GRADUATE EDUCATION AT NORTHWESTERN: AN ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

2013 Interviews with successful PhD graduates of color
EILEEN CHERRY CHANDLER, PHD
Assistant Professor, Department of Theatre and Film
Bowling Green State University
PhD, Performance Studies 1997

What helped you decide to go to graduate school?
I worked for quite a while before returning to school. When I decided to go back to school I was working as the Director of Student Life at Columbia College. While in that job I had the opportunity to serve as the director of the Student at Sea program. I decided to write my dissertation about African American women travelers after a semester in the Indian Ocean with Columbia College students, most of whom were white.

I graduated from Northwestern with a bachelor’s degree in 1973. I had maintained connections to the school and still had many friends when I returned to campus in the 90s.

What were challenges to you as you considered graduate school?
I never thought that I’d get to graduate school. I had many people in life tell me I could not do things: I grew up in housing projects and as a young person I was told I was not college material, even though I had excellent grades.

How did your graduate experience impact your life?
Graduate school gave focus to many of my different interests and gave me a theoretical foundation that I pull upon now in my academic career. Today, I am a tenured professor at Bowling Green State University.

It was somewhat difficult to leave the working world and go back to school. Many of the students in my class were twenty years younger than I was at the time.

I had quite a bit of support going back to school. I had existing faculty connections and the support of The Graduate School’s Office of Multicultural Affairs.

What advice would you give to students considering graduate school like Northwestern?
You have to be very self-reliant and very self-directed. The world-class scholars at Northwestern are very busy people who are typically working with many students and on many projects, and they will not be able to closely supervise all of their students. You must be able to work independently and be accountable to yourself.

It’s also important to ask for help when you need it. If you don’t get the help you’re looking for right away, don’t give up. Keep asking people until you do get the assistance you need. Be a squeaky wheel, if necessary. You’re doing a great thing for yourself.
MAISHA GRAY-DIGGS, PHD
Manager, R&D Strategic Recruitment
The Procter & Gamble Company
PhD, Materials Science and Engineering, 2004

What made you want to pursue graduate education?
I did ceramics research as an undergraduate at MIT and I knew that to improve my ability to find a job in research, I needed to go to graduate school. I had a conversation with my advisor who encouraged me to pursue a graduate degree. MIT has an extensive undergraduate research requirement, so I’d had self-directed research experience prior to my graduate studies.

What helped you pick Northwestern?
I knew I wanted to be near a city. Graduate school is a big commitment time-wise, and I wanted to be in an urban area.

Additionally, the admission chair in Materials Science and Engineering connected with my basketball coach at MIT, who encouraged me to make connections at Northwestern. Penny Warren in the Student Life and Multicultural Office at The Graduate School called me to tell me about the support available to me as a student of color. These connections helped me make my decision to attend Northwestern.

What are some differences between graduate and undergraduate education?
When you’re in undergrad, everyone is in the same phase of life. As a graduate student, that’s not the case: some people are married and some have worked for a number of years before going back to school. People bring different experiences and perspectives to the table in graduate school.

How did you get involved with student life while at Northwestern?
I quickly joined the Black Graduate Student Association once I was on campus. This helped me gain exposure broadly to students in other departments. We lobbied The Graduate School for a maternity leave policy that was created during my time as a student. The leadership experience helped prepare me for the work I do today.

What advice would you give a student considering graduate school?
You need to find the program that will work for you both personally and professionally, which means choosing the academic program for you and then finding a place or activity that will serve as an outlet for when you’re not working, whether it’s cooking or salsa dancing.

You need to be well-rounded. Learn to discuss your research with all audiences, and find an advisor who will be supportive of your development as an academic and a professional. Get involved with student associations or groups of students with diverse interests.

Where do you work today?
I am the manager of Recruitment and Development Strategic Recruitment at Proctor & Gamble. It’s a talent development role and I hire for different departments within the company, and frequently hire recent Master’s and PhD recipients.
Why did you want to pursue graduate education?
I went to MIT for my undergraduate degree in engineering and I worked for 6 years as a research and development engineer. I wanted to move further in my career and thought the training would help me.

