



How to Be a Graduate Student (Before I Forget): A Collection of Experiential Wisdom

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1. The Case for Sharing Wisdom

Overall, the number of graduate and doctorate degrees awarded in the US has grown over the course of the early 21st century [1]. Fields like engineering and education have been producing PhDs for several decades, however recent shifts in technology have changed the process of a PhD drastically [2]. The specific new field of a PhD in engineering education came formally into existence in 2004 with the creation of Purdue's School of Engineering Education [3], with programs at Virginia Tech, Clemson, Utah State, Arizona State, Ohio State, and others formalizing in the years since then. Other less formalized PhD pathways in engineering education have also appeared, expanding the possibilities of PhD study. Thus, the process of graduate school, while familiar to many academics, is also always becoming new. While sharing strategies and insights about graduate school has been done several times before [4], [5], it is important to update and reiterate those pieces of advice in new realities.

Furthermore, while an intense and specific experience, most people only ever complete the PhD process once. Each step of the process— coursework, qualifying or comprehensive exams, dissertation proposal, research, dissertation writing, and defense—is only completed once. In education theory, singular experiences can be particularly difficult to learn from, as repeated practice helps develop strategies and better abstractions from examples [6]. Each person who experiences the PhD process holds a piece of valuable knowledge and experience, that is no longer directly useful to themselves. To make these experiences valuable, and to add productively to the body of knowledge and academic community, we must find ways to share our lived experiences of being graduate students.

Indeed, ASEE Student Division specifically values this peer knowledge-building with their “Tricks of the Trade” paper category, which the Call for Papers says focuses on:

Addressing problems and sharing experiences within undergraduate or graduate school, specifically regarding tricks of the trade or lessons learned along the way. The papers should...be centered around tips and tricks that students have accumulated through their own education that can help guide other students who may be going through similar experiences...Topics of interest for this category include but are not limited to...advice for new graduate students: choosing a committee, work-life balance, stress management.

The spirit of this piece is to draw on personal experience from completing a PhD program in education focused on engineering education and to craft the pieces of experiential wisdom that came to the fore across that experience. The advice is offered with a sense of humility and context from my own limited experience, and the advice contained may not be applicable to everyone's situation or approach. And yet in ethnography and qualitative research, we often say that the universal is in the specific—by explaining and offering insight from one experience in detail, we may arrive at truths that transcend the individual. This piece of writing is meant to contribute to a collective wisdom for graduate student pathways, that each other current and former graduate student has an opportunity to contribute to as well.

2. Author Positionality and Method

I have been conceiving of writing a paper like this for a long time. While pursuing my PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, I would often see myself or a friend struggling with an aspect of the PhD and think what

advice I would try to give in general about that challenge. Over the years I assembled a list of those pieces of advice. Now 2+ years out of the PhD and in a faculty role, I have already taken on the formal role of a mentor, teacher, and employer (through research assistantship) to graduate students. I can tell that time and this professional shift are already changing my perspective on my graduate school experiences. Things look differently from this side of the relationship, as supervisor, coach, and mentor of graduate students, but also as a faculty member who now has a new set of challenges to learn about. But I think there is value in hearing directly from a graduate student perspective, not a person who relates primarily as an employer or instructor of graduate students—hence, the “before I forget” part of the title. I hope the perspective gained by hindsight can supplement that lack of immediacy and that as a communicative act I can speak directly to graduate students with something valuable. Now a faculty member, I am also looking towards being able to synthesize these pieces of advice in ways that I may be able to pass along to my own and other graduate students. I do not anticipate this advice to be comprehensive, and I invite others to add their wisdom as well, in this paper (see Section 5) and future works. In this envisioned collective body of knowledge on graduate student process, no one would presume to speak for all, but each act of adding perspective would help the collective understand the process of graduate school together.

Methodologically and analytically, I approach my research and life as an ethnographer, a critical scholar, an educator, and an engineer (Secules & Groen-McCall, 2019). Although there was not a formal *in situ* series of autoethnographic reflections for these findings, I consider my own lived experience to be a source of embodied knowledge. As such, I do not draw on statistics, literature, or studies *about* graduate students to present these findings, these sources do not provide a sense of agency, voice, or the knowledge that personal experience brings *by* graduate students. Rather, I synthesize my own and others’ experiences from my own positionality to provide a sense of lessons learned or wisdom beyond the particularities of my single story.

To supplement my own understanding of this topic, I also asked the Twitter community of #AcademicChatter and #PhDChat for topics of advice they would give graduate students (see Section 5). I received many responses and share those response in the final section of the findings. The tweet received 27 replies some of which were elaborated in comment threads. Twitter is a character-constrained medium, so I try to embellish on the perspectives to some extent without speaking for others too much. These pieces of advice are shared in a spirit of opening up the conversation to the many others who can offer useful advice. In summarizing the tweets, I rephrased some of them and chose not to identify the authors. Although I do want to credit that this source material is not my own, I wanted to protect any tweet authors for whom the tweets are potentially revealing difficulties in graduate school from any unintended consequences with those who read them.

