



## The Eight Habits of Highly Successful Doctoral Fellows

By Sharon Watson Fluker, Ph.D.  
Director of Ministry Programs and the Partnership for Excellence

How does a doctoral student prepare for and learn to successfully negotiate a doctoral program? During my eight years of working with highly gifted fellowship recipients at The Fund for Theological Education (FTE), I have had the opportunity to both observe and help impart behaviors and practices that set these achievers apart. I'd like to share these eight habits of success with you:

- First, successful students **know early** in their master's programs that their "calling" is to teaching and scholarship. They begin to make adjustments in their courses—looking for the tough courses and the tough professors that will "prepare them" for further graduate study to reach their goals.
- Second, highly successful students seek out professors and mentors to **have conversations** about their decisions. They have learned to seek advice from more than one mentor—often branching out deliberately to talk to faculty at other institutions to seek guidance.
- Third, successful FTE doctoral students **ask lots of questions** about the graduate program to which they are applying to (and subsequently are admitted) and requirements for fellowships, both at FTE and elsewhere: What are the requirements for admission? What are the expectations of the graduate program? How are these expectations similar to FTE's requirements? How can I get support for my doctoral studies? In short, *successful students learn the rules of the game.*

- Fourth, highly successful FTE doctoral students **learn the importance of being in community** with other scholars—an important habit that helps to minimize their own sense of isolation of being either “the only or just one of a few students of color” on their home campuses. They take advantage of networks including gatherings hosted by FTE and others and use these conferences and professional meetings and workshops to get to know each other better as future colleagues in the profession. These students e-mail and exchange ideas among themselves.
- Fifth, highly successful doctoral students **work hard to be excellent students and future scholars**. They seek out summer language courses when necessary, they look for ways to do more teaching than is required in their programs so that they can improve their craft, and they look for conversation partners outside of their areas to explore issues in their own research. They begin to understand the importance of doing interdisciplinary work.
- Sixth, successful FTE doctoral students **join professional guilds and organizations**. They become student members of these organizations and attend meetings where they often present papers and publish articles. Our FTE Doctoral and Dissertation fellows frequently support one another by attending sessions when one of them is presenting a paper. They also learn about the publishing world by attending FTE’s workshops so that they are more aware of these writing and publishing expectations as part of the tenure process. By doing so, they come to know publishers and have relationships in place as they enter their first teaching positions.
- Seventh, **successful students complete the dissertation** (or are approaching completion) **prior to taking their first teaching position**. It is always best to have the dissertation completed, but if it is not possible, it is very important to

- negotiate time to complete it by having reduced teaching loads and a writing plan.
- Finally, highly successful doctoral students **stay true to their faith traditions** and see their success as scholars as just one part of who they are. While they make important contributions to the church, they also begin habits that encourage balance between their academic commitments with those of the church, family, health, and other professional commitments.

These “eight habits” do not mean that successful racial and ethnic students do not sometimes feel alone or unsupported even though FTE strives to build a network of support and community that accelerates their time to degree completion. It doesn’t mean that they don’t experience some of the challenges that confront **all** students who pursue the Ph.D., or do not continue to confront instances of racism on their campuses. But, these habits **do** suggest ways students can begin to navigate the graduate school terrain with some finesse and political savvy. For many, diligent practice of these eight habits makes it possible for them to successfully join the ranks of faculty on college, seminary, and university campuses where they make important contributions as the next generation of scholars and educators. It is our job to support them in the development of these habits and others to advance excellence and diversity in the academy and society.

**Editor’s Note:** The Fund for Theological Education is a leading advocate for excellence and diversity in Christian ministry and theological scholarship. Its work supports the next generation of leaders among pastors and scholars, providing fellowships and a network of support to gifted young people from all denominations and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Since 1954, the Atlanta-based Fund has awarded more than 5,600 fellowships in partnership with others committed to quality leadership for the church and academy.

A version of the author’s comments was presented at a meeting of Lilly Endowment, Inc. sponsored programs in Charleston, SC in April, 2005.

**About the Author:** Sharon Watson Fluker is director of the doctoral fellowships and Expanding Horizons Partnership at The Fund for Theological Education (FTE) located in Atlanta, GA. She has held the position for more than six years. She came to FTE from the University of Rochester where she was dean for sophomores and director of the office of minority student affairs for several years before moving to Atlanta with her family. She is a graduate of Spelman College (B.A.) and Northwestern University (M.A., Ph.D.).