

**Individual Development Plan**

A **Plan It 4-Ward** Tool

for Graduate Students



**Context**

Individual Development Plans (IDPs) allow students to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and make plans for developing skills they need to meet their academic and professional goals. This document is for your use, but sharing it with your mentor will assist the mentor in meeting your needs. Plan it 4-Ward is a university strategy developed to assist students in planning for their future and getting the most out of their time at WMU. For graduate students, the IDP is a Plan it 4-Ward tool.

There are many skills that will help you become a successful professional, and your years in graduate school are an opportune time to enhance those skills. There are six core competencies developed by the National Postdoctoral Association to encourage scholars to seek to develop the skills needed in a variety of professions (academia, industry, government, nonprofits, and entrepreneurship). These basic skills apply to graduate students as well. You are encouraged to keep the following skills in mind as you make your IDP and modify them to meet your needs, since specific skills can vary by discipline.

1. Discipline-specific conceptual knowledge
2. Research skill development
3. Communication skills
4. Professionalism
5. Leadership and management skills
6. Responsible conduct of research

**Instructions**

The first step is to assess your skills and values. This includes an honest consideration of your strengths and weaknesses. You will then explore your potential future career options. You can next compare your skills to those required for your future career.

The second step is to develop an IDP that maps out your plan for achieving your goals. You will evaluate what you learned in your skills assessment so you can see where you need improvement. Then you will set professional goals. One of your goals is to earn your graduate degree, so you need to analyze the degree requirements for your program and your progress towards fulfilling those requirements. You can then set SMART objectives (specific, measureable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound) that will help you improve your skills to prepare for your future career. This will allow you to become more efficient and productive and will help you attain your professional goals.

Then, you will recruit mentors to assist you in achieving your goals, by forming a mentor network. It is recommended that you discuss your IDP with your mentors, so they can help you achieve your goals. Your mentors may be able to assist you in attaining competencies or may direct you to others who can help you.

The final step is to use the plan and revise it as your goals and skills evolve.

Wishing you the best, most productive graduate experience,

Christine Byrd-Jacobs, PhD

Interim Dean, Graduate College

**Step 1: Self-Assessment**

**Skills assessment**

Begin by assessing your current skill set. This will help you identify your strengths and areas for improvement. This is an important step in helping you 1) identify a potential career path that utilizes your assets and 2) recognize the skills you should work on as a graduate student.

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| **Am I proficient at the following skills?** | **Needs work** | **Getting there** | **Highly proficient** |
| Technical/research skills related to my area |  |  |  |
| Finding and evaluating the literature |  |  |  |
| Knowledge of expectations of my chosen profession |  |  |  |
| Background knowledge related to my project, thesis, or dissertation |  |  |  |
| Experimental or project design |  |  |  |
| Critical thinking |  |  |  |
| Creativity and innovation |  |  |  |
| Data analysis and interpretation |  |  |  |
| Problem solving |  |  |  |
| Record keeping |  |  |  |
| Time management |  |  |  |
| Computer skills and digital tools |  |  |  |
| Oral presentation to a non-academic audience |  |  |  |
| Oral presentation to a discipline-specific audience |  |  |  |
| Teaching Skills (if appropriate) |  |  |  |
| Basic writing skills (grammar, punctuation, sentence structure) |  |  |  |
| Writing grant proposals |  |  |  |
| Writing for my discipline |  |  |  |
| Writing for publication and publication process |  |  |  |
| Responsible conduct of research |  |  |  |
| Participation in professional service to my discipline |  |  |  |
| Participation in service to my department/institution |  |  |  |
| Workplace etiquette and working with others |  |  |  |
| Knowledge of internships or practical learning opportunities |  |  |  |
| Other |  |  |  |

**Values assessment**

Next, reflect on the values that are important to you. When you examine potential careers, you should consider whether they match your personal values. A career that conflicts with your personal values will not be satisfying.

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| **How important are the following values to my future career choice?** | **Not important** | **Medium importance** | **Highly important** |
| Helping others |  |  |  |
| Helping society |  |  |  |
| Working with people |  |  |  |
| Working alone |  |  |  |
| Working in a team |  |  |  |
| Friendly atmosphere |  |  |  |
| Working towards deadlines |  |  |  |
| Creativity |  |  |  |
| Intellectual stimulation |  |  |  |
| Recognition of achievements |  |  |  |
| Predictability |  |  |  |
| Variety |  |  |  |
| Job benefits |  |  |  |
| Job security |  |  |  |
| Good salary |  |  |  |
| Location |  |  |  |
| Flexibility |  |  |  |
| Prestige |  |  |  |
| Low stress |  |  |  |
| Work/life balance |  |  |  |
| Potential for advancement |  |  |  |

**Future Career Assessment**

Now that you have a good idea of your talents and values, you can begin examining specific career options. Summarize your career goals by answering the following questions.

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| What type of work do I like to do? |  |
| What do I want to do immediately after graduation? |  |
| What career am I working towards? |  |
| What is most important for me for the future- location, salary, challenge of position, etc.? |  |
| Have I researched my future career to know if it aligns with my interests? |  |
| Does my future career align with my values? |  |
| What degree is required for my future career? |  |
| What skills will be required of my future career? |  |
| How will I develop contacts/network related to my future career? |  |

**Step 2: Individual Development Plan**

Since you have examined your current skills and future goals, you can map out a plan to help you make the most of your graduate education. This map is your Individual Development Plan. Remember that this document will evolve as you progress through your graduate program; it is meant to be revised periodically.

The first part of your IDP is a review of your skills from step 1. This will reveal the skills you need to improve in order to reach your career goals.

The second part of your IDP is setting some professional goals.

