



Advice for a first year PhD student

By Grind12, June 2, 2012 in Officially Grads

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Greetings! After a long and stressful application season, I was fortunate to be accepted to all schools but two. I will start this Fall as a 21 year old. I suspect I'll be one of the youngest in my cohort and program. Is there any advice that you'd wished someone told you during your first year? Any advice would be appreciated whether it was age related, adviser related, studying, extracurricular activity, friends, etc. ALSO how much time do you really devote to grad studies, I have a dog and I'm wondering if I should give her away. Is grad school like 9-5 and then you work at home all night (spend time w/dog too) or is it more like a constant coming and going and not at all fair to my dog? Thanks!

juilletmercredi

Cup o' Joe



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Location:Pacific Northwest

Application Season:Not

Applicable

Program:Working in industry

Posted June 5, 2012 (edited)

Report post



About your dog: I think that depends entirely on you and your program. I am in a social science program where the majority of my analysis and writing can be done from home, and I prefer to work from home or from a library (as opposed to my cube in the windowless cube farm). When I was taking classes I was generally there from 9-6 or so, but now that my coursework is finished I am rarely at the school itself. I go for meetings, seminars, interesting kinds of things and I do most of my work remotely. My time is verry flexible, and if my building didn't prohibit it I would get a dog in a heartbeat. Another thing to keep in mind: a dog can be a great comfort when you're all stressed out over graduate school.

Advice?

Age:

-Don't feel like you have nothing to offer just because you are younger. I was 22 when I started graduate school. You got accepted to the program for a reason, and chances are you are just as equipped as any older students are to successfully complete the program, just in a different way.

-Your older classmates may be just as terrified as you. Talk to them. You have a lot in common. You are, after all, in the same place.

-You will feel like an imposter, like you don't belong, or like you are constantly behind. Or all three. It's normal. It will pass. (Well, sort of.) People of all ages go through this.

Adviser related:

-If you are lucky enough to get both research interest fit and personality fit perfect, congratulations! But sometimes, personality fit is more important than research interest fit as long as the research isn't too different. A great adviser is interested in your career development, likes you as a person, advocates for you, and wants to hear your ideas. Even if his or her research is quite different from yours, they may give you the autonomy to work on your own projects and just supervise you. A bad personality fit will drive you nuts, even if you love his or her research. Consider that when evaluating your adviser fit. (This will vary by field: research fit may be less important in the humanities, more important in the natural and physical sciences. Social sciences are somewhere in-between.)

-Don't be afraid to be straight up blunt with your adviser when it comes to asking about your progress. Ask if you are where you should be both academic program wise and getting-a-job-after-this-mess-wise.

-Be proactive. Advisers love when you draw up an agenda for your one-on-one meetings, come with talking points and progress to share, have concrete questions to ask, and have overall shown that you have been thoughtful and taken control of your own program. Of course, this won't immediately come easily to you, but in time you will work up to it. Every semester I type up my semester goals, and at the beginning of the year I type up annual goals. I show them to my adviser and we talk about whether they are too ambitious, or whether I need to revise them, and how I can meet them.

-Don't expect your adviser to actually know what courses you have to take to graduate. They will know about comprehensive exams and the dissertation, but a lot of professors don't really keep up with the course requirements, especially if their program is in flux. Get you a student handbook, and find out what you need to take. Map it out in a grid, and check off things when you finish them. Show this to your adviser every semester. You may have to explain how such and such class fills a requirement.

-Nobody loves you as much as you, except your mother. Keep this in mind as you take in advice from all sources, including your adviser. Your adviser is there to guide you, but that doesn't mean you have to do everything he says.

Studying:

-You will have to read more than you ever did before, in less time than you ever have before, and you will be expected to retain more than you ever have before. The way that you studied in undergrad may need some tweaking. Be prepared for this.

-Corollary: you may find that your methods change with age or interests or time. I preferred to study alone in college, but in grad school, I prefer to study in groups. It keeps me on task and the socialization keeps me motivated. You may find that you shift from being a more auditory learner to a visual learner or whatever.

-You will feel behind at first. This is normal.

-At some point you will realize that your professors don't actually expect you to read everything they assign you. This, of course, will vary by program, but there will be at least one class where the reading is actually impossible to do in one week. The point is to read enough that you know the major themes and can talk intelligently about them, and then pick some of the readings to really dig into and think more deeply about.

-For most programs, don't worry so much about grades. If you stay on top of your work and do what you're supposed to, you will probably get an A. How much grades matter varies from program to program. In some programs, a B is a signal that you are not up to par, and more than a few Bs will warrant a discussion with your adviser or the DGS. My program isn't like that - A, B, it's all meaningless. My adviser

doesn't even know what my grades are. But at almost all programs, a C means you need to retake the course, and two Cs means you have to convince the DGS not to kick you out.