Were there obstacles to attending graduate school?
The middle two years of undergraduate school were a difficult time for me personally, and I did not perform the way a typical PhD candidate performs, academically speaking. During the 6 years I worked, I was trying to get up the confidence to go back to school.

What helped you decide to attend Northwestern?
A few reasons:
I wanted to work in speech and hearing, and Northwestern has reputation for strong work in that field. I could take classes in communication disorders and electrical engineering, and that was a large draw.

Additionally, I knew I wanted to work with a young black professor in the engineering department at Northwestern who was interested in hearing aids. After I was accepted, I called her to introduce myself. She eventually became my advisor.

How did graduate school differ from undergraduate life?
I had a sense of what I wanted to do, and I knew I could do it well. The curriculum in electrical engineering was well defined and tailored to the sort of thing I wanted to do. Graduate advising is also different from undergraduate work: my advisor gave me a lot of freedom to dig in to literature and set my own course of study, and asked me questions and challenged me to determine my way forward.

In my personal life, by the time I got to graduate school, I was 28 years old and married. Money was tight, but it was enough for us to live comfortably. I found a small community of people to socialize with and tutored at African American Student Affairs.

I had a lot of support as I worked through school, both socially and within my program.

What advice would you give to students considering graduate work at Northwestern?
Do your homework: determine the interest of faculty members, talk to them and find a good mentor. Northwestern is a great place with many resources: there are grant and scholarship opportunities and people are able to help you apply for them. If you find the right academic match you can be very happy and very productive, and you can have a good career once you receive your degree.
**SHARON M. COLLINS, PHD**

Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies  
Department of Sociology  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
PhD, Sociology 1988

**Why did you want to pursue graduate education?**  
I had a Master’s in Social Work and was working in health sciences in San Francisco. The program I worked in at the time had many connections to Northwestern. I met Northwestern faculty at conferences. After working closely with a sociologist, I realized that with a PhD, I could make my own work by creating and executing projects of my own design. After speaking with professors in the department of Sociology at Northwestern, I applied.

**Were there obstacles to attending graduate school?**  
I had a job and was used to that level of income. You are paid to go to graduate school, but the wages aren't the same as working a full-time job. It was a sacrifice, but it was worth it.

**What are the differences between undergraduate work and graduate school?**  
Undergraduate work is very structured and you're tested on concrete facts. Graduate education is about exploring an entire field, and it is much more self-directed. You learn both facts and theory, and you spend time debating issues and examining how they evolved over time.

**How did your graduate training help you become the professor you are today?**  
When I started graduate school, I thought I wanted to go into the business and marketing world. As my career evolved, I realized I wanted to go into the academy. My research and publications began to have an impact on the study of gender issues in health care, and it became clear that I needed to stick with my research. I had a few postdoctoral positions before I found a job as a professor, and those opportunities allowed me to publish more work.

**What advice would you give to someone considering graduate school today?**  
This time of your life offers a wonderful luxury to be able to learn ideas and philosophies and interact with a group of people thinking about the same things. It affords you the time and ability to work with a group of people who share your interests. When you have a job, you don't get to spend nearly as much time thinking, reading, and talking. I really enjoyed this time in my life and as I look back, I realize how valuable it was to me.
DEJURAN RICHARDSON, PHD
Professor of Mathematics
Department of Mathematics & Computer Science
Lake Forest College

and

Adjunct Professor of Biostatistics and Director
Section of Biostatistics & Epidemiology
Department of Preventive Medicine
Rush University Medical Center
PhD, Mathematics, 1987

Why did you want to pursue graduate education?
While I was an undergraduate at Northwestern, I realized I wanted to teach adults in my career, and I knew that in order to do this, I would need a PhD.

Were there obstacles to attending graduate school?
There were financial impediments. I applied for both a National Science Foundation fellowship and a CIC Fellowship, and I ended up getting both. The CIC Fellowship was better and I accepted it.