3. Individual Findings: How to be a Graduate Student

My format for this paper, including section titles and the paper title, are meant to be evocative, descriptive, and sometimes humorous. The following sections are organized around aphorisms that suggest a broader topic regarding graduate student life.

3.1 Grad school asks a lot of you and you don’t have to be amazing at it all right away

A PhD is so multi-faceted it inherently tests you in a wide variety of areas. As a grad student you will need to (at least):

- 1) read a lot, quickly and with critical comprehension,

- 2) write independent and compelling thoughts,
- 3) be productive on extremely open-ended tasks,
- 4) speak up in group meetings and share your ideas (sounds small but it's scary at first!),
- 5) present your work at public venues,
- 6) learn and implement advanced research methodologies at the cutting edge of your field,
- 7) teach a class, manage a gradebook, respond to student concerns, be engaging,
- 8) synthesize the literature and know how your research findings fit in,
- 9) navigate academic hierarchies and unspoken rules,
- 10) handle setbacks, ritualized hazing, personality conflicts, and other roadblocks, and
- 11) figure out what your strengths are as an academic, what you like to do, and what is possible to do in the system...

These are some prominent aspects of being a graduate student from my perspective, there are undoubtedly more. My bigger point is to acknowledge that no one can be a master of all of these when they set out, or even after 10 years of hard work. Some of these are more difficult for us than for others we know, and we each bring our own unique set of strengths as well. Paying attention to these relative strength and weakness areas helps you know where you need to apply more of your effort.

For me, upon entering my PhD program I found (and already knew) that reading a lot quickly was going to be a challenge, that public speaking wasn't my strength, and that teaching (as a major act of improvised public speaking) was going to stretch and challenge me in ways I wanted to be stretched but couldn't yet imagine. For others of my friends in my Education PhD cohort (primarily K-12 teachers) it was different. I had friends who could teach a 3-credit self-designed curriculum without stressing about or even mentioning it much, and others who could finish our entire week's reading assignments in half an hour while I had to block off hours of my weekend just to get enough focus for it. Some of them struggled more with other aspects than I did—I was grateful that writing came quickly to me, for example.

Again, *no one* can be an expert in all these areas, on Day 1 or even on Day 1000. You aren't expected to be, but you are still expected to do it all sooner or later. Realize where your strengths are and where you'll need to put more structure, more incentive, and more support for yourself to get through the necessary tasks. Also, pay attention to what the grad school process values, and when and how. In your core classes, you're held responsible for a lot of reading, but the task schedule is relatively well laid out for you. You may be required to or want to gain teaching skills, and teaching well and effectively is challenging and super important, but is also not actually the big milestone standing between you and a doctoral degree. What I started to notice over the course of graduate school was that *writing* was the key to unlocking each of the next levels—writing a final paper was the ticket out of a core course; writing was required to prelims or comprehensive exams. There was writing to pass a dissertation proposal, and even more writing to write a dissertation. If continuing in academia, the writing also doesn't stop being one of the main measures people hold up against your work to judge adequate progress.

So that's why you'll see all the blogs and advice columns for academics about writing, all the focus on writing retreats and writing accountability groups. It's pretty much the keys to the clubhouse. What you should keep in mind is it's not the only thing that matters—you can perform enough command of written

language to pass through the system without really having had an impact or found out anything important through your research, or being ready to be a teacher yourself. But keep in mind that writing is a primary thing pushing you forward or holding you back in your progress. By writing a comprehensive exam or a dissertation, you're gaining access to a lot more freedom to ask questions, question systems, and grow in your teaching. It's not the end all be all, but it is the shape the steppingstone takes.

This perspective comes from having watched colleagues not always taking that steppingstone with their writing. I had friends who poured their heart and soul into their teaching and campus activism without getting their qualifying exams written, semester after semester. This is both great, and bad. These other non-writing activities are fantastic and probably more effectual at changing the system most days. But graduate student funding eventually dries up, graduate students are not equally listened to and credited when they take on service and activist roles, and graduate school is frankly a difficult place with high workload and low pay that you don't want to stay forever. Figuring out what you need to do to get out of here (i.e., how to get the writing done) is not the whole game, but it's one part of it.

So, take some time and map out what your strengths and weaknesses are. Be honest with yourself about it. Start to work out some plans for how to combat those weaknesses. How will you put the necessary effort and resources around those weaknesses? How can you capitalize on your strengths to help support those weaknesses?

For me, I blocked off a ton more time for reading, put a ton more energy into practicing my talks for conferences, and placed a ton more effort on preparing to teach than some of my peers for whom this came more easily. All of those tasks got easier over time. They are still not my go to strength areas, and that's ok!

