

How to Survive and Thrive in Graduate School

Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS), IU Health Center, 4th Floor
healthcenter.indiana.edu/counseling @IUHealthCenter
(812)855-5711

Graduate school can be difficult due to the unstructured nature of the process, and the lack of information about what to expect. So here's what we think you need to know!

1. Adjusting to grad school. Most students feel a mixture of anticipation, excitement, hope, insecurity, and fear during the first several weeks. It's normal to experience some physical and emotional symptoms during this change. Adjusting can be especially difficult for international students or those who've moved their partners/families (guilt!)

2. Expectations. Chances are, no one sent you a brochure outlining how graduate school is different from undergrad so you can adjust your expectations. Now, you will have more readings and tasks than ever before and maybe even more than you can actually complete (instead of finishing your to-do list), you will be responsible for learning the material independently (instead of having lectures that teach the readings), your colleagues may view you as competition (as opposed to potential friends), and working like a "good student" now means keeping pace (but not completing every task as well as you'd like to), earning A's, B's and maybe an occasional C (instead of all A's), and getting some accolades, but no longer being at the top.

3. Impact on Your Relationships. Unless your family, friends, or partners have attended graduate school, they also won't know how the graduate school process is different, and this can lead to frustration, jealousy and hurt feelings on both sides. When your dad asks you a third time to explain what you're studying, your step-mom asks you when your thesis is "due", or your partner is angry that you're "still working on your research; it's been 3 years!", it can make you feel like they don't understand you anymore.



4. You need a strategy for completing graduate school. Runners train differently in order to run a sprint race versus a marathon. Graduate school is more like a marathon. You'll need to pace yourself, eat, hydrate, and conserve your energy sometimes, even though you'll feel like you could run faster/work harder. In graduate school, there are so many exciting opportunities and tasks to do that your work can easily become what you think about and do 24/7/365, crowding out the other important relationships and activities in your life.

5. Impact on your confidence and identity. You may think “I’m not as smart as everyone else here” or “when I turn in this paper, my advisor is going to see that I shouldn’t have been admitted”. This has been called “The Imposter Syndrome” and it’s common, especially among females. This can lead graduate students to feel anxious, procrastinate, or over-correct for these feelings by talking/bragging about all the things they have done or do know. Also, you’re now one of many “big fish” in a “little pond” and that shift in how you view yourself and your abilities compared to others can feel disconcerting.

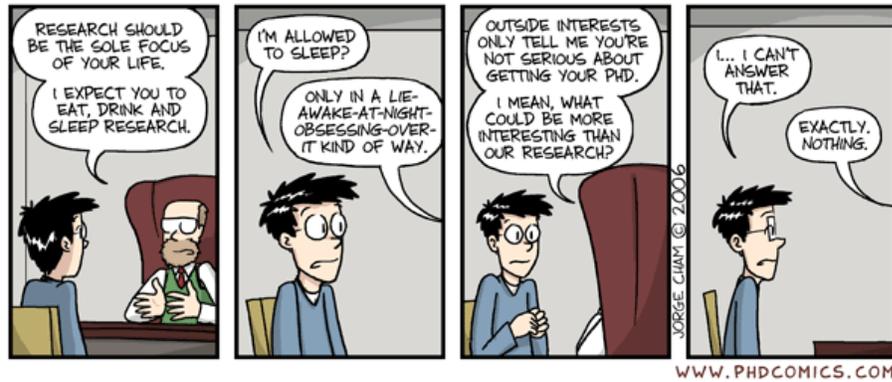


6. Taking constant care of yourself is now a priority. “Generally speaking, people provide better maintenance for their cars than for their bodies.” – Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Future*. Because so many tasks will need your attention, it will be easy to forget or to think there isn’t time to take care of yourself physically and emotionally. Maybe in the past, self-care wasn’t so necessary; you just drank more caffeine if you felt tired, pulled all-nighters if you couldn’t get your work done for the day, and skipped lunch if didn’t have time to eat that day. Like the successful marathon runner, if you don’t make adjustments to get more sleep or pre-plan for lunch, finishing the graduate school race may be much more difficult for you.

