



Wayne State University Graduate School Newsletter

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The Life of a Graduate Student

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The life of a graduate student is much less structured than that of an undergraduate. Hours in the classroom are fewer, although hours of course-related work are greatly increased. The structure that might have been imposed on your undergraduate life by the routine of a dormitory, sorority, or fraternity is gone. You may find yourself far from home for the first time, or you may find that your family responsibilities are increased by marriage or parenthood. In any case, there will be more responsibilities to juggle and fewer fixed points to rely upon. What can students expect and what can they do to cope during their experiences of graduate school life.

Original Article can be found at: <http://www.cs.umd.edu/~oleary/gradstudy/node5.html>



New Freedom and Flexibility Can be Found in Graduate school

Graduate school gives you new freedom and flexibility in your choice of courses, although it might be a year or two before you experience this.

While the typical undergraduate carries 15 or more credit hours, the typical graduate student carries 9 or fewer. Expectations from the instructors are higher, however: you really will need to allow one or more study hours for every class hour. Different professors have different styles. Sometimes the instructor will lecture to supplement the text, and you will be required to master the textbook material on your own. Sometimes there is no text, so outside hours are spent in doing the suggested reading or in filling in the gaps in the course notes. Sometimes the students do the bulk of the presentations, with the instructor acting as resource person.

Choosing courses for your first semester must be done with care. Make use of your official academic advisor, the instructors for the courses that interest you, and fellow students. If you have any doubt about whether you are over- or under-prepared for a course, talk to the instructor about your background and get advice.

If you enter graduate school unprepared in some aspect of your major, remedying that deficiency should be your first priority. Try to take the elementary courses you are missing within your first year of study, but make sure that you also include some graduate courses if possible so that you can hasten your adjustment to graduate life.

Most departments have a set of course requirements or a set of exams that students are expected to pass within a given amount of time. Your second priority is to take the courses that will lead you to fulfilling these requirements. It is tempting to sign up during your first semester for several advanced seminars in a specialized area, but you cannot afford much time for this unless they fit into your plan of fulfilling the basic requirements. There will be time later to take advanced courses in the areas that interest you, and you may get a lot more out of those courses if you master the basics first.

On the other hand, it is a good idea to develop a good working relationship with a person whom you consider to be a good candidate for a thesis advisor--someone actively working in an interesting field who is willing to make time for you. It might be useful to take one advanced course during your first year or so with this person, but probably not during your first semester.

Once you have completed the basic course requirements, you have additional flexibility. Strive for breadth in your knowledge even if not required for graduation. Often careers take unexpected twists, and an area that is now peripheral to your interests may be central later on. Strive for depth in your research area: make sure that you understand the full range of research problems.

Once you are past all the hurdles and working on your thesis, your course work should be very selective. Don't dilute your energy by taking too many courses, but don't miss special opportunities such as seminar courses by top researchers.

If more than one section of a course is offered, get advice on which instructor to choose. In general, regular faculty are to be preferred to visitors teaching basic courses, so that you get to know the people with whom you will be working. Try to choose faculty who are possible advisors. If that is not possible, choose the ones with the best teaching reputations, but try for a healthy mix of junior and senior faculty. Remember that eventually you will need a set of letters of

recommendation in order to find a job, so it is a good idea to become known to the faculty early.

Don't make your course decisions in a vacuum. Talk to your advisor about what background would be helpful for work in a particular area. Talk to fellow students about what courses are most useful and what professors are best teachers. Talk to the instructors of courses you are considering if you have any doubts about the course syllabus or your preparation for the course.

