Comments from Mahmut Parlar (McMaster University) in response to a request from Dr. C. DeLuca, Faculty of Education (Queen’s University) to share advice with graduate students.

1. What is the single, most important piece of advice PhD students need to heed in order to thrive in their doctoral program?

Be curious! In the early stages of your PhD studies, your supervisor may have assigned you a research topic. But don’t expect your supervisor to come up with all the research ideas for your thesis. Read the current literature; follow the news and discuss your research with your fellow graduate students and other interested parties. Remember that once you receive your PhD and start working as an academic, it is up to you to generate new ideas for your research. Learn how to work as an independent researcher.

Make sure that what you are doing is, (i) original, (ii) interesting, (iii) technically correct, and (iv) well-written. There is so much competition these days that any manuscript that doesn’t satisfy one of these requirements will be quickly rejected. Remember, in our business, it is “Publish or Perish!”

If your research involves mathematical modelling (as in my field of operations research / management science), make sure that you start with a small-scale version, understand how it behaves, and then gradually make your model more realistic. This is known as “sneaking up on the problem.”

If you find an academic position after your PhD, you will have to teach courses. For people who don’t like it, teaching can be painful. So, try to enjoy teaching, learn from the best practices you have observed from your own professors and have fun in class. To practice this, try to teach a course or two during your time as a PhD student. You may be working in a university for the next 40+ years (which is my case); make the best of it and follow the maxim, “Do what you love; and love what you do.”

If English is your second language, you have more work to do. Don’t limit your reading to academic papers and books. Read magazines, newspapers, and novels and stories written by the best writers of the English language. My favourite writer is Somerset Maugham and I have read everything he has written, and everything written about him. It’s exciting to be an amateur expert in something other than your academic discipline.

But above all, in your dealings with your friends, colleagues and future students and everyone else, follow the Golden Rule and be kind.

1. PhD students often hear “you should do this … or that,” but what behaviour or thought patterns do you think are most important for PhD students to AVOID?

**Don’t work 7-days a week**. Each week take a day off (for me it is Saturdays) and do something different on that day to recharge your mental batteries. You must be in good physical shape too because “Healthy Body = Healthy Mind.” So, please **don’t be a couch potato** and do something physical a few days a week; go jogging (as I have been doing), go for brisk walks or go swimming. Physical exercise allows you to think clearly; would you believe it, I remember proving a theorem while I was jogging.

Sometimes you may experience a mental block for a brief period of a few weeks (or maybe, a month or so) and you get stuck in proving a theorem or analyzing your data. This is common in our business, so don’t lose hope and **don’t give up quickly**. Remember that when we embark on a research project, we normally don’t see the light at the end of the tunnel, and it may take several attempts to get the desired results. But, if your mental block continues for many months and you are not getting any results, then it is time to consider abandoning that particular project after consulting with your supervisor. You have to finish your PhD in 4 (or 5) years, so **don’t waste time** on projects that are not going anywhere.

1. Please provide a brief (100 words maximum) biography:

Mahmut Parlar is a Professor of Management Science and Distinguished Business Research Professor in DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University, Canada. In 2013 he received the “President's Award for Excellence in Graduate Supervision,” and in 2014 his MBA students honored him with the DeGroote School of Business “Dr. S. J. Basu Teaching Award.” He received the Canadian Operational Research Society’s Lifetime “Award of Merit” in 2018.

He has a BSc degree in mathematics, MSc degree in operations research, both from the Middle East Technical University, Turkey; and PhD degree in Management Sciences from the University of Waterloo, Canada.

2020-04-01