7. Becoming an Associate Instructor (AI). Most teachers go to school for 4+ years to learn how to teach, so becoming an AI may require a steep learning curve for you. Therefore, you may experience anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt for a while. Teaching also requires a lot of time, so balancing teaching along with your other school priorities, relationships and self-care will require quite a bit of trial-and-error before you can feel confident about yourself as an AI. Many AI’s also find they need to adjust their expectations of themselves and their students, get help learning how to respond to students who are disgruntled or who come to you in emotional crisis, and develop a ‘thicker skin’ to student feedback from course evaluations.

8. Qualifying Exams. Yet another task you’ve never experienced before, hearing horror stories about others’ experiences, not knowing what to expect, and the looming possibility that failing could end your graduate career - qualifying exams can feel scary! Your expectations about how to prepare, how you “should” perform, and how you’ll feel afterward can cause you unnecessary stress. It may seem that everyone else is preparing better/faster/with less procrastination than you (yet again, threatening your confidence)!

9. Research/Thesis/Dissertation. What does it mean to “do research”? “How do I find my research interests?” These are common fears new graduate students face when they begin their research. Proposing and writing your thesis/dissertation may trigger different fears for you (e.g., “What if it doesn’t make a significant contribution to the field?”, “What if it doesn’t get published?”) and problems (intense procrastination, sleep problems) than you’ve experienced before, and this may surprise you or make you feel guilty, panicked, or depressed. Sometimes this is due to incorrect or unrealistic expectations (“I’ve written a 50 page paper before, so why can’t I write this thesis?”), unrecognized insecurities (“I’m so behind; now I really have to write a really good thesis to prove to my committee that I deserve to pass”), or poor fit with your advisor/committee (e.g., a too hands-off).



10. Advisor, Department, and Cohort Relationships. Your department is probably fantastic, but some graduate students do experience misunderstandings, personality mis-matches, department politics, or in the worst case scenarios injustices, exploitation, harassment or discrimination. These can happen with faculty or colleagues. Think about it: you’ll be spending thousands of hours with these people, developing into a make-shift ‘family’ (complete with parent(s), “the golden child”, the “rebel”, etc.), and all families have conflict at times. You may find yourself accidentally in the middle of these situations or feel strongly about speaking up but powerless or afraid because of power differences.



Tips to Surviving/Thriving In Graduate School:

"Being a graduate student is like becoming all of the Seven Dwarves. In the beginning you're Dopey and Bashful. In the middle, you are usually sick (Sneezy), tired (Sleepy), and irritable (Grumpy). But at the end, they call you Doc, and then you're Happy."

- Ronald T. Azuma

1. Be patient with yourself! Expect some physical and emotional symptoms of adjustment (feeling anxious, crying more easily, sleep disturbance). Take time to make friends and explore Bloomington. Check out the Graduate & Professional Student Government (GPSG) and attend their Informational Mixer Wednesday Aug. 16, 3-5pm at Wells Library, and other events: <http://www.indiana.edu/~gpsg/>.

2. Think through your expectations. *"To know the road ahead, ask those coming back."* - Chinese proverb. Adopt a mentor by inviting older students to coffee, and asking questions about what to expect the first year, what they wish they had known, and the way things work in your department. Decide your priorities and divide your time accordingly. Adjust your expectations about how you "should" perform. Remember: grades don't define you as a person. There will always be some class or topic that you just don't understand. As long as you try your best, you've fulfilled your obligation. Learn to doubt your ability to set realistic goals for new tasks; however long you think it will take you to accomplish the task, multiply times two.

3. Set others' expectations straight. Educate family and significant others about what the first year will be like for you, explain what you're thinking and feeling, and tell them directly what you need from them so they can understand your experience and really be supportive. If you're in a relationship, institute a set-in-stone weekly date with your partner. Plan to check-in with him/her once a month to see how your relationship is going and if anything needs to be adjusted (e.g., tweaking chore responsibilities, re-discussing expectations). Educate family/friends about how commitments or finances will impact summer and holiday travel plans.

