

TOP 10 BITS OF ADVICE FOR SURVIVING GRADUATE SCHOOL
(Posted 2009-12-20 21:41:22 by Ray Lopez)

This advice is intended for anyone interested in pursuing graduate education (toward the Ph.D.) on a full-time basis, not for part-timers or weekend scholars. Also, my graduate education was in the sciences, so some of what I say may not apply to someone in, say, management or the humanities.

1. Maintain a positive attitude

I wish I would have known this bit of advice when I was in grad school. Being a poor graduate student is, for the most part, a miserable existence. But, you get to share it with others going through the same thing. Bond with these folks, and make it a point to be positive in the face of adversity. Combine this with hard work, and you'll make a great impression on the graduate faculty.

2. Don't get married or be married

Being a full time grad student in science is a very self-absorbed undertaking. You'll be eating, breathing, thinking nothing but graduate school for at least 3 or 4 years. Unless your spouse is another graduate student, or VERY, VERY patient and understanding, you'll end up with a ruined marriage at about the same time you receive your doctorate. You also won't be earning a lot of money, and that can stress out some couples as well.

3. Expand your horizons

Take time in graduate school to explore other areas of knowledge, to get to know faculty members in areas outside of your own. This extra knowledge and experience may come in handy to differentiate you from other job applicants when trying to land that tenure track job.

4. Maintain professional relationships with your mentor and graduate faculty at all times.

If you have a very good mentor, like I did, he or she will keep your relationship professional and will make sure your relationship with other faculty members is professional as well. Why is this important? Because of academic politics. The graduate faculty at your department likely has a nasty, ugly history of bloody politics. They all do. The last thing you want is to get involved in these politics, such that you hurt your chances of successfully jumping through all the hoops of the hazing ritual known as graduate school. Keep professional relationships with everyone, document EVERYTHING you say and that is said to you, and treat everyone with respect.

5. Cherish the friendships

Graduate school is an ordeal, an ordeal that you suffer through along with others. If you're lucky, this group suffering will cause a strong bonding experience, and you'll make a lifetime of friends. There are only two good things about graduate school: 1) finishing it, and 2) the friends you make. Cherish especially those friends with whom you can share your feelings with. You'll have a lot of ups and downs in grad school.

6. Learn to write and to speak well

Do everything you can to get better at writing and speaking. Ask your mentor and other profs for writing feedback. Write as many papers as you

can, and take the feedback seriously. Do a teaching assistantship and learn how to deliver good lectures and explain difficult concepts to others. Ask others for feedback on your speaking or teaching. Videotape yourself giving a talk or lecture, and find ways to improve. You might be the most brilliant scientist since Einstein, but if you can't communicate your ideas well, no one will pay attention to you or want to hire you.

7. Develop a routine

Develop a routine that will allow you to study, teach, conduct your research, and take care of yourself every day. This is why it is important to be unmarried and unattached. You need to develop a routine that depends as little as possible on the routines and actions of others.

8. Take it one task at a time.

If you sit down and look at the sum total of work you have to accomplish to earn a doctorate, you'll get discouraged. Don't think about it. Just take things one exam at a time, one paper at a time, one experiment at a time. Trudge through it with a positive attitude and you'll be done before you realize it.

9. Just get it done!

There are going to be many, many times in the course of your graduate education when you are just going to want to quit. At the very least, you're going to hit a wall, and will be unable to bring yourself to write your thesis, run that experiment, analyze those data, etc. This is where you just have to pull yourself up and just do it. There's just no other advice that I can offer, it just boils down to sucking it up and forcing yourself to complete those aversive tasks. Just realize you're going to have these moments, and mentally prepare yourself for them.

*

10. Read phdcomics.com*

No one has captured graduate life the way Jorge Cham has in his webcomic, Piled Higher and Deeper [<http://www.phdcomics.com>]. The comics don't make much sense to anyone who hasn't suffered through graduate school. But after your first semester you'll appreciate how hilarious these comics are, and they'll make you feel a little better, knowing that you're not alone!

There are no comments on this post.

To submit a comment on this post, email rl@well.com or visit us on the web [<http://ratthing.com>].

.