Extracurricular activity: What's that? No, seriously:

-A lot of your time will be unstructured. You will have coursework, but most grad classes meet once a week for two hours and you may have three classes. You may have meetings with your adviser every so often and some seminars or things to catch (like we have grand rounds and colloquia that are required), but a lot of time will be unstructured. However, since you have so much more work than you had in undergrad, you actually will have less free time than you had in undergrad. This may initially cause you great anxiety. It did for me. Some people love unstructured time, though. (I don't.)

-Because of this, you'll have to be playful about your non-grad school related stuff.

-TAKE TIME OFF. DO it. It's important for your mental health. However you do it doesn't matter. Some people work it like a 9-5 job. Some people take a day off per week (me) and maybe a few hours spread across the week. Some people work half days 7 days a week. However you do it, there needs to be a time when you say "f this, I'm going to the movies."

-Find your happy place, something that keeps you the you you were when you came in. I love working out. It gives me energy and I feel good. I stay healthy. I also love reading fiction, so sometimes I just curl up with a good book, work be damned. You have to give yourself permission to not think about work, at least for a couple of hours a week. You may also discover new hobbies! (I never worked out before I came to graduate school.)

-Your work will creep into all aspects of your life, if you let it. This is why I hate unstructured time. You will feel guilty for not doing something, because in graduate school, there is ALWAYS something you can do. ALWAYS. But since there will always be more work, there's no harm in putting it aside for tomorrow, as long as you don't have a deadline.

-You may need to reach outside of your cohort for a social life. None of my close friends are in my doctoral cohort. I've met master's students in my program, master's students in other programs, and I know a few non-graduate students I hang out with, too. Go to graduate student mixers. (If your university doesn't have any, organize some, if you like planning parties.) Join a student group that doesn't take up too much time. I had a doctoral acquaintance who kinda laughed at me because I joined some student groups other than the doctoral student one, and I was usually the only doctoral student in those groups, but I met some close friends (and future job contacts) and had a good time.

-DO NOT FEEL GUILTY FOR WANTING A LIFE OUTSIDE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL. This is paramount. This is important. You are a well-rounded, complex, multifaceted human being. NEVER feel bad for this. Everybody wants some kind of life outside of work. Yes, you may loooove your field, but that doesn't mean you want to do it all day long. Some other doctoral students, and perhaps professors, may make you feel bad about this. Don't let them. Just smile and nod. Then disappear when you need to.

Career:

-This is job preparation. Remember that from Day One. Always be looking for ways to enhance your skills. Read job ads and find out what's hot in your field, what's necessary, what's in demand. For example, in my field statistics and methods are a hot commodity, and they're not a passing fad. I happen to really like statistics and methods, so I have pursued that as a concentration of mine.

-Don't be afraid to take on volunteer work and part-time gigs that will give you skills that will be useful both inside academia and out, as long as it's not against your contract. Your adviser may be against it, but he doesn't have to know as long as it doesn't interfere with your work.

-If you want to work outside of academia - if you are even *considering* the possibility - please please definitely do the above. Even if you aren't considering it, consider the possibility that you won't get a tenure-track job out the box and that you may need to support yourself doing something else for a while.

You will have to prove to employers that you have developed usable, useful skills and this is one of the easiest ways to do it. But don't overdo it - get the degree done.

-For more academic related ones - always look for opportunities to present and publish. Presentations look good on your CV. Publications look better. When you write seminar papers, wonder if you can publish them with some revision. Write your seminar papers on what you maybe think you may want to do your dissertation on. Even if you look at them three years later and think "these suck," you can at least glean some useful references and pieces from them. Discuss publication with your adviser early and often, and if you have the time and desire, seek out publication options with other professors and researchers. But if you commit to a project, COMMIT. You don't want to leave a bad impression.

-If you can afford it, occasionally go to conferences even if you aren't presenting. You can network, and you can hear some interesting talks, and you may think about new directions for your own research. You can also meet people who may tell you about jobs, money, opportunities, etc.

-Always try to get someone else to pay for conference travel before you come out of pocket. Including your adviser. Do not be shy about asking if he or she can pay. If he can't, he'll just say no. Usually the department has a travel fund for students, but often it's only if you are presenting.

-If you are interested in academia, you should get some teaching experience. There are two traditional ways to do this: TAing a course, and teaching as a sole instructor. If you can help it, I wouldn't recommend doing a sole instructor position until you are finished with coursework. Teaching takes a LOT of time to do right. You should definitely TA at least one course, and probably a few different ones. But don't overdo it, if you can help it, because again, it takes a LOT of time. More than you expect at the outset. If you are in the humanities, I think sole instructor positions are very important for nabbing jobs so when you are in the exam/ABD phase, you may want to try at least one. If your own university has none, look at adjuncting for nearby colleges, including community colleges. (I would wager that the majority of natural science/physical science students, and most social science students, have never sole taught a class before they get an assistant professor job. At least, it's not that common in my field, which straddles the social and natural sciences.)