4. Choose your strategy NOW. Approach graduate school like a job – Work 9am to 6pm? No weekends? Try not to focus on every single detail/class assignment; this can prevent you from seeing the big picture. Maximize your long-term productivity by protecting some time for yourself and important relationships in order to recharge your batteries. Schedule in non-work time (e.g., American Idol, date night) and self-care (e.g., exercise).

5. Expect to feel like an imposter. It's normal to feel confused, need to re-read, and believe that you're the only one of your colleagues who...can't read it all...has never learned this before...etc. Don't always trust your emotions about this. How do you know your internal critical voice is always right?

6. STRIVE for balance. Develop a schedule that's consistent and includes personal time. Every once in a while, put away your work and read something fun. Cook extra food and freeze in portions. Stash large quantities of snacks in your backpack or office. Use a crock pot. Visit an IU Health Center dietitian (855-7688) for a free appt. to learn tips to fast, healthier options on a grad school schedule. Take some personal time off every day. Get involved in at least one activity outside of school. Say "no" to some things. Decide what it means to do "enough" What is "good enough"? Never say, "After I finish graduate school, I will..." Graduate school is not limbo; this is your life. Your health and happiness are more important than your job or your degree.

7. How important is teaching to me? After prioritizing teaching with your other tasks, relationships and self-care, spend your time in this area according to your priorities. If teaching is important to you, find a mentor who values it too. Remind yourself that people aren't born knowing how to teach; it's a skill learned through experience, feedback, and self-reflection. If teaching isn't a high priority for you, work smarter not harder; ask other AI's for tips. Remember: not everyone is meant to be a teacher.

8. Approach qualifying exams as a task. Qualifying exams can cause stress because they can feel like unmanageable mountains to cross. Talk to older students about the process and how to prepare, and break it down to smaller, more manageable tasks. Most importantly, try to see it as 'just' another task to accomplish in order to move along the road of graduate school.

9. Develop an honest relationship with your research advisor. Ask to have a conversation about his/her expectations and each of your working styles (so you'll know what to expect!). Tell your advisor when you don't understand or need help; putting it off will only make it harder to do. If you're procrastinating on your research, try to identify why, include how you're feeling about it. Compared to quick finishers, research suggests student who finished their thesis/dissertation slowly or not at all: a) generally suffered as much anxiety as slow finishers b) coped by developing close professional relationships with their advisors c) worked productively even when feeling anxious d) could tolerate imperfection e) were typically married. Those who struggled to finish their thesis/dissertation a) had few or no relationships with others b) gave help but did not seek help because doing so made them feel vulnerable c) had unresolved issues in their lives that popped up.

10. Treat colleagues the way you want to be treated. Save the competition for the sports field; you and your colleagues are all in this together! Commit to getting to know them but remember you don't have to be best friends. Make plans to have dinner together after class. Celebrate birthdays and accomplishments together (e.g., a research grant award party). Offer each other support. Say out loud when you're struggling and ask if they are too. Avoid gossip. If you have a problem related to your advisor, a faculty member or your department, talk to a department member you trust, GPSG, University Graduate School, or the Dean of Students.

11. Recruit your cheering section/support group. Identify friends, family members, significant others and members of your cohort who know how/when to be supportive and give you a pep talk, and how/when to get in your face and push you to do what you need to do. Do these same things for your colleagues.

12. Bumps WILL happen; expect it! Unexpected events such as your advisor going on sabbatical or family or personal/health emergencies may occur. Especially at first, accurately predicting how long a task will take or how laborious it will be, will be difficult. Practice setting realistic goals for yourself but also plan for these goals to be revised.

13. Know when you or a colleague could use some help and speak up! CAPS sees more than 4,000 IU students each year, and approx. 1 in 5 are graduate/professional students. We have services tailored just to you, such as graduate student therapy groups and dissertation task groups, as well as individual and couple's counseling and medication assessment/management. We want to see you for any problem, "not that big of a deal" to "very serious". Please encourage your colleagues to make a "CAPS Now" appointment if you see them struggling; sometimes they need a little push or encouragement from you to know that they should take this step. <http://healthcenter.indiana.edu/counseling/index.shtml>

Thanks to: <http://www.phdcomics.com> and <http://www.goannatreeblog.com/>