

You're in Charge:

Project Management for Graduate Students

Chances are you're not going to get through graduate school without managing at least one major project: your thesis or dissertation. You'll probably also have significant projects for some of your classes; you may have to manage a research project with a budget and a staff to supervise; perhaps you will have to design and teach an entire course. Learning to be an effective project manager now will help you get these jobs done on time, within budget and with a minimum of stress.

Being the Project Manager

Sometimes being the project manager simply means you have a large, long-term job to get done. Other times, it means you have a budget to manage, tasks to delegate and the activities of many different people to coordinate. Either way, as a project manager, you are the one responsible for ensuring that the end product comes out as planned.

The three major activities project managers must take on are: 1. planning, including the overall concept, the budget and necessary events/tasks; 2. stimulating action: launching each event that must occur; and 3. intervening: monitoring the project to see whether everything is going as planned and quickly getting things back on track if they stray from the order of business. Good project managers are flexible, adaptive, proactive, responsive and resilient. There will be a lot of give and take between yourself and your team members, much juggling of multiple activities, and a lot of monitoring (of your own work or others') in the course of most projects.

Ten Steps to a Stellar Project

The following walks you through how you might effectively manage a project. Depending on the type of project, some of these steps will be more important than others. Some may not be necessary at all. And they may occur in a slightly different order. Still, this is a good place to start no matter what you have to tackle. research and career path you want to pursue.

1. Determine the scope of the project. What exactly will the project accomplish and what will all its facets be? The role of the project manager here is also to create a preliminary budget and timeline. For the timeline, start with the final

delivery date or other inflexible deadlines, then work backward based on the amount of time you expect to need for each task.

2. Organize. Make sure that everyone working on the project is in agreement as to its scope. Add details to your preliminary budget and timeline. Recruit members of your project team. Set up a project diary – a Web site, electronic file or binder – that contains budgets, timelines and all such necessary information. It should be accessible to all team members at all times.

3. Gather information. Figure out what information you will need for the project and where to get it. Assign information-gathering tasks to one or more team members.

4. Develop a project blueprint. Create a detailed description of what the final project will look like. For your thesis or dissertation, the blueprint will be an outline. If you're designing a class, the blueprint is the syllabus. For other types of projects, the blueprint is a description of the tangible end-product of your work. The project manager's role here is to establish a climate of creative problem solving to encourage the best thinking from team members.

5. Share the blueprint with reviewers. The project manager should be at any review meetings to hear critiques first-hand. Filter and incorporate useful feedback.

6. Pilot test. Get together a group that represents the end-users of your final product and ask them to test the materials you have developed. (For a thesis or dissertation project, this can mean asking an advisor or a couple of your peers to review a chapter.) The project manager arranges rooms, space, time, equipment and any materials necessary for testing sessions. Expect to make many revisions after pilot testing.

7. Produce "final masters" of your materials. This is the production phase of the project; it means formatting the electronic version of your thesis or dissertation or putting together the report of findings from a research project or the final copy of the class syllabus that you will reproduce. At this stage, make sure that all rounds of feedback have been incorporated into the final product.

8. Reproduce. Make sure everything meets specifications and get the copies made.
9. Distribute. This could be as simple as providing a copy of your dissertation to each member of your committee or as complicated as sending copies of the electronic learning tool you developed to a large group of end-users. Essentially, the project manager simply makes sure everything goes where it needs to go.

10. Evaluate. Gather feedback from the end-users of your final project. If the final product is something of which you may create future versions (e.g., a class you'll teach again), record feedback to be incorporated next time. Otherwise, this phase may be one you don't need to worry about. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminars "Project Management for Graduate Students: How Do I Manage People and Budgets?" and "Time Management for Graduate Students" by Janette Hill, Department of Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology. To view these seminars in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Manage Time to Be an Effective Project Manager

One of the primary constraints of any project you will manage is time. So, you must develop good time management skills, particularly if you are managing more than one project at a time.

Time management is all about getting organized, which means that if you are not a Type-A personality, you may not like it, but you'll have to do it anyway. Start by creating a time management "map." Write down everything you currently have on your plate and all the goals you need to accomplish over, say, the next semester and the deadlines for each. Next, break each large job down into component "chunks." Calculate how much time you will need to accomplish each chunk. The better you know your own work habits, the easier this will be. If necessary, complete a small amount of a task, time yourself and use that time to extrapolate how long the entire task will take. Using a calendar or planner, work backward from the final deadline for each project, moving back by the amount of time you will need to complete each chunk of the project. Now you are armed with start dates and interim deadlines for each project.

Include in your map or calendar your work and personal responsibilities so you can realistically allocate time for both. At the beginning of each week, write down everything you have to do to complete the chunks scheduled for that week. If necessary, schedule tasks for each day. If the workload is just too much, go back and re-negotiate your deadlines or the parameters of your projects. At the beginning of the day, glance at your to-do list. Plan to tackle your toughest assignment during the part of the day when you have the most energy.

A couple of final tips: Learn to say "no" to prevent overload, and, if you can't say "no" to a project or obligation, negotiate how much you are willing to do. Organize your work and home space so you don't waste time looking for things. Finally, reward yourself as you accomplish tasks and goals.