Life as a Teaching Assistant

The job of teaching assistant is a crucial one. The success of the course you are assigned rests in great part on your performance. The instructor sets the tone and the standards for the course, but you have several critical jobs:

- You are the student's best hope of understanding concepts that the book and the instructor fail to communicate. Whether you meet the students in office hours or in a recitation or lab session, you need to be well-prepared: read the relevant part of the textbook, know what the instructor has covered in class (in particular, the special notation used and supplementary information introduced), and solve the homework problems.
- You are eyes and ears for the instructor. A good instructor will appreciate regular reports from you on any errors you find in the handouts or homework assignments, what is confusing the students, and what concepts need more motivation. What the students tell you is important!
- You set standards of integrity and fairness. Your grading must be careful and objective and prompt, so that students are evaluated fairly and get quick feedback on their mistakes. You must put aside any prejudices in your interaction with students, treating each one with respect and an expectation that each can master the material. You must be alert to any attempts at cheating, and you must discuss any suspicious actions with the instructor.
- You can use the job as an apprenticeship, learning how (and how not) to teach from close observation of the instructor and from trying various techniques in your own interactions with students. Make use of your fellow teaching assistants, your instructor, and any campus teaching excellence offices to learn to communicate knowledge!

Life as a Research Assistant

The job of a research assistant is amorphous, ranging from clerical help in finding library citations, to performing calculations or writing computer code to match precise specifications, to participation as an equal research partner with your supervisor. Usually the responsibilities increase with your experience, and if you find your duties to be too routine, make sure that your supervisor knows that you are ready for more responsibility.

You will probably be working on a very small part of a rather large project, but your role is crucial:

- Try to keep the big picture in mind. Ask your supervisor if you may read the research proposal under which you are funded, so that you can see how your project fits into the larger scheme of things.
- Try to keep your task clearly in your mind. Make notes immediately after talking to your supervisor so that you don't forget anything.
- If you have questions or are stuck, get help! Ask other students who are working on the project, or contact your supervisor as quickly as possible. Don't drift! Each project has a deadline, and it is important that you stay on track.
- Stay in close contact with other graduate students on the project to see how they are progressing and to provide sounding boards for each other's ideas. On the other hand, don't hinder their work by constantly distracting them.

Sometimes a major source of contention between a research assistant and a supervisor is how much credit should be given to the assistant when joint work is published. In general, a research assistant should be listed as a co-author if the work could not have been completed without the creative intellectual input of the assistant. If the assistant carried out the instructions of the supervisor in performing some computations or writing computer code to accomplish a task, then the supervisor is the author, but an acknowledgement could be made of the assistant's contributions. "Helpful discussions" between the supervisor and the student should be acknowledged as such. If a calculation required special expertise that only the assistant had, or if the work succeeded only because of a special set of new ideas designed by the assistant, or if the assistant found and fixed a major flaw in the supervisor's idea, or if the assistant made major

suggestions for improving or extending the idea, then co-author status would be merited. Sometimes it is difficult to agree on the definition of "major" contribution. If the supervisor and the assistant disagree on whether the assistant should be a coauthor, the assistant should ask advice from another faculty member or student. In most cases, contesting a gray-area decision on co-authorship is not worth the resulting ill-will, but serious injustices should be resisted.

Life on a Fellowship

Some students are supported by a fellowship, a grant from their university or some outside agency. The funds may cover tuition and also provide a living allowance.

Unfettered by the responsibilities of being an assistant, graduate life can seem rather uncomplicated. This is largely an illusion, though, since the toughest part of graduate school is study and research!

There are a few pitfalls to avoid if you find yourself fortunate enough to have fellowship support:

- It can be more difficult to settle down to research, mainly because your fellowship support can make it tempting to just drift rather than actively seek the right advisor. You will need to make the effort to meet faculty members and get involved in seminars and independent study until you find your place.
- Try to get office space, at least once you have a research advisor. Without a desk, it can be difficult to make contact with fellow students or your advisor, and a place to work away from home is quite important.
- If you think you might want to become a professor, you might want to volunteer to TA for a semester in order to get some experience. This can be helpful in deciding whether the academic life is right for you, and it is a definite asset during a search for an academic job. Some graduate programs require teaching as part of the Ph.D. requirements.

Life with an Outside Job

If you have a full or part-time job outside the university, you may feel that you are between two worlds, without belonging to either one. Neither the university nor

the workplace is well adapted to dealing with the other, and each may place demands that are incompatible with those of the other.

Your biggest problems may be the double commute, scheduling difficulties, and isolation.