-**Always look for money.** Money is awesome. If you can fund yourself you can do what you want, within reason. Your university will be thrilled, your adviser will be happy, and you can put it on your CV. It's win-win-win! Don't put yourself out of the running before anyone else has a chance to. Apply even if you think you won't get it or the odds are against you (they always are), as long as you are eligible. Apply often. Apply even if it's only \$500. (That's conference travel!) Money begets money. The more awards you get, the more awards you will get. They will get bigger over time. If you are in the sciences and social sciences, you should get practice writing at least one grant. You don't have to write the whole thing, but at least get in on the process so that you can see how it's done. Grant-writing is very valuable both in and outside of graduate school.

-Revise your CV every so often. Then look and decide what you want to add to it. Then go get that thing, so you can add it.

-The career office at big universities is often not just for undergrads. I was surprised to learn that my career center offers help on CV organization and the academic job search, as well as alternative/non-academic career searches for doctoral students. In fact, there are two people whose sole purpose it is to help PhD students find nonacademic careers, and they both have PhDs. This will vary by university - some universities will have very little for grad students. Find out before you write the office off.

-It's never too early to go to seminars/workshops like "the academic job search inside and out", "creating the perfect CV," "getting the job," etc. NEVER. Often the leader will share tips that are more aimed towards early graduate students, or tidbits that are kind of too late for more advanced students to take care of. This will also help you keep a pulse on what's hot in your field. It'll help you know what lines you need to add to your CV. And they're interesting.

Other:

-Decide ahead of time what you are NOT willing to sacrifice on the altar of academia. Then stick to it.

I'm serious. If you decide that you do NOT want to sacrifice your relationship, don't. If it's your geographical mobility, don't. I mean, be realistic, and realize that there will always be trade-offs. But you have to think about what's important to you for your quality of life, and realize that there is always more to you than graduate school.

-If you don't want to be a professor, do not feel guilty about this. At all. Zero. However, you will have to do things differently than most doctoral students. Your adviser will probably never have worked outside of the academy (although this may vary depending on the field) so he may or may not be able to help you. But you have a special mission to seek out the kinds of experiences that will help you find a non-academic job. Test the waters with your adviser before you tell him this. My adviser was quite amenable to it, but that's because I told him that my goal was to still do research and policy work in my field just not at a university, AND because it's quite common in my field for doctoral students to do non-academic work. If you're in a field where it's not common (or where your professors refuse to believe it's common, or it's not supposed to be common)...well, you may be a little more on your own.

-Every so often, you will need to reflect on the reasons you came to graduate school. Sometimes, just sit and think quietly. Why are you doing this to yourself? Do you love your field? Do you need this degree to do what you want to do? Usually the answer is yes and yes, and usually you'll keep on trucking. But sometimes when the chips are down you will need to reevaluate why you put yourself through this in the first place.

-To my great dismay, depression is quite common in doctoral students. Graduate work can be isolating and stressful. Luckily your health insurance usually includes counseling sessions. TAKE THEM if you need them. Do not be ashamed. You may be surprised with who else is getting them. (I found out that everyone in my cohort, including me, was getting mental health counseling at a certain point.) Exercise can help, as can taking that mental health day once a week and just chilling. Don't be surprised if you get the blues...

-...but be self-aware and able to recognize when the depression is clouding your ability to function. Doctoral programs have a 50% attrition rate, and this is rarely because that 50% is less intelligent than, less motivated than, less driven than, or less ambitious than the other 50% that stays. Often they realize that they are ridiculously unhappy in the field, or that they don't need the degree anymore, or that they'd rather focus on other things in life, or their interests have changed. All of this is okay!

-You will, at some point, be like "eff this, I'm leaving." I think almost every doctoral student has thought about dropping out and just kicking this all to the curb. You need to listen to yourself, and find out whether it is idle thought (nothing to worry about, very normal) or whether you are truly unhappy to the point that you need to leave. Counseling can help you figure this out.

-Don't be afraid to take a semester or a year off if you need to. That's what leaves of absence are for.

Lastly, and positively...

...graduate school is great! Seriously, when else will you ever have the time to study what you want for hours on end, talk to just as interested others about it, and live in an intellectual community of scholars and intellectuals? And occasionally wake up at 11 am and go to the bank at 2 pm? Sometimes you will want to pull out all of your hair but most of the time, you will feel fulfilled and wonderfully encouraged and edified. So enjoy this time!

Edited June 5, 2012 by juilletmercredi



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