee Advisor

At first glance, it would seem like Ryan had completely lucked out. As a second year PhD student in finance at Carleton University, Ryan had secured Professor Wang as his advisor. Wang was a prominent, well-respected researcher in financial microstructure, as well as the recently appointed editor of *the Journal of Finance*, a top-tier finance journal.

But Ryan didn't feel so lucky once he realized how incredibly hard it was to get ahold of the guy. Professor Wang was always out of town or running around to this meeting or that one. Clearly, he was too occupied with his other professorial obligations to meet one-on-one with Ryan.

On top of that, his office hours were almost totally inaccessible – everyone and their grandmothers flocked to his office. Professor Wang seemed to have co-authors from every single business school known to man, not to mention the infinite number of industry contacts he had. So even when Ryan tried to get there early, there was always a long line of people spilling out of his office. Often, by the time the professor got to Ryan, his office hours would be over.

And then Professor Wang was always politely apologetic when he ran out of time to talk to Ryan. He would say something like, “Sorry Ryan, I have another meeting in five minutes – can we talk about your issue next time? Send me an email to make an appointment, all right?” But Ryan felt like the professor's inbox might as well have been a black hole – he rarely got a response. For every fifteen emails he sent, he got one in return.

Ryan was beginning to get anxious – he needed to sit down with the professor for more than two seconds in order to work out the major kinks in the empirical results of his summer paper. It was getting to the point where he was getting seriously off-track

timing wise. The deadline for the first draft loomed closer and closer, and he still hadn't been able to make any significant progress on it without direction or guidance from Professor Wang.



Ryan wondered if it was just him; Peter, another advisee of Professor Wang, always seemed to have constant and easy access to the professor. But he'd overheard that the two of them had gone to the same alma mater, Peter for his undergraduate degree, and Professor Wang for his master's. It made sense – Ryan always got the sense that they were old college buddies, if the boisterous conversation and constant laughter that came from his office was anything to go by. To make matters worse, Peter and Ryan were the only two students in their PhD class, meaning that Ryan was Peter's competition. The fact that Peter had an established relationship with the professor put him at an advantage. And indeed, Ryan felt like a loser.

Professor Wang – and his innovative work in financial microstructure, a research area Ryan was especially interested in pursuing – was the reason Ryan chose Carleton in the first place, but now the professor was the main reason he was doubting his choices. What now . . . be more aggressive? Find another advisor? Transfer to another program?

## Back to School After Too Long Away

Amy had a loving husband, two (sometimes) angelic children, and a beautiful apartment. She worked as a consultant in a tall, glass office building downtown. She lived off a six-figure income – money was never an issue, to say the least. To anyone else, her life would have looked absolutely idyllic... except for the fact that she had almost no time to spend with her family. Her job required a huge amount of overtime, and often she had to work late nights and weekends.

So she did what anyone wishing for more free time would do: enroll in a PhD program.

The application process itself went smoothly, and she received offers from several universities. But when it came time to make her final decision, she chose Cornell's program in Policy Analysis and Management for the quality of the program, as well as its reputation. Packing up her apartment to move to Ithaca, she told her kids, "Now I don't have to miss movie nights with you guys anymore!"

But in fact, she found the opposite to be true. She was absolutely swamped with classes and research, and her kids seemed to have disappointed pouts permanently set on their faces. What was worse, it was the same amount of work – if not more – than her job, and she was being paid much less for it. She felt like she spent twice as much time studying as everyone else in her classes because she'd been away from school for so long. Additionally, her husband had also decided to jump on the academic bandwagon and pursue his Master's degree, making Amy's meager PhD stipend the family's sole source of income. They couldn't even *afford* to pay for weekly movie nights anymore. The situation was a disaster.

Amy constantly felt like pulling out her hair. They were penny pinching everywhere they could, but even so her credit card debt was beginning to pile up dangerously. By the end of her first year, their debt had begun to creep up towards bankruptcy. Amy had briefly entertained the notion of getting a part-time

job to help with the bills, but the overwhelming amount of first-year homework and exams put that notion to rest immediately. Amy could only hope that things would start to look up her second year when she got her first-year classes out of the way.



And sure enough, it did. At the beginning of the second year, she received a part-time, short-term offer from her previous employer for some minor consulting work. Thinking about their mounting debt, Amy didn't hesitate to accept the offer once he told her what the pay rate was. But, as in everything, there was a catch. It took up a lot of her time and required frequent travel to DC on weekends.

Amy finally had to admit that there was a possibility she'd put herself in an even worse situation than when she was working. She always felt like dropping from exhaustion, had an infinite amount of research projects to complete, and she *still* never saw her kids or husband.

Fortunately, her part-time consulting work only lasted for a month, exactly the amount of time and money she needed to pay off all of her credit card debt. Amy felt so relieved as she sent in her last consulting report... until she received a reply email from her boss, asking if she'd like to extend her job for another term. As a PhD student, Amy knew that she should be prioritizing research. If she spent most of her time on consulting work, maybe she shouldn't have resigned in the first place?