



Planning for Success in Graduate School

Congratulations on your admission to graduate school and thank you for letting Grad School Coaching continue to assist you with your success in graduate school. The following recommendations are based on years of feedback from graduate students. It is in no way and exhaustive list, but worth reading at the beginning of each semester for a quick reminder. Please contact me if you would like to schedule an appointment if you need assistance throughout your graduate studies.

Pragmatic Recommendations

- ◆ PRIOR to the start of your graduate program, create a folder that will hold a printed copy of EACH SYLLABUS for EVERY COURSE you take in your graduate studies. There is likely to be a time in the future when you will need the original syllabus for state licensure committees, post-doctoral admissions committees, etc. who want to see exactly what areas your courses covered. Note, professors and programs do not always keep copies over the years so it is your responsibility. Printing out a copy and placing it in your SYLLABI folder will likely save you a great deal of time and hassle in the future. Keep a copy on your hard-drive but still print out and save each syllabus.
- ◆ At the beginning of each semester, create a folder in your computer and/or files for each course prior to the first day of class. Drop information throughout the semester about the course into the folder. Cull through the folder at the end of the semester and keep any information that may be of use in future courses, comprehensive exams, or thesis/dissertation work.
- ◆ Syllabus Shock: To counteract "syllabus shock," read over the syllabus more than once, using a highlighter to underline due dates and grading criteria. Place assignment due dates in your calendar so you may plan ahead for those weeks when several assignments /exams are due. Be sure to carefully read and understand all policies and expectations for each course.
- ◆ Revisit the basics of study skills at the beginning of each semester. For example, the SQ4R Method of Reading (see Grad School Coaching overview "Retaining What You Read: [SQ4R for Graduate Students](#)) can be a useful tool for expediting reading textbooks and books. This will help combat what is often the experience of large quantities of expected readings in many courses.
- ◆ Consider using free online resources or useful apps to assist you throughout your graduate work. For example, Trello is a free online tool to assist you in organizing and tracking the steps involved in successfully completing your projects.

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- ◆ In order to best complete your planned program of study, be aware that required courses are not always offered every semester or even every year. It will take planning on your part to determine how to best meet your course requirements within your time frame. Make sure to talk with your academic advisor regularly about program requirements.
- ◆ In considering your planned program of study, find out your options for taking courses outside your program and school. Learning from related fields may strongly expand your knowledge base in your area of study.
- ◆ For elective courses, be sure to preview courses by attending the first class. Reviewing the syllabus and hearing the course introduction from the instructor will help you determine if the course will meet your needs. Do not rely solely on a course description.
- ◆ It is important to take advantage of professors' office hours and meet with them when you have questions or have areas you want to discuss regarding the course. Get to know your professors and help them to get to know you rather than waiting for them to contact you. These may be the people who write letters of support for you in the future for fellowships, grants, work positions, etc. so let them know you.
- ◆ Prior to attending meetings with your advisor, plan ahead for your meetings. Bring a brief list of questions, planned program of study, course descriptions, etc. Take brief notes during the meeting and when relevant, consider sending your advisor a brief bulleted outline of the key points of the meeting.
- ◆ Attend colloquia, forums, panels, and speakers in and outside your university to expand your learning throughout your graduate work. You may also meet new colleagues and contacts who may be beneficial to your career.
- ◆ You may assume you do not need to go to your university's library because of all the online resources. PLEASE go to relevant library orientation sessions. There are many, many more resources at the library than what you can access online even via your university's web sources. Gaining the most from the library resources is best accomplished by learning from library staff. Please also be sure to meet the librarian assigned to your area of study or school. This person will be a formidable asset over the years. If they assist you in a way that was invaluable, be sure to send their supervisor a quick email praising them for their work.
- ◆ Do not, repeat, DO NOT PLAGIARIZE. No matter how far you are behind, how difficult, boring the material, plagiarizing is one of the most egregious moves you can make in academia. Do not do it. Go meet with your advisor and let them know you are having difficulties.
- ◆ When needing to following formatting processes such as APA or MLA, use relevant manuals or reliable online resources such as Purdue University's OWL website (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>).

