10 Things I Wish I Would Have Known About Graduate School

1. Discover Your Passion
If you are going to continue your education you should have a reason. If you don’t know what you are interested in you will have a hard time finding a program you are really excited about. Think about what you want to do in the future: do you want to teach? Work in a research lab? Specialize in a particular discipline? These questions will help you narrow down your choices. Talk to current students to find out more about the program at a particular school. You can only learn so much from the description on the school’s website. Additionally, the phrase “You’ll never go to grad school if you don’t go now” holds little water. Chances are if you feel like you’d never go back after taking a break, you may not belong in a graduate program. Evaluate your reasons for going, and make sure they include something else besides grad school being “the next logical step”.

2. Pick a School Intentionally
While picking the school may seem like an obvious part of choosing a graduate program, there are a few crucial elements you should consider.
- Location: You shouldn’t pick a school on location alone, but it’s something you should consider. What things are important to you? Do you like big cities? Lakes? Mountains? Snow? Are there leisure activities or a community in which you’d want to get involved? Remember that you are going to spend the next 2 or more years at this location, but that doesn’t mean it should necessarily be the deciding factor.
- Size: Do you want to go to a large university? Small school? What about the department size? Number of grad students? Number of undergrads? Does it have a cohort?
- Funding: Are graduate assistantships available? How many and what do they cover? Are they renewable? Will you be funded throughout your entire program? What about the summer? Is your department grant funded?
- Recent Graduates: What careers have recent grads of the program pursued? What kind of reputation does the university have?
- People: What are the undergraduates like? Faculty and staff of your department? Other graduate students? Will you work with them in an assistantship, or take joint classes with them? What is the campus climate and attitude of the student body? Is it a commuter campus or do students stay over most weekends? Where do the faculty come from?

3. Know Your Advisor
This is the person who will be your mentor throughout your graduate career. It is extremely important to have a good relationship with your advisor. Make sure your interests line up BEFORE applying to a program. Keep in mind that your advisor has your best interests in mind. Even though it may seem like he or she is out to get you, your advisor really wants you to succeed. Good advisors will challenge you and put you out of your comfort zone, but will also be there to back you up when you need support.

4. Think About Research Interests
Make sure you read recent publications from your potential advisor. Find out what type of research he/she has done in the past. Lining up research interests is extremely important- you want to pick an advisor who has worked in an area that is interest to you as well, especially if your program includes a thesis requirement or option.

5. Revise Your Study Habits
Graduate classes are much different than undergraduate classes. You will have much more responsibility and sometimes an assignment takes longer than you plan. Most of the time, you will also have much more reading than you might be used to. Prioritizing tasks and budgeting your time are essential for success. It is also important to stay organized; if you didn’t do this during undergrad, invest in a daily planner or use a smartphone calendar application.
When it comes to getting all of your work done, you have to be productive. Excessive surfing the internet, watching TV, and naps are a thing of the past. To find out how you work best, ask yourself some questions:

- What time of day am I most focused?
- What type of environment do I work well in?
- Do I work best in groups or on my own?
- How do I learn best?
- What types of things distract me?

Break up your work up into sections and take breaks in between. Making lists can be helpful and encouraging as you cross them off when tasks are completed. You can even add things that seem silly, like “eat lunch” or “do laundry”—those things are important too!

6. Get Involved
Becoming involved in your school, community, or field of study is great for a number of reasons. First off, you get to meet a lot of people! Second, it’s great for networking and establishing contacts. Third, you can learn a lot and get to meet some influential people within your field. Lastly, becoming a member, attending, and presenting at conferences can help educate you in ways classroom learning cannot. You should also stay current with recent trends within your field. Take advantage of the opportunities offered to you as a student.

7. Remember Your Non-Student Life
Take care of your body. It’s hard to stay on top of all of your coursework, your research, teaching classes, etc. if you aren’t taking care of yourself. Remember that you have nothing to give others if you haven’t given yourself what you need first. Make sure you eat well. Good nutrition really can make a positive difference in how you feel. Buy yourself a cookbook and learn how to cook. Also, try to get enough sleep. Most people need around 8 hours to feel rested. Although you may not be able to sleep 8 hours every night, a few times a week is a good goal. Take time for yourself each day. It’s easy to slip into the routine of geeking out at school all day, going to work, and become bogged down in all of your responsibilities. Set aside time to do an activity that you enjoy—especially something that is a lot different than the activities you may be doing at work or class (i.e. if you sit in an office all day at work, taking a walk or run may rejuvenate you).

8. Be Aware of Finances
Graduate students sometimes live close to poverty levels. However, don’t stress too much about money, just be conscious of how much you spend and try to budget. One way to cut down on costs is to pack a lunch every day. Instead a spending $10 a day, a bag lunch probably costs you about $2. Do the math—it adds up.

9. Use Coffee Wisely
Coffee can be a lifesaver sometimes, but be aware that it is not a cure, only a temporary aid. Get sleep whenever possible!

10. Be Encouraged
Remember that you got into school for a reason. Don’t sell yourself short; everyone has ups and downs. Try not to take criticism personally and be confident in your abilities. It’s good to have friends or other students you can talk to. Sometimes just having someone listen to your frustrations can make you feel better. Remember, if grad school were easy, everyone would do it!

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