

From undergraduate to graduate student: What I wish I had known

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As a new graduate student, I thought I had a fairly good understanding of what graduate education would entail. I had been lucky enough to be mentored by wonderful graduate students and faculty members who spent numerous hours discussing graduate school with me; I had it figured out - or so I thought. Upon arriving, I quickly learned that things are very different from undergraduate. Here are some things I learned as a first year student that I wish I had known before starting. Would knowing these things have changed my decision to enter? Definitely not - but it may have made the transition from undergraduate to graduate student easier and kept me more sane in my first year! I hope passing on such things will accomplish the same for you...

a) The imposter syndrome is real and you are not the only one suffering from it!

I had been warned about the "imposter syndrome"- characterized by feelings of inadequacy and the notion that one does not belong in graduate school. Despite knowing that such feelings often afflict first year students, I underestimated the extent to which I would experience them and often felt alone. However, it soon became apparent that many, if not most, graduate students experience periods of self-doubt and insecurity regarding their abilities. I have yet to come across one student who has not felt uncertain and insecure at some point in their graduate career. Remember this when you are feeling like an "imposter" and

questioning your school's decision to have let you in!

b) There is a large transition and adjustment period.

Relocating to a new city, leaving family and friends, and starting a new program all bring about significant personal change and adjustment. My peers and I were surprised at how large the adjustment was and how long it took for us to settle fully into our new lives. First term was long past before I felt truly familiar with my surroundings and comfortable in my role as graduate student. Finding your rhythm in novel activities such as teaching, marking, and supervising students simply takes time, as does building new relationships and navigating within a new city and program. Allow yourself time to go through this adjustment phase and enjoy the process of starting your life as a graduate student.

c) Graduate school is very time-consuming and graduate students wear several different hats.

I assumed graduate school would resemble a 9-5 job with evenings and weekends off; I soon learned I was mistaken. The sheer volume of work took me by surprise, and between juggling courses, research, teaching assistantships, student supervision, and practical work, graduate students have their hands full. Setting priorities and developing a good time management plan from the beginning can help handle the various

commitments and tasks that demand your time.

d) Setting goals (especially research goals) is key.

Although I had general goals, I wish I would have set specific goals for the year with timelines. My hope of conducting lots of research within my first year was not fulfilled, as the majority of my time was spent on courses and teaching assistant duties. Finding time to do research would have been a squeeze, however, I think that with clear goals and a set plan, I would have produced more research within my first year.

e) Grades are different in graduate school!

One of my mentors recently discussed with me the importance of thinking “differently” about grades. Whereas grades are all-important in undergraduate education, they become less so in graduate school. Graduate funding and award decisions are largely based on research potential and productivity. That is not to say that academic performance is not important or that you should not strive to do well in your courses. However, be aware that time spent on coursework is time spent away from research and other academic activities. Learning to become less fixated on grades can be difficult, yet I think doing so makes for a happier and more research-focused graduate student.

f) The approach you used as an undergraduate may not work.

I was an undergraduate student who read everything and studied in advance. This approach did not carry over into graduate school - I simply did not have time to read every single article that was assigned or pertained to my area. Trying to keep abreast

of all the work in graduate school forced me to adjust my approach and concentrate my efforts on essential material. It can be unnerving when methods you have relied on for years do not work as well; be aware of this and recognize that some refinement in work style may be required.

g) Taking care of yourself is vital.

If someone had told me that my first term as a graduate student would be filled with sleep deprived days, more take-out food than I care to remember, and sporadic exercise, I would have been horrified! I soon learned, however, that such a lifestyle does not sustain you, and that taking good care of yourself is essential. The stress and demands of graduate school can take physical and mental tolls, and caring for yourself is key to avoid burnout. Graduate school can work you 24/7 if you allow it, and it is up to you to ensure that your health and wellbeing are a priority.

h) You get by with a lot of help from your friends.

Seeking out friends and support from your fellow graduate students may be one of the best things you can do; having someone who understands what graduate life is like is invaluable. Make an effort to be helpful, noncompetitive, and supportive of your peers - they will appreciate it and you will gain needed social support as you make your way through a demanding program. You never know when you may need to call on your friends... when it is 3 am, your essay is due in 5 hours and your computer crashes, or the paper you submitted gets rejected, it is often your peers that are there to support you.

i) There is no one right way to approach graduate education.

This article is based on MY experiences and MY perspective - you may have a different experience. It is important to realize that there are several ways to succeed and you have to find one that works for you. You will be exposed to many different models and encounter people who have reached their goals in various ways - adopt

approaches that suit you. Find your own voice. Do not be afraid to make mistakes and experiment until you find an approach that works. Despite its stresses, graduate school is a very rewarding experience and by finding your own voice you will likely enjoy it more and learn a lot about yourself along the way!!