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- ◆ Consider using a reference manager and PDF article organizer such as Mendeley (note: some university libraries recommend reference managers that sync well with their library system). You can create folders that enable you to hold and sort by topic, author, etc. Start using early in your graduate work so by the time you are working on your thesis or dissertation, you already have an organized means of accessing and referencing your articles.
- ◆ You pay for them in your student fee, so take advantage of the many resources on campus. This can include the learning resource center, counseling center, nutrition counselor, career services, pool, etc. It is worth leaving the comfort of your computer and going on campus to places such as the writing center, graduate resource center, women's center, and library.
- ◆ There is life beyond your program's building. Find interesting places to study on and off campus. For example, make an effort to connect with others by studying or spending time in one or two student centers on campus.
- ◆ Who is often the most important person in your program? Your advisors, professors, dean? No! Often, the most important person is the administrative coordinator / assistant for your graduate department/program. You will inevitably need assistance throughout your program and this person can make or break your smooth transition through such key areas as knowing when a course is offered in which upcoming semester/year, who is teaching the course, registering for courses, finding out the best person in financial aid to assist you, etc. This person will at some point be your lifesaver, be KIND, RESPECTFUL, and CARING toward this person.
- ◆ Check for miscellaneous costs when planning your budget for the year. Consider lab costs, parking fees, printing fees in the computer lab, etc. that add up and need to be considered as you plan ahead.
- ◆ Be realistic about your limits with course loads, research projects, commuting, time management, etc. Beginning a new graduate program is not the time to overload your schedule in other areas. There is much to learn and become familiar with when starting graduate school, including your advisor, students, professors, living area, and new region of the country and they will all take time.
- ◆ University programs throughout the years will engage in various accreditation reviews (i.e., state education boards, national accreditation bodies). You will learn a great deal by becoming involved in the process so consider being part of the planning committee as a student member or working with the professor in charge of the accreditation review process.
- ◆ I know you do not want to think about it, but humor me: in the student handbook read the section on "approved medical leave." Better to know your options in case you ever need them. Some schools do not reimburse after a certain time period and others are very strict on what is considered "approved" medical leaves.

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Process Recommendations

- ◆ Consider your new opportunities, roles, and expectations. Starting graduate school can be a time to start new habits, continue successful ones, take new chances and make new choices.
- ◆ This is the time to use existing, or create new stress-reducing habits that work best for you. These may include exercise, time with friends, playing music, hobbies, movies, or joining a recreational class on campus such as fencing, weight lifting or yoga.
- ◆ What leads to the most success in the completion of graduate school is resiliency. Figure out how in the past you have maintained the ENDURANCE to complete tasks. Was it support from your family and friends? Setting Saturday evening aside no matter what each week to relax and let loose. Outside activities like dance, martial arts, baking brownies to send to your grad school coach. This is NOT the time to forget what works for you in maintaining your energy and perseverance. By the way, when you forget to do this, post a large note above your computer listing things you do to remain in the game for the long run as an ongoing reminder.
- ◆ Maintain your support systems with family and friends and cultivate new support among your academic peers, room/housemates, etc.
- ◆ It is important to maintain your life outside graduate school. Life will continue regardless of how busy you are in school, so give thought and planning to all parts of your life that are important to you.
- ◆ Be open to meeting people outside your program, as well as outside the university. Such contacts can be particularly helpful when there is a sense of “contagious stress” among students around due dates for papers, exams, etc. in your program. Again, meeting people outside your academic community will increase your support systems.
- ◆ Collaboration with your fellow students goes a great deal farther than competition. It is also useful to connect with advanced students to learn from their experiences (note: talk to more than one advanced student so you gain a better overall picture rather than just one person’s opinion/perspective).
- ◆ Mentors may not always be your advisor. Be willing to cultivate mentoring relationships with other professors, site supervisors, or students who are further along in the program.

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- ◆ Be aware that “imposter syndrome” will strike. This is common and involves a feeling that you are an imposter or an “admissions error.” The admissions committee accepted you, because they believe you would be both successful and a good match for the program.
- ◆ Be open to personal growth that may happen during your time in graduate school. In many ways, your personal growth is as important as your professional growth.
- ◆ “Reading maketh a full man, Conferencing a ready man, and Writing an exact man.”
Francis Bacon
 - Read for content and major ideas/points, rather than focusing on every single word. It is also important for you to create a system to keep track of important information, as well as your reflective thoughts. These may later be the foundation of your research, thesis, or dissertation.
 - Be open to individual and group achievement. Collaborate and take advantage of the fact that you are part of a learning community. Study groups have much to offer if you put planning into the group. It is also okay if your needs change over time, and you need to change the composition of your study group(s) as you proceed through the program.
 - Make sure to plan reflection and writing time into your schedule. Part of graduate school is about processing and reflecting on new ideas as well as discovering new avenues you may want to pursue.
- ◆ Keep in mind that it’s okay to like and enjoy graduate school. It can be very exciting to be immersed in the area of study you really like, with people who also want to learn. Enjoy!

Additional resources may be found at: <http://www.gradschoolcoaching.com>

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