

All I Needed to Know to Survive (and Succeed) in Grad School I Learned from a Dog Named Rowdy

By Jennifer H. Nabors



We were in Petsmart to look at a different dog available for adoption. A male dachshund I had seen online had caught my attention, and I thought he would make a good companion for our female dachshund, Maggie. So my husband agreed that we'd go and check him out. As fate would have it, the dog I was expecting to meet wasn't there, but my eyes locked in on a little black and tan dog lying patiently in a different cage. He was so quiet, just hanging out in the middle of a busy store while shoppers passed by, checking out the dogs for adoption or just shopping. My husband was also interested enough that we drifted over to get a better look.

His foster mother called him "Jeffrey," but said he didn't really know that name. He was a stray found wandering in a high-end but remote neighborhood in a nearby county. Posters with his picture on them didn't bring about a reunion with an owner, so a dog rescue group had him. His paperwork listed a combination of breeds – Chihuahua, Cocker Spaniel, Dachshund, Corgi – but there's no definitive answer to what kind of dog he is. My husband and I took turns walking him around the store; soon enough it was clear that we were sold. After some paperwork, a few questions, and a check of our humble apartment, he was ours. But we thought the name "Jeffrey" just didn't suit our new family member. He was so calm in the store and after we got him home that my husband suggested we name him "Rowdy" as a joke.

The joke was on us though, because, the more accustomed to his new surroundings Rowdy became, the more he began to fulfill his name--by running around the apartment at top speeds, often slamming into the furniture (if he wasn't jumping on it), playing with toys with wild abandon, and greeting the neighborhood children (and often adults) with an excited jump and lick to the face. Our veterinarian exclaimed, "Well, he is aptly named," when Rowdy pounced on him excitedly at their first meeting. That was September of 2009 and almost five years later Rowdy still fits his name perfectly.

I feel that when this loveable, goofy, mixed-up little dog came into my life it was for a good reason. Sure, he was a quiet stray in need of a good home, but it turns out that I had some needs too--and Rowdy was the perfect teacher. I was in the dissertation phase of my doctoral studies at the time, and though I was well educated (or so I thought), there was still much I needed to learn from Rowdy about surviving and succeeding in grad school:

- **Live in the moment** – Even when facing his least favorite things, such as being disciplined or getting a bath, Rowdy is living in the moment and will soon be on to whatever is next (most likely a nap). He doesn't dwell on the negative and let experiences bring him down. Similarly, I had some really good days during grad school when everything went right. There were times when my comments in class were insightful and everything I wrote was brilliant. But often, I faced days where things didn't seem to go my way. Rowdy's example taught me not to fixate on a tough day in class or an afternoon of uninspired writing. Live in the moment by shrugging off the negative. Move on because there will be better days ahead.
- **Find joy in the small things** – Rowdy loves the simple things in life, like a good tummy rub or a nap in the sunshine. He finds such happiness in a new a dollar store squeaky toy; he carries it

around all afternoon before eventually collapsing with it in his bed. Likewise, I learned that there are seemingly minor things that might be overlooked but that can make the graduate school experience so much more enjoyable. A compliment from a professor or coffee with a colleague may not be the same as a major award, but finding joy in these small things can make the journey less arduous. Graduate school can be such a stressful experience and waiting for big accolades while overlooking the smaller, simpler pleasures could make it even more so.

- **Sometimes a walk is just what you need** – Rowdy loves a walk outside and is always excited to go. He knows that a change of scenery does a dog good and it's not so bad for his owner too. There were many afternoons that I suffered writer's block, but somehow found some inspiration after a stroll through the neighborhood with Rowdy. It's easy to get caught up in the business of school: deadlines, reading, and papers. Time can get away from the preoccupied student. Stepping outside and getting that break can be the best source of inspiration for the weary mind. It's important to work hard in grad school, but it's also important to take a break for your mental and physical health. Get outside and take a walk or just change your scenery for a few minutes, because that may be all you need to recharge.
- **A pedigree isn't really important** – Rowdy is a mixed-breed dog, or a "mutt." We'll never know what breeds he is, and we don't really care. He's our Rowdy, a loveable, goofy, black and tan ball of energy, and I wouldn't trade him for any purebred dog. I guess I identify with Rowdy, because in grad school I have felt like a "mutt" at times. Higher education can be a very competitive arena with faculty and fellow students alike judging each other on "pedigree," such as undergraduate school or major. I remember feeling like I was judged as less than some of my peers who were Ivy-League educated or had done impressive internships. I had to learn that there will always be people who appreciate and are concerned with pedigree over other qualities, but I know that those who really matter will look deeper into what makes this "mutt" special.
- **There's value with the pack** – Dogs are called "pack animals," because they recognize the value in staying with the group or family. Our canine friends have evolved from their wolf ancestors, who needed their pack for protection and food. Rowdy is likewise loyal to his pack, human and canine members, and looks to the pack for his basic needs. He knows that my husband and I provide necessities such as his food and shelter, and he's definitely not shy about letting one of us know that he is ready to be fed. Though there is the romantic ideal of the lone scholar, I think that graduate students would be wise to emulate a dog's pack nature. Graduate school can be a long, tiring, and stressful experience. Going through the journey alone is doable, but having a "pack" of friends and family who provide support makes it much easier and more enjoyable. I know that my husband and close friends -- and my pets too, of course -- provided valuable support during my graduate school career. My pack gave me what I needed to get through the tough times, and I owe my success in part to them.

While I may have been book-smart before Rowdy came into my life, it's easy to see that there were valuable life lessons I could learn from him. Dog owners often get asked, "Who rescued whom?" It makes me smile. The truth is that we've both given each other a lot, but I think Rowdy has helped me a little more than I've helped him.

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