

Anthony Comegna: [00:19](#) Welcome back to *Ideas in Progress*, brought to you by The Institute for Humane Studies. I'm your host, Anthony Comegna. And this week, we pick up virtually halfway through our grad school 101 program, and we turn from preparation to execution. Let's get to it, and welcome in Professors Brandon Davis and Theo Christov. All right, Professor Brandon Davis, thank you so much for coming on the show.

Brandon Davis: [00:42](#) Well, thank you for having me.

Anthony Comegna: [00:44](#) Now I have been starting out here with the same question. What made you want to go to graduate school? Because it is in the grand scheme of things, a somewhat unusual decision for people to make. So why did you decide to go to graduate school?

Brandon Davis: [00:58](#) Well, originally when I went to school, I thought I was going to go to school, to go to graduate school, like a child psychologist or something like that. And I ended up graduating from school and getting a job as a social worker with a psych degree. And I did that for a while, and what got me go to back to school was that I got laid off. And so I wanted some more job security, so I went back to graduate school for that purpose, to actually get my master in social work to have some job security. And in getting that degree, I took the thesis track, and decided that I wanted to get a PhD, and so now I'm a political scientist.

Anthony Comegna: [01:41](#) How old were you when you decided grad school was the way to more job security? Which it sounds very odd, by the way.

Brandon Davis: [01:51](#) I was probably in my mid to late 20s, because I graduated college, and I worked for about five years. And then when I got laid off in the recession, I was like, "I can't do this again."

Anthony Comegna: [02:08](#) Okay. So you were somewhat a nontraditional student.

Brandon Davis: [02:12](#) Yes.

Anthony Comegna: [02:13](#) Okay. Now I've also been asking everyone. What was graduate school like? What was it like for you? And given that you were a slightly nontraditional student, that kind of puts you in a different cohort from the bulk of graduate students. What was life like for you in grad school?

Brandon Davis: [02:33](#) Well, when I got into the PhD program, it was a steep, steep learning curve because I was coming into this political science program with a psychology, sociology, social work background.

So I actually had never taken an American politics course before in my life. And so I took the summer to read a lot of books. And when I got there, it was a steep learning curve, especially with the workload. So the first semester, I was really putting it to the grindstone.

Anthony Comegna: [03:08](#) And was there anything that really surprised you in that time? Or do you think you pretty much expected grad school to be what you found it to be?

Brandon Davis: [03:17](#) Well, I didn't really know what to expect, honestly. The only person I knew that went to graduate school in my family was my uncle, and he got a master's in music, so that was no help. And so I think what really surprised me that first semester is that I was able to compete. And so I take it, like when I went to classes, I was taking it as almost like a challenge every day, to be prepared, and to be able to contribute to the discussion. And when I found out I was able to compete, which probably isn't the best word, that's what really got me hooked.

Anthony Comegna: [03:54](#) Now I kind of like that notion that grad school is a challenge every day because I don't know if this was your experience, but in my experience, a lot of people just didn't great it that way at all. It was just something that they were now doing in life, and it wasn't much of a mission, or a personal project, or a set of massive projects that they were tackling sort of one by one right there in classroom discussions and stuff, book by book in their list. They just didn't really treat it that way. And I think that might have something to do with why attrition rates are so high, and so many people decide, ugh, God, I just hate this.

Anthony Comegna: [04:34](#) And that brings me to your lecture subject for this graduate school 101 program that we're running. Your subject is never waste time. So I want to say that while I recognize that you didn't create the titles here, I absolutely want to get your take on that subject. So why is it so important that grad students think this way, that you should never be wasting time?

Brandon Davis: [05:04](#) Well, I think first, you have to realize you're only in graduate school for a certain amount of time. And once you get out, you're essentially saying, "This is going to be my career for the next 30, 40, 50 years," and you have at the least four years, at the most, seven years, to prepare yourself for a career that's going to be 30 years long, 40 years long. And so I think you have to jump in with the mindset that this will be my career. And you have to kind of treat graduate school like a job in a sense that you have to be strategic about your classes. You have to be very

conscious of your concentrations, and have an idea, a general idea, of where you want to go.

Brandon Davis: [05:51](#) I think it's important to not waste time because it can sneak up on you very quickly. You've been in graduate school, I had friends that when I left my fourth year, or fifth year when I left to go to Brown, there were people who were still dilly dallying, writing, and teaching and things like that, that weren't even on the job market. And they had been there six or seven years. And so you don't want to be in that position.

