

# The Lord of PhD: Fellowship of the Dissertation - A guide to surviving the pursuit of a PhD

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**Abstract**—Allegories have been used to represent ideas, concepts, and processes, primarily in classical literature. In engineering education, allegories have been used to describe the different roles within academia [1]. Here, we focus specifically on the path of a doctoral student in engineering working towards earning their degree and completing a dissertation. The path will be discussed as an allegory to “The Lord of the Rings” by J.R.R. Tolkien [2]. This allegory explores the milestones, characters, barriers, and support doctoral students will meet along their journey. The session will utilize identity-trajectory to guide discussion and encourage attendees to explore and share their experiences. The session is aimed at providing guidelines to students progressing through a doctoral degree and to assist graduate advisors in supporting their students on this journey.

**Keywords**—Graduate Education, Identity-Trajectory

## I. GOALS OF THE SESSION

The goal of this session is to help graduate students reflect on the journey toward graduation as they begin to navigate their way through a doctoral degree; highlighting the different people and events they will meet along the way. The broader purpose of the session is to inform graduate students of the challenges and difficulties that will arise on the journey and the friendship, guidance, courage, and risk and that will be required to succeed.

## II. DESCRIPTION OF SESSION CONTENT

When pursuing a PhD, many students struggle with the process and expectations of the degree. This can discourage degree completion and cause frustration for students, advisors, and all involved. This special session aims to describe the PhD process in a way that many students and faculty may be able to relate to.

This session will use an allegorical approach to highlight the similarities between obtaining a PhD and the fantasy series “The Lord of the Rings” by J.R.R. Tolkien [2]. Frodo (the graduate student) is given the one ring (dissertation funding) by Gandalf (his PhD advisor) and asked to shepherd the ring to its end (a PhD dissertation). Throughout the story, Frodo encounters a variety of individuals and faces a number of challenges that can be compared to the process that a graduate student

follows in order to achieve their degree.

The use of identity-trajectory will guide the discussion and the key points that are discussed throughout the special session. Identity-trajectory has been used to theorize the development of graduate students and early career academics through three primary strands: *intellectual*, *institutional*, and *network*. These strands will be tied into the allegory as it is discussed. The *intellectual* strand deals with the contributions a person makes to their field through coursework, research, and publications. This will be discussed through the lens of the outcomes of various events within the story. The *institutional* strand deals with the resources, department structure, rules, and organization that contribute to the identity of a professional. This will be discussed in the context of the path taken and the various tools and resources utilized in shepherding the ring. Finally, *network* addresses the professional relationships, relationships, collaborations, and affiliations that contribute to the professional identity of an individual [3]. The different relationships between the characters in the story will be compared to the relationships a PhD student establishes during their graduate career.

## III. SESSION AGENDA

The session is planned to run on the following timeline:

(00 - 05 min) Introduce the beginning of the story to the Lord of the Rings

(05 - 15 min) Have participants in groups explore who each character is within the story, and what aspects of a PhD the story represents following the key components of identity-trajectory. Each group reports their perspective

(15 - 20 min) Have participants identify who they are in the story, where they are in the process, and who are the people they have met along their journey

(20 - 80 min: in 15 minute increments) Dividing the story into four arcs, facilitators will present a summary of the key story elements and characters. Participants will then work in their small groups to discuss and identify who/what those key elements are within the context of the discussion and

how they fit within the story of obtaining a PhD. After each small group discussion, facilitators will present their interpretation of the work and who/what each of the characters/events represents.

- Arc 1 (Access to intellectual development experiences, institution)
  - Hobbiton - BS, MS work
  - The Prancing Pony - Graduate course work
  - Weathertop – Qualifier
- Arc 2 (Institution, Network)
  - Rivendell - Committee Formation
- Arc 3 (Institution)
  - Moria - Advisor leaving/a change in advisor/advisee relationship
  - Orc battle at the end of Fellowship – Prelim
  - Meeting Gollum - Proposal (setting a path to the end)
- Arc 4 (Intellectual/ Network)
  - Shelob - Unexpected challenge collecting data
  - Climbing Mount Doom - When you need Sam to carry you to the end
  - Inside Mount Doom - Defense

(80-90 min) Wrap up

#### IV. DESCRIPTION OF ANTICIPATED AUDIENCE

The anticipated audience for this special session primarily includes students interested or currently pursuing a PhD and those involved in guiding graduate students through the PhD process (graduate advisors & committee members). Graduate coordinators and heads of graduate committees may also benefit from the content and discussion being raised. While the presenters are all current or former PhD students from engineering education programs, the ideas and issues presented should apply to all PhD programs and the discussion will not be engineering education-centric beyond recognizing engineering education as the lens through which the presenters have the greatest experience.

#### V. OUTCOMES AND FUTURE WORK

Participants will reflect on their experiences, share their perceptions of the path to a dissertation, thus providing participants working towards a PhD with the knowledge of what to expect on their journey beyond the logistical milestones. The workshop also intends to provide faculty and academic administrators a constructive avenue to “re”-understand the graduate education experience to ensure success of their graduate students.

The research team will continue to investigate the barriers and constructive experiences of life in academia in order to highlight resources and tools that help participants with their career routes in engineering education.

#### VI. AUTHOR INFORMATION

James Pembridge graduated from Virginia Tech with a PhD in Engineering Education. His recent work has explored the formation of doctoral committees within the field of Engineering Education. The work specifically identifies the technical, professional, and personal characteristics of both the committee chair and the committee members [4].

Stephanie Cutler is a PhD candidate in Engineering Education at Virginia Tech. She was an NSF IGERT Fellow and assisted with the assessment of the VT IGERT program focusing on the impact of an interdisciplinary curriculum the on graduate student experience [5, 6]. She also assisted with the development and implementation of an orientation program for the VT Engineering Education PhD program [7].

Matthew Verleger graduated from Purdue University with a PhD in Engineering Education. As a graduate student, he helped launch the ASEE Student Division [8] in an effort to help provide a voice to student members within the larger national organization. He was also extensively involved with university-level training of graduate teaching assistants [9].

Lauren D. Thomas is a PhD candidate in Engineering Education at Virginia Tech. Her dissertation explored the identity-trajectory of graduate students in optics and photonics doctoral programs. She has chaired the Graduate Engineering Education Consortium for Students, GEECS, an organization focused on the development graduate students invested in engineering education research [10].

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