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Advice about grad school from a Ph.D. holder looking back a decade later (opinion)

Submitted by Vanessa R. Corcoran on October 31, 2018 - 3:00am

Exactly 10 years ago this past August, I was getting ready to move to Washington to start my master's in medieval history at Catholic University, with a larger goal of earning a Ph.D. I had just graduated from the College of Holy Cross three months before and was excited to continue on with my education.

Although my undergraduate professors certainly trained me as a budding historian, and I had carefully researched my graduate school of choice, I still arrived at the university unsure of the ins and outs of grad school beyond the expectations listed on the syllabus. So if you're at the start of your first semester, or contemplating going to grad school in the near future, I hope you'll find these tips helpful.

Grad school is not undergrad 2.0. I loved my undergraduate experience, but in no way was graduate school a continuation of my four years at Holy Cross. You do much more independent work in grad school, and you will probably need to revise the study habits and methods that worked for you in undergrad.

Keep up with the reading. Simply put, you'll be assigned an enormous amount of reading. Learn how to read efficiently while taking thorough notes. The assigned reading is at the core of class discussions, so the best way to be prepared is to have read the book(s) and articles and have written notes on key takeaways from the material. What was the author's main argument? Kinds of sources? How does this book fit in with the current scholarship? What areas did you take issue with? Being prepared to discuss these issues will help you participate in class and will also be integral in your success in comprehensive exams, and later on, writing the literature review for your dissertation.

Create an organizational system that works for you. Find a set of naming conventions that work for saving your files, notes, articles. Back everything up on Google Drive, Dropbox or some other sort of cloud. If professors give you feedback via hard copy, scan those documents. Spend time on occasion (e.g., at the end of the semester or over the summer) getting caught up and file everything away in a way that works for *you*. (Your colleagues may have different methods.)

Keep up with your citations and bibliography. Get accustomed to doing this while in course work so that by the time you're writing a thesis or dissertation, it's a habit. Otherwise, it can be incredibly painful to spend the final stretch of your program combing through everything to make sure that your bibliography is up-to-date.

Connect with your professors early. Visit them during office hours, talk to them at department events and, in general, strive to make a positive impression early on. Your professors, especially your adviser, will be the people who make recommendations about fellowships, jobs and other opportunities throughout and beyond grad school. Keep them updated about your progress (rather than having them chase you down). Particularly if you pursue a Ph.D., your relationship with your adviser is a key element of your graduate experience, and you want to cultivate a positive one from the beginning.

Connect with other graduate students in your program. Your classmates are going through the same experiences, and it is helpful to make friends with people who can appreciate the challenges you're experiencing. Typically, veteran graduate students are willing to mentor the incoming ones. I was grateful that, from the beginning, our department's "old hands" (as my adviser referred to them) invited me out to events over the weekend or to grab coffee before class. They offered inside tips about how to do well with particular professors and shared their strategies for advancing through the various stages of the program. Some of them are still my closest friends.

Maintain a supportive community outside of grad school. Whether it's with your parents, your partner, your dog or other close family and friends, it does help to have a "squad" who is entirely separate from graduate school. They may not understand the specific challenges you're dealing with (such as learning Latin, my personal Everest), but you can vent or unwind with them in a completely judgment-free zone. Graduate school can often be a very lonely, solitary endeavor, and a support group or community of family and friends can provide vital support as you navigate through the highs and lows of it.

Be visible. Grad school is not just about going to class: you are also expected to attend lectures, workshops, conferences. Engage with your professors and classmates at these events, even if it feels awkward to introduce yourself to strangers. You all have a common interest that brought you there. Don't just leave immediately after a lecture ends; stay for the reception. Such events not only provide some light fare but also an opportunity to chat with faculty members outside of class.

Recognize that impostor syndrome is real. American psychologists Pauline R. Clance and Suzanne A. Imes coined this term in 1978, describing impostor syndrome as a feeling of "phoniness in people who believe that they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite evidence of high achievement." In my early years of grad school, I feared that the mask would be ripped off and my professors would realize that it was a mistake for me to be there -- that I did not belong.

I didn't realize that so many other grad students shared that feeling. It wasn't until three years into my program, when I walked out of a workshop on how to write a dissertation proposal, that I realized that many other grad students shared that feeling. As they began to vocalize *their* apprehensions about getting over this particular hurdle, I finally knew I was not the only one who was dealing with this common syndrome.

Practice self-care. The stresses of grad school, including doing well in course work as well as financially supporting yourself, can be quite taxing, and they will probably worsen if you don't have some coping mechanisms to help provide a sense of balance and calm. Self-care goes beyond merely pampering yourself via spa days and juice cleanses ^[1]. Indeed, by spending time seeking ways to improve your quality of life ^[2], you can become more productive in school and can lead a more fulfilled and well-rounded life. I picked up running when I started graduate school as a coping mechanism for dealing with the anxiety of a rigorous academic program. I quickly fell in love with the sport. A decade later, running has been an integral part of my physical and mental well-being.

Develop your own writing routine. People write their dissertation in many different ways. Some thrive in complete silence, working for long uninterrupted sessions. Others, like me, enjoy having the background noise of a coffee shop and break up writing sessions throughout the day. Create a writing environment that is specific to your needs. Do what works for you, whether that means blocking out two hours in the morning before the craziness of the day begins or returning to your desk after you've put the kids to bed. Be protective of your writing time, but also forgive yourself when you miss a few sessions. Get back on the horse.

Also, consider reading *How to Write a Dissertation in 15 Minutes a Day* ^[3] by Joan Bolker. The key message of the book isn't that it only takes a fraction of an hour regularly to write a dissertation, but rather that dread and anxiety consume so many people that they stop writing altogether. They need to get beyond those feelings, and 15 minutes of writing each day can build a habit that will eventually turn into longer writing sessions. Ultimately, however, there is no one right way to establish a writing routine -- you just need to keep working at it until you develop one that works for you.

Don't be ashamed to ask for help. Let me repeat that it again, because I've had to assure myself of that many times. Don't be ashamed to ask for help. Use all of the resources available to you: the writing center, counseling center, conversations with your professors and your loved ones, whatever and whomever you can find. Grad school can feel incredibly isolating, but many people are rooting for you to succeed and want to help you get through the difficult parts.

I hope these suggestions are helpful to those of you who have just started grad school in recent weeks or are contemplating doing so in the coming months. I wish you the absolute best as you embark on this exciting journey.

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Links:

[1] <https://thoughtcatalog.com/brianna-wiest/2017/11/this-is-what-self-care-really-means-because-its-not-all-salt-baths-and-chocolate-cake/>

[2] http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2017/04/the_history_of_self_care.html

[3] <https://www.amazon.com/Writing-Your-Dissertation-Fifteen-Minutes/dp/080504891X>