Anthony Comegna: [06:26](#) Everything in grad school seems to have this character, at least that's what I was told, that things should build one after the other. They should always be building on top of what you've done in the past. So your work pretty much straight away, as soon as you can make things this way, every paper you write, every book you read, every class you take, it should all be pointed toward something, some big thing, your dissertation, your career after grad school. But it should all be lumped in as much as possible to this overarching goal. Could you talk a bit about that, and maybe best techniques for students to make sure they're actually accomplishing that?

Brandon Davis: [07:03](#) Yeah. So I think the first step in that is choosing your classes wisely, and choosing classes that are going to benefit you in the long run. I kind of look at it like a funnel. And so when you first start graduate school, you have the fat end of the funnel, and you're putting in big pieces, like American politics core, public policy core courses, things like that. And within those core courses, those seminar papers, they allow you to take all the literature you've read all the semester, and target it towards something in that field that you enjoy, that you find interesting. And I think that's the beauty of this progression is that you can always work on things that you find interesting.

Brandon Davis: [07:45](#) And so I think it's very important to pick your classes wisely, and have those seminar papers, not ... You don't have to tailor it toward your dissertation because obviously you don't know what that is in your first year. I mean, my dissertation evolved over the dissertating process. And so I think it's very important to take your classes strategically and use those seminar papers to explore things within the literature that you find interesting because you can always go back to that later on because you have all those citations, you have all the things you've written. And you can take pieces of that out to use for different projects.

- Anthony Comegna: [08:21](#) Yeah. You're making me think that my first semester in grad school, I still wasn't totally decided what I wanted to my master's on. And I was doing a master's before the PhD program, and so I was still trying to figure it out. And I just kind of went from: Wells, what papers do I have to write in my classes? And then from there, I kind of built out my project of what I wanted to do. I would sort of let myself be inspired by what I was reading and what I was doing and the general direction I knew I wanted to head in with my work. And then it kind of started coming together as the semesters went on. And suddenly, I had a project on my hands. At what point do you think you actually had your dissertation project in mind? And what was that experience like?
- Brandon Davis: [09:08](#) I think it was probably my third or fourth year. I knew I wanted to do something with criminal justice. And I originally thought I was going to do something with felony disenfranchisement. But after further review, I found that area of research was somewhat saturated, and so I needed to get another ... I needed to be able to find a different angle. And so initially, I found a really good data set, which I think is key to doing a quantitative dissertation, to find a really good data set. And it allowed me to test some things that haven't really been looked at. And I think that was probably the most exciting part because I had the data on hand. I had a different angle, that way, I could make a wedge into literature and make a contribution to the literature. And I think that's what really spiked my ... That was the moment during my dissertation process where I knew this was going to be it.
- Anthony Comegna: [10:11](#) So you really felt like, oh man, this is absolutely the contribution that I can step in and make.
- Brandon Davis: [10:19](#) Yes. Yeah, yeah. A lot of the stuff on criminal justice and voting deals with felons, obviously, but also, there's people who have incarcerated. And so I looked at my dissertation about network effects, so people who had been pulled over, people who knew people who had been incarcerated, how that network or second level of contact was affecting participation.
- Anthony Comegna: [10:47](#) Do you think there was one piece of advice that you really, really wish somebody had told you in grad school? And now you think, "I just have to make sure students know this before they embark on grad school."
- Brandon Davis: [11:01](#) I think, I guess what I usually tell graduate students is your dissertation is not your life's work. It's important, but it's not

your life's work. I think the thing that, the advice that was given to me that was probably the best advice, was one of the professors, Dr. Park, told me. He was like, "Take your methods classes seriously, and learn the math." And I think that stuck with me because a lot of people who were not comfortable with math, I think kind of breeze through some of the quant classes. And the end result is that you won't be able to do the kind of manipulation you need to do once you get out on the market, or once you get a job. And I think, as me, as a quantitative person, I think that was the advice that probably was, that I still remember to this day.

Anthony Comegna: [11:59](#)

Yeah. A common refrain I think that we hear at these sorts of workshops is that the best dissertation is a done dissertation. Yeah. And that really, it's like you're saying. The skills that you build along the way that you're going to carry with you, and they're really going to help mark and stake out your career. Now what do you think surprised you the most about grad school?

Brandon Davis: [12:25](#)

I think what's ... What did most surprise me about graduate school? The amount of work. The amount of work, I think that was the most surprising thing because the first class I ever had in graduate school and in my PhD program was we had six articles and a chapter in a book a week. And we had to not only read it, you had to have a one page summary of the articles broken down by how the article was written. So what is the argument? What are the hypotheses? What are the methods? What are the results? So in a one page deal. And so not only did you have to read it, you had to synthesize it, and that was due every week. And that's just one class. And so I think what surprised me is the amount of work and the amount of reading that had to be done. And I guess the second thing would be the fact that you could do it, that it seemed insurmountable, but you could do it.