While you are taking courses, each semester will bring challenges of how to arrange to be on campus at the necessary times without unduly hampering your work. Don't make the mistake of believing that you need time off only for going to class; a graduate student may need time for access to resources (e.g., labs or libraries) that have limited hours, for meeting with instructors or teaching assistants in their office hours, and for meeting with other students for group projects. Electronic mail and remote computer access will alleviate some of these problems but not all of them.

Many departments put time limits on progress toward degree that are incompatible with part-time status. Know and understand the rules, and have a plan to deal with them, either by taking a leave of absence from your job or by working as if you had two jobs.

Later, when you are involved in research, you will need to carve out time to meet with your advisor, as well as time for your thesis research.

Since you do not spend as much time on campus as a typical student, you may find it harder to get to know your colleagues, find study groups, and generally learn the ropes. Consider some of the advice given above for fellowship students.

Social Life

In some departments, the graduate students form relatively cohesive groups, organizing lunches, social hours, and excursions. In others, there is little interaction. Even if a department is relatively "cold" when you arrive, it only takes a few people to "warm it up." Try to get a core of interested students, and aim for establishing a graduate student lounge, a weekly brown bag lunch (perhaps inviting a faculty member or a finishing student to give an informal presentation), or a monthly excursion.

If interactions within the department look hopeless, try making contacts in another department, or through the graduate school itself.

Maintaining Sanity

No student gets through graduate school without experiencing a significant amount of stress. There is always too much to do, and not enough time to do it. Sometimes it is not even clear what should be done--only that it should be completed now. Students doubt their intelligence, their creativity, their motivation, and sometimes their sanity.

This is normal, and probably unavoidable. But there are certain factors that will make your life smoother.

To prevent Failure in graduate school, rely upon as many of these F's as possible:

- *Friends.* Use them as sounding boards, as shoulders to cry on, and as non job-related companions. And make sure that they can rely on you for the same things.
- *Faculty.* Try to find a supportive faculty member other than your advisor: perhaps someone in a closely related field, a former teacher, or someone (perhaps a woman or minority member) you feel some kinship with. Make it a point to stop by once a month or once a semester just to report progress (or lack of it) and problems, and to get another perspective.
- *Family.* The support of your family is a great resource. A healthy adult relationship with your parents can provide a great sense of security. The time you spend with spouse or children is a good way to recharge your batteries and remind you that career is not everything.
- *Faith.* A belief in God or a theory of why you are where you are can be a source of strength in keeping your perspective and knowing that hard times will pass.
- *Fitness.* The healthier your lifestyle, the more energy--especially creative energy--you may draw upon.
- *Fun.* Make time in your life for the other things you enjoy, whether music, theater, reading, art, or sunset watching. You are a scholar, and you need some balance in your life. You will be more efficient during your working hours if you allow yourself to shift gears and relax in your off-hours.

Success in graduate school is important to you, but you should not disregard the other priorities in your life.

The Graduate School has the new SBE AGEP program to help you find the way to success!!!

- ◆ Career counseling
- ◆ Orientation Programs
- ◆ Funding for Research Conferences
- ◆ Preparing Future Faculty workshops



The Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP program) strives to increase significantly the number of minority students receiving doctoral degrees in the social, behavioral and economic (SBE) sciences. The program places particular emphasis on underrepresented groups in these fields wishing to pursue an academic career.

For more information visit the SBE AGEP website at:

<http://www.gradschool.wayne.edu/current/AGEP/seb.html>



The Michigan AGEP Alliance



Alliances for Graduate Education and the Professoriate



What is the AGEP Program?

Four major Ph.D. institutions in the state of Michigan have established one of the Alliances for Graduate Education and the Professoriate. A program designed to advance under-represented minority students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The MAA is dedicated to combining resources for graduate education into an effective collaboration that will produce the next generation of innovators and leaders in research and teaching not only in the STEM disciplines but also in our nation and the world.

<http://www.gradschool.wayne.edu/current/AGEP.html>

Support Services:

- Career Counseling
- Professional Development Workshops
- Funding for Travel/Participation in Diversity Student Conferences

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