After I got the NSF Fellowship, every school I applied to wanted me, including the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Yale.

How is graduate life different from the undergraduate experience?
The work responsibility is a quantum level higher. The concepts you're learning are advanced, and you're surrounded by a great deal of thought power. The level of personal responsibility is also much higher. You're on your own, and if you don't get your work done, no one will breathe down your neck about it. If you don't cut it, you're out. You have to be motivated, diligent, and self-starting.

What in your undergraduate career helped prepare you for graduate school?
My undergraduate academic program was tough: as a senior, I was taking as many as half of my classes in graduate level mathematics. This turned out to be very useful, as it helped me get used to the level of rigor that would be required of me as a graduate student.

Were you involved in any graduate student organizations?
I was part of the CIC mentorship program support network. The CIC program had a Northwestern cohort of students who would meet several times during the academic year and talk about pertinent things and challenges that faced us as graduate students. This program helped me form a great support network and helped connect me with The Graduate School, as Penny Warren, Assistant Dean of Student Life and Multicultural Affairs facilitated meetings.

How did your graduate training help you become the professional you are today?
My work in the Mathematics department at Northwestern helped me become a strong theoretician. I had great teaching models in the faculty, and even 30 years later I remember them for their excellence.
What advice would you give to an undergraduate student considering graduate school?

Be prepared to dig deep and don’t be surprised when you have to. The material is hard. It’s meant to be. There’s a sense of needing to prove yourself, and it takes sheer intestinal fortitude to break through those barriers. Graduate students are called upon to expand the limits of knowledge. Know that’s coming and be prepared for it.

Know what you want to do with yourself. You must be very clear with your purpose or you won’t do it. It will be hard. It’s not just sheer intelligence. Lots of people are intelligent but flunked out of graduate school for lack of discipline or direction. It’s about purpose. Purpose will trump intelligence.
HENRY PERKINS, PHD  
Staff Psychologist  
Stress Clinic Coordinator  
Counseling and Psychological Services  
Northwestern University  
PhD, Counseling Psychology, 1991

**Why did you want to pursue graduate education?**  
I majored in psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and I thought that graduate education was going to be a part of my future. After I got my BA, I went directly into a graduate program in counseling psychology, also at the University of Illinois, where I earned my Masters in Education in Counseling Psychology. I then went to work in Chicago as a therapist at a community mental health center. After three years of work experience I applied to graduate school at several schools, including Northwestern.

**Were there obstacles to attending graduate school?**  
I wasn't admitted to Northwestern right away. The Chair of the program liked the fact that I had work experience and a Master’s degree, but had concerns about my quantitative test scores. He made a generous offer: I would register as a non-degree student and take the research methods sequence of courses. If I did well, I would be admitted to the program and the courses would count toward my degree. I got As in each course.

Another aspect of my life that made graduate education challenging was that I was married and midway through the program we had a child.

I also didn’t have funding as a full time student at first. My job had a tuition reimbursement program which helped me to pay for courses, and later, Penny Warren at The Graduate School helped me apply for and receive a fellowship.

**How did your graduate training help you become the professional you are today?**  
Getting a PhD was the best professional and educational decision I’ve ever made. It has continually opened doors. I trained more as a generalist in counseling and that stood me in good stead as I began to specialize. I had good training in psychopathology, motivation and emotion. My dissertation was on work stress and I’ve been able to apply my work to a variety of environments since.

I’ve held jobs at counseling centers and I have also had the ability to maintain my private practice, where I’ve done interesting things. I was a consultant to the National Football League, where I served as a regional evaluator for the player conduct program, and I also worked as a life skills trainer during NFL rookie orientation. I’m currently part of the referral network for the National Basketball Association.

**What advice would you give to someone considering graduate school at Northwestern?**  
It’s important to have a social support network. Your network can be comprised of other students, or if spirituality is a relevant dimension for you, find a place to express that. In graduate school there will be all kinds of challenges. Having a broad array of resources will be helpful.
Additionally, networking is an important part of being a professional. My network has helped me at every turn in my career.