Anthony Comegna: [13:31](#)

Professor Brandon Davis, thank you so much for joining us.

Brandon Davis: [13:34](#)

All right. Thank you.

Anthony Comegna: [13:56](#)

All right. So Professor Christov, thank you so much for joining us. And I want to start by asking you. What made you want to go to graduate school?

Theo Christov: [14:08](#)

I think to me, the most important aspect of going to grad school was a really intellectual curiosity. I was really fascinated by the world of ideas. And that was my first instinct, to want to study

more. I had done my undergraduate degree at Thomas Aquinas College, so it was the natural sort of progression of keep on reading the great books. But a proper intellectual curiosity, it was sort of the dream job of being an academic, and sort of professional prospects that a graduate degree would offer you in teaching students.

Theo Christov: [14:47](#) And I recall as early as fifth or sixth grade, I was teaching some of my peers as sort of when I was in middle school. And we would just do these math problems. And I would try to explain to them. At the time, I was quite good at math. So that was sort of the other part, that it was just this desire to want to teach, and just kind of be part of this ongoing conversation. So I think intellectual curiosity along with professional development and making a career out of academia.

Anthony Comegna: [15:24](#) Now given those sorts of goals or interests in grad school, what was life like for you throughout the experience?

Theo Christov: [15:33](#) So for me, it took me about six years to finish from start to finish. And that's not counting the master's degree that I obtained before going to my PhD. I would say, overall, it was really the best time of my life. It was my mid 20s to late 20s, early 30s. I think for me personally, if I had to put it in one word, it would be apprenticeship. I think it was a time when you tried to emulate the work of your own advisor, tried to hone in your skills in research and writing, and trying to perfect the craft of your own discipline. So in many ways, it was more of emulation and trying to follow the route of many scholars before you. And in many ways, being an apprentice is not the easiest task because it requires a lot of humility, I think.

Theo Christov: [16:33](#) But also, I think it was a time for me personally that was very much lined up with prospects to go to conferences, to meet new people, develop a network of friends, and just cultivate relationships that would stay with me, not only during grad school, but also after grad school. And of course, it was a time of a lot of research and a lot of reading. And if there's any one moment, I think my last two years were somewhat sort of lonely times because you're kind of locked into your own office and just writing the dissertation. I would recall these were some of the kind of loneliest moments during my grad school years. But you come out of this experience, and overall, it was a very wonderful experience.

Anthony Comegna: [17:29](#) Yeah. You know, I had the same sort of feeling in that, at some point, I really yearned to get back to stocking shelves at Wal

Mart overnight, one of my summer jobs, or mowing lawns for \$25 a piece. I just wanted to get out and do something active and something that felt like I wasn't always having to drive the situation forward myself. It can be very taxing and exhausting, and like you said, a bit alienating. But hey, that's how apprenticeships often work. Right? Not to get too Marxist about it, but I think that happens a lot, which sort of brings me to the actual subject of your lecture for this grad school 101 program, which is titled Working With a Purpose.

Anthony Comegna: [18:17](#)

I wondered, I don't know exactly how it is in other disciplines, because graduate school is very different for different disciplines. But in history, most people enter our graduate departments with a really clear ... Without much of a clear idea of what they want to do, or why they want to be there, why they want to be a historian. About half of them end up dropping out of their programs before they finish their degree. And that, of course, entails all sorts of sunk costs. And it just goes on forever. There's no getting that time and that funding back to use for somebody else. So it's just wasted effort. And it's not because these people can't hack it intellectually. It's that they get there, and they realize they just hate it. They hate everything about it, especially teaching, like you said, was your initial love that got you into this. Me too, by the way.

Anthony Comegna: [19:16](#)

And usually, people hate some part of it or another, and they just want to be done with it as quickly as they can. So I wonder, what kinds of things are you going to try to get across to our prospective graduate students about how they can really turn around that possibly awful experience, and really make sure that they're working with a purpose and doing something that matters to them?

Theo Christov: [19:46](#)

I think me personally, I would say that the piece of advice I would give is commitment. Even if you don't absolutely love everything about graduate school, there is a reason why you ended up in graduate school. And I think for anyone, it is never the ideal. It may be very close to the ideal, but nothing in graduate school is absolutely perfect. But as long as you commit, as long as you follow up to your commitments what you would want to accomplish, I think it does pay off. So it also comes with a level of maturity. I think many of the peers that I started out my PhD program, a good number of them actually either dropped out, transferred out to get a different degree, more professional degree, such as a degree in library science, or law school.

