

What to Expect in Graduate School

Graduate school is a wonderful experience. You'll grow, you'll learn, you'll push back the scientific frontiers. That's why you're here. But there's another aspect of graduate school for most students.

At some point during your program, you will probably do a little 'soul-searching.' You will question why you are in the program, if going to any graduate school or this one in particular was the right decision. Do you really want to be here or be doing this for the rest of your life, and what happens if you don't make it?

This is normal. The first time you get this feeling, sleep on it, take a break, and by the next week you'll be fine. Another great way to combat the "why did I do this to myself" feeling is by participating in some fun social gatherings with your classmates...who were, or are, or will be...experiencing the same thing! The second time you get this feeling, it will be more familiar and you'll have additional coping mechanisms. There are many people who have been through the same thing; make their day by letting them help you over the rough spots.

Insecurity and anxiety (and, of course, STRESS) are also common emotions. Support systems are critical during graduate school, whether that support comes from a faculty member, a fellow grad student, or a friend or family member outside of the program. Don't go into isolation; avoiding people makes stress increase. Don't think you can read your advisor's mind. Even advisors have bad days.

Get involved with your classmates and professors as much as possible. A great deal of learning in graduate school actually comes from non-class times...study groups, symposia, teaching, research (of course!), or even just hanging out with colleagues...helps you put what you learn into action.

Find a mentor (or mentors) in addition to your research advisor. They can make a significant impact on helping you stick it out, find resources (if you're in a new town), or even just learn about the 'real world.'

Graduate school is a more focused, intense process than undergraduate school. You are studying one subject (no more gen. eds here!) and you don't generally have institutionally-endorsed extra-curricular activities to keep you busy and energized. There is a lot of reading/writing and a LOT of research and, depending on your undergraduate preparation, this may be a real challenge. Grades are no longer a measure of ability or achievement. For high achievers (the only people who get into highly-ranked graduate programs) this can be quite disorienting.

The other thing that is confusing is how to prioritize your time...all-nighters may occur because, unlike in college, they are necessary just to get work completed (in college they tend to be merely a result of procrastination!).

While some programs (and faculty members!) tend to be more structured than others, you will not get the 'hand-holding' you had in undergrad. You *will* get out of graduate school what *you* put into it and you will be largely responsible for your own learning and for the quality and timeliness of your research, publications, and presentations.

Decide why you want to go to graduate school...because you haven't found a job (or haven't wanted to take the time to do a job search!) is NOT enough of a reason. This will surely lead to problems because it takes a lot of effort and motivation to get through all the coursework and research and if you don't have strong enough reasons to get you there in the first place, they won't keep you there when the going gets tough. Your reasons may evolve over time.

An aside on integrity: time and achievement pressures may tempt you to take shortcuts. Don't. Plagiarizing is NOT acceptable. Many students don't really know what plagiarizing is...but graduate school professors and journal editors do! Students think simply changing a few words in someone else's thought means you don't have to use direct quotes or even cite the source. This is not true. Paraphrasing means taking someone else's thought and putting it completely into your own...NOT just changing the structure of a sentence. Along those lines, fabricating research results is absolutely never acceptable, either. Take the time to do it right...it's much better than having a black mark on your record – forever – when you get caught! The notion of plagiarism is different in different cultures. What passes for honoring the words of an expert in some parts of the world is considered plagiarism in Europe and the United States. Regardless of where you come from, the standards that apply are the ones from here. If in doubt, consult a faculty member. It may be a little embarrassing if you were planning to do something that turns out to be situationally unacceptable. It's a lot more of a problem if you just did it the way you were used to and that turned out to be a violation of the rules.

Each year will have its own challenges. The first year will be a tough transition to a new environment and new people. Other years will present different challenges regarding your research and time commitments. Therefore, use the first year to establish some routines, get comfortable with the area and all of the departmental and campus resources available to you, and build a support system.

You will most likely go through a personal identity change while in graduate school. While this also occurs, to some extent, your first couple of years after college or in any new job, it is definitely true while in graduate school because it is the very thought of who you are and what you want to accomplish with your life that will motivate you to succeed in grad school.

In addition, through the work you do, you will establish your professional identity...you will find focus and you will become KNOWN for something (i.e. some of your undergrad. friends may no longer fit in with you...but, although this is somewhat sad, it is a very natural part of growing up and moving on...don't worry, you'll find friends who are that much more like you!)

Although this may sound grim and bleak, we simply wanted to point out some of the challenges you'll face. Most of your graduate school experience will be wonderful. It is a time for you to grow and develop into a 'real' professional and to find a true sense of accomplishment. If you establish your support system, find a mentor, and develop good reading/writing/research habits early on, you will graduate with joy at the accomplishment you achieved. You will feel more confident, more prepared, and wiser. At some point you will most likely look back on your graduate school experience and say, "Ah, that was nothing" (for some, it takes longer to get to that point than for others), and then you will embark on the next step in your journey. For now, though, look ahead with open and eager eyes and an inquisitive mind, and enjoy the ride!

Please contact us for career guidance and job search assistance...

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