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Accepting Setbacks: Surviving When Your Dissertation Changes

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Blog: [GradHacker](#) ^[1]



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"Any change, even a change for the better, is always accompanied by drawbacks and discomforts".

-Arnold Bennett

During the Fall 2012 semester I was diligently working on my annotated bibliographies for my comprehensive exams, a task that often takes a full year of preparation if not longer. My goal was to finish analyzing the 150 sources, write them up, take the exams, and, at some point in that semester, also write up my dissertation proposal. The hope was that I'd be ABD (all but dissertation) by the winter break, or at least mid-way through the Spring semester. This way I could begin filling out grant and fellowship applications for doctoral candidates at the beginning of summer to ensure funding for the following year. In preparation of this I had taken two separate trips to Italy to conduct research: the first was exploratory to see the archaeological site and associated museum, and the second was to begin the preliminary research and excavation work. I had a wonderful plan, firmly set out in ink.

In September it was determined that this was not the best dissertation or career path for me. I was going to have to find a different region and time period in which to do my dissertation research.

To be completely frank, I felt like I had the proverbial rug pulled out from under me. I went from being focused to flustered, from goal-oriented to lost in the woods, and it was devastating. Not only did this mean I had to scrap 75 of my sources in my annotated bibliography (about 6 months of work down the drain), find a new archaeological collection, and redo a year's worth of research, it also meant that I had lost precious time and money. I'm not going to lie, it probably took me a month to get a grasp on what had happened and to adjust to the changes. Regardless I learned some very good lessons.

Mourn: It's ok to be angry or frustrated or shattered- you just lost something you've been working on for a long time. Take a break and take some time to mourn. You'll have an easier time accepting the changes if you give yourself some time to be upset about it. Take time to vent (though never ever do it at work or to other professionals, restrict it to your apartment or other non-academic spaces), and move on.

Perspective: It's not about you, it's about the dissertation. It's hard not to take it personally when you are criticized for your dissertation or research. If your committee wants you to scrap your dissertation it's because they want to set you up to succeed. Perhaps the topic was too narrow, or the data wasn't available, or it would take too long- find out why the dissertation doesn't work, because it has nothing to do with you as a person.

Guidance: Try to find someone to talk to who has been there or will be able to give you much needed mentoring. When things change it can hurt, but getting advice from faculty and other graduate students lets you know that you aren't alone. These things happen. They suck, but you'll survive. Those with which you speak might even have advice on new directions.

Triage: When something drastic changes in your dissertation or timeline, take some time to figure out what you can save. You may not have to start over completely- there may be something that you can use. While it wasn't feasible for me to

work in Italy, I could still use my same theory and methods in another country. This saved me from having to start completely over again. Perhaps you'll even gain valuable experience from this exercise and gain new insight into your topic!

Acceptance: If something changes drastically in your graduate student career it is highly likely your timeline will get extended. You just need to accept the change and move on. This was probably the hardest part for me. While I moved on with research, the concept that I'd have at least another year added to my tenure as a grad student wasn't settling with me. Then I figured out it meant I could take my time with other aspects of my degree, like getting a teaching certificate. Try to see the benefits!

Changes suck. But they happen to a lot of us and we need to find ways to make the best of it. I can honestly say that I'm a whole lot happier with my dissertation now. I'm more comfortable with the region in which I'm studying, more excited about the readings, and in the end it probably was in my favor that it all changed.

Stay strong, and carry on.

Have you had experiences in which a perceived setback in your graduate program ultimately worked in your favor? Share your experiences in the comments below.

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