- Theo Christov: [20:39](#) But I do think it requires a level of maturity that not everyone who begins the PhD program has been able to cultivate. So in that sense for me, the one aspect of graduate school was just how competitive it is. And you can sort of get lost in that level of competition. Relationships can get strained because of that. So I think it's important to kind of remind yourself why you are doing this. What are the reasons you have gone to graduate school? I think you also have to be very mindful that what you're doing is investment. You will not see the immediate benefits of being grad school for quite some time, actually, until you find your first job. And even then, in the case of some students, they might have to pay off some student loans. So it will take some time from the moment you finish graduate school to the time you land the kind of job that you really want.
- Theo Christov: [21:47](#) But importantly, you also need a level of confidence. I think that's one thing that I would strongly recommend, that intelligence is there. Everyone who gets into the program is smart. But you also need, in addition to intelligence and being smart, a certain level of confidence that you have to take pride in the skills you're developing. And that comes with a level of self recognition that what you're doing is important. So in that sense, it is important to relate to peers outside of your own field, so with graduate students in different departments, and kind of build up that level of confidence. But if anything, just stick to the main commitment that you have made, even though sometimes it will be challenging to meet that commitment.
- Anthony Comegna: [22:47](#) Is there one single piece of advice that you never got, but boy, you really wish somebody had told you?
- Theo Christov: [22:57](#) Yes. I have a few, actually. The one big piece of advice is you can do many things with your graduate degree outside of academia. And I wish that someone had mentioned that to me when I was entering into my graduate school, because there are many other skills besides writing a dissertation and teaching, that you can develop during your graduate school. So that's one piece of advice that I wish I had known about. There are many different things, depending on your discipline, whether you can go work for a think tank, go work even for the IHS. Or you can also go and do research analysis. There is just so much. And I think in many ways, I was lucky and fortunate to have ended up in Washington DC for my career because it really opened up an entire world of possibilities that, looking back, I just thought you can't really do anything with a PhD except teach at a school.

- Theo Christov: [24:02](#) But actually, that's largely untrue. So that's what I would encourage anyone who is a prospective student looking to go into graduate school, what other options there might be available to them. Another piece of advice that I have is try to develop a network of friendships and relationships throughout graduate school. Oftentimes, you get sort of lost in the deadlines you have to meet, in the writing, the courses you'll be taking. But at the same time, don't neglect your personal life. Some of the best relationships I actually developed came out of grad school. These were really wonderful times. And oftentimes, you'll be thinking, "Well, I have to finish this paper. I have write this many pages of my dissertation."
- Theo Christov: [24:55](#) But at the end of the day, it's really about the people who will also give you the strength and the energy to keep on being part of that sort of intellectual community. So I would say these two aspects. One, you can do a lot more with your degree than just teach in academia. And number two, try to grow in your personal relationships with other people.
- Anthony Comegna: [25:22](#) What do you think surprised you the most about your time in graduate school?
- Theo Christov: [25:28](#) I think graduate school, the most surprising thing for me was it was such a wonderful opportunity to grow, not only intellectually, but also emotionally. To kind of develop the skill, how to face criticism, how to respond to criticism, and how to become a little bit more accepting of how other people constantly assess your work. And take that in a positive way, and own it. And I think that was one surprising thing for me. I went to do my graduate degree straight from undergrad. I never took any time off. So I really felt that in my graduate school years, it was really a great opportunity for me to kind of grow emotionally.
- Theo Christov: [26:26](#) But also, concomitant to that idea for me was sort of trying to always be responsive on deadlines, on meetings, people's requests. And that to me was something I really had to learn, that in a way was surprising to me because I always felt that you write when you get sort of the inspiration to write, as opposed to, well, you actually write two pages, or three pages, every single day. And that kind of regularity was something that really kind of took me by surprise. But you make the best of it.
- Theo Christov: [27:05](#) And I think the third aspect that I already mentioned is just how lonely it can get at times, especially when you're writing your dissertation. But all of this really is to say that there are many

surprising aspects of being in grad school. And yet, really to me, these were some of the best times in my own life so far.

Anthony Comegna: [27:27](#)

Professor Theo Christov, thank you so much for joining us on the show.

Theo Christov: [27:30](#)

It's been a pleasure. Thank you so much for having me, Anthony.

Anthony Comegna: [27:38](#)

There you have it, folks. Huge thanks to Professors Davis and Christov. Maybe we couldn't cover everything you need to know about grad school, but it's definitely enough to get your undergraduate wheels turning, and to start putting all your ideas in progress. So if you're thinking about grad school for 2020, I'm sorry, you're probably too late. But 2021 is right around the corner, and you better get to it. Have fun with it. Let your passions and vision guide you through. And keep the ideas coming.