You will next examine your degree requirements, which will help you achieve your goal of earning your graduate degree.

Then you will define a plan for achieving your goals by setting specific objectives that will help you achieve your goals. SMART objectives (specific, measureable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound) are generally more effective than vague ones.

**Specific** objectives are clearly identifiable.

**Measureable** objectives can be tracked so you can determine when it has been accomplished.

**Attainable** objectives are realistic.

**Relevant** objectives are worthwhile, achievable, and match your time/effort capacity.

**Time-bound** objectives have a deadline.

Finally, discuss your IDP with your mentor and others in your mentor network. Your mentor network includes the people who can help you achieve your goals. These can be formal relationships (your major advisor) or informal relationship (peers, family, friends, other faculty, staff, etc.).

Your plan is divided into 4 general areas: academic, career, financial, and engagement. While these areas often overlap, it is useful to think of your plan as 4 quadrants.



**financial**

**academic**

**career**

**engagement**

**Summary of My Skills Assessment**

Next, conduct a review of your skills assessment, and summarize your strengths and areas for development. This will give you a framework for setting up specific goals for improving particular skills that will be important in your future career.

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| **My strengths:** | **Areas for development:** |
| *Example: Writing for a discipline-specific audience* | *Example: Giving oral presentations* |
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**Summary of My Academic and Career Goals**

Set some short-term and long-term academic and professional goals (completing my coursework in X years, gaining candidacy in X, earning my degree in X, finding a postdoctoral position, getting a job in Y, publishing my dissertation, winning a Nobel Prize, etc.). Define whether these are goals you can reach in your current position or are more applicable to your future positions. This will help you consider practical steps in staying organized and focused on your goals.

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| **Goals** | **Current or Future?** |
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**Degree requirements**

Since one of your goals is to earn your graduate degree, a good way to begin your plan is to examine your current academic responsibilities. Evaluate your progress on the requirements for your graduate degree.

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| **Have I completed the following requirements for my program?** | **Not started** | **In progress** | **Completed** |
| Core courses |  |  |  |
| Electives |  |  |  |
| Research skills requirement (if applicable) |  |  |  |
| Thesis/Dissertation credits (if applicable) |  |  |  |
| Cumulative exams (if applicable) |  |  |  |
| Proposal defense (if applicable) |  |  |  |
| Advancement to candidacy (for doctoral students) |  |  |  |
| Thesis/Dissertation defense (if applicable) |  |  |  |
| Other requirements |  |  |  |

**Plan for Achieving My Goals**

You can now develop objectives for improving specific skills that are important for your current position or your future career goal. Define the objective (or skill to be learned), the strategy (how you are going to achieve the objective), a timeframe (when will you accomplish the objective, and the outcomes (measures). Remember the SMART definition to ensure that your objectives are well-defined and reasonable.

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| **Objective** | **Strategy** | **Timeframe** | **Outcomes** |
| *Example: Improve my oral presentation skills* | *Volunteer to give formal lab meeting presentations (or class presentations or conference presentations)* | *Ongoing, but I will make identified progress in the next academic year* | *Give 2 presentations per year* |
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**My Financial Plan**

Graduate education is a significant investment, in time, effort, and actual dollars! It is important that your IDP include some consideration of the costs of your education and your strategy for covering those costs.

***What do I expect my costs to be?***

You cannot necessarily predict the actual costs for your entire graduate education, but you can estimate and plan for expenses. You will want to revisit your financial plan regularly, especially as unintended costs arise.

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|  | **Year 1** | **Year 2** | **Year 3** | **Year 4** | **Year 5** | **Year 6** |
| Anticipated # years |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| # credits |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Tuition costs |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Fees |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Books/  Supplies |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Health insurance |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Rent |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Living  expenses |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Transportation |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Other expenses |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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***How am I planning to pay for my education?***

Do I have the financial means to pay for my graduate education?

What are the chances that I will receive a graduate assistantship?

How do I apply for graduate assistantships in my department/program?

What other sources of funding can I pursue?

Are there grants/scholarships/fellowships from WMU I can submit?

When are these due?

What is required for application?

Are there grants/scholarships/fellowships from external agencies I can submit?

When are these due?

What is required for application?

Should I take out a student loan?

What federal student loans are available for graduate students?

Should I consider private loans?

How do I apply for student loans?

**My Plan for Engagement in Professional Experiences**

Graduate school is a time for developing a variety of experiences that will enable you to be successful in your career. This often includes experiences beyond courses and scholarly work. Think about the professional experiences that will make you a better job candidate and your plan to participate in those experiences. Some examples of professional experiences are given, but you should consider which experiences are most valuable to making you a good candidate for a position in your profession.

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| **Experiences** | **When?** | **Where?** | **How?** |
| Internships |  |  |  |
| Conference attendance |  |  |  |
| Conference presentations |  |  |  |
| Publications |  |  |  |
| Committee work |  |  |  |
| Service to the department/university |  |  |  |
| Service to the profession |  |  |  |
| Service to the community |  |  |  |
| Other types of engagement |  |  |  |
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**Step 3: Discussion with Your Mentor Network**

It is recommended that you share your IDP with your mentor. Your mentor can assist you in completing your goals by helping you keep your goals realistic and by providing additional resources. You may also want to discuss your IDP with your mentor network, outside of your primary mentor.

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| **Mentor** | **Primary role of this person in your mentoring?** | **Meeting how often?** | **Useful feedback** |
| Primary mentor |  |  |  |
| Committee members |  |  |  |
| Other faculty |  |  |  |
| Family |  |  |  |
| Friends |  |  |  |
| Staff |  |  |  |
| Collaborators |  |  |  |
| Others in chosen field |  |  |  |