3.2 Grad school is long and real life will happen

Most PhDs are completed in your twenties (about 42%), thirties (43%), or forties and older (15%) [7]. The duration of a PhD can depend on your program of study, prior qualifications, and how quickly you complete different milestones, but in the US the process tends to take over five years [7]. So potentially half of your twenties, thirties, or forties are happening through this PhD process alone, if you live to be 100 that's 5% of your lifespan. That is a lot of time and a pivotal period of adult life, when a good deal of real personal life happens. You will be finding out who you are and dealing with serious events. You may deal with a new marriage or the birth of a child. You may deal with a major break up or divorce. You may deal with a death of a family member or a close friend. You may have a life epiphany that shifts what your goals are and makes you question what you're doing today. You may experience new mental or physical health challenges you aren't ready for.

We don't usually talk about the PhD as a process where you will be forced to confront major life circumstances. But almost by design in such a long process, real life comes along with many PhDs. It's wise to recognize when those major real-life moments are happening, and when they're significant enough that just getting through the semester (or even taking a break from the semester) is ok. It's ok to delay a PhD milestone, it's ok to ask for more help or understanding from the process.

Sometimes the advisor/advisee relationship can be shaped narrowly around the research process. Not every advisor is someone you'll want to share your personal life with—nor should you feel compelled to, healthy boundaries are important. But you can keep yourself and your advisor aware of the biggest personal real-life dimensions of being you and how they intersect getting the work done of grad school.

For me, I went through a major break up midway through my second year of PhD. I went from having someone to talk to every night, to being a little bored, sad, having way too much time on my hands. I threw myself into my work in a way I hadn't been previously and finished the PhD early with in-progress journal publications. Being single during this process was still very difficult, and I started therapy during my second year to deal with a series of simultaneous stressful life circumstances including this one. But at the time becoming single afforded me time and what felt like a productive channel for my sadness.

For others of my colleagues' real-life circumstances, they had babies, childcare, marriage, or personal tragedy interrupt their plans for PhD completion. Many of them finished up years later and have gone on to great next steps. Grad school can offer some amount of flexibility around your personal life. While it provides more work for less pay than many other jobs, it can usually accommodate schedule requests, a slowdown of the process, or a semester off, if you advocate for it.

It's impossible not to have a real life while attending grad school, and it shows up for different people in different ways. Acknowledging real life when it's happening is important—more humane to yourself and in the long run more productive for your work.

3.3 Long distance relationships and two-body problems are the worst and sometimes reality

A corollary to real life happening, is that many academics who are in relationships will have to consider move with a partner in a non-ideal work setting, a long-distance relationship, or some other compromise, at some point [10], [11]. Sometimes academics meet other academics or ambitious people, and both partners have big dreams and potential with their best job prospects scattered across the country or the world in a random collection of places. So the question of how to both make the next best career move for two people (referred to jokingly by those who are familiar with physics dynamics analysis as a “two-body problem”) is likely to come up at some point, and a graduate student and their partner has to know where they stand on it.

We all have different schools of thought about these things. Some folks can manage long distance fairly well as long as they know the game plan and when it will end. Others could never go a month at a time apart from a significant other, but they are flexible about their own career path. Others might come to find out the challenges are much more than they thought originally.

Some additional factors about grad school make this decision different than some other career / relationship decisions:

1. A PhD is a relatively fixed amount of time, and you'll have some flexibility with how you spend summer and winter breaks.
2. You have a lot of work but are usually in control of when and where you do it (e.g., doing your readings or writing on a plane ride, in coffee shops, or in a different institution's library).
3. There are some clear milestones and some of these milestones are associated with more flexibility (e.g., once you pass through the required coursework you may be able to complete a dissertation elsewhere, once you are to the writing stage of a dissertation you may have even more flexibility).
4. While time is more flexible, money is tighter than at many other jobs, so traveling to see a partner or supporting a family are harder.
5. A PhD is an intense and unusual process that may test the patience of a partner.

I had a long-distance relationship during PhD that didn't work out. I don't regret moving away for the PhD—it was a decision we made together at the time that partially impacted my choices (I chose a university location that in my mind he could have joined me at later) but also allowed me to pursue my

dreams. I can't know whether the relationship would have lasted if I had stayed behind, and I had no clear path to pursue my dream while remaining local.

I point out this two-body / long distance dimension because of how many people I knew who experienced something like it. People who like me started in long distance and broke up, people who worked through long distance and are still together, people who avoided long distance and had to slow down or reorient their careers to stay geographically close. Every relationship is different, and it's not a simple decision.

You should know there's a community of other academics / PhDs who are having the same dilemmas about relationships and how they're getting through this long program and career. So, you can at least usually find some support. There may be some other folks from a prior generation who don't understand it—perhaps they are a straight man who married young and brought his wife and kids with him to each new professional or academic endeavor. But since that single-career relationship model is much less common nowadays, a lot of people know what you're going through.

3.4 When grad school functions as hazing

This one's unfortunate to have to write. Completion of grad school, especially a PhD, is based on a tradition for how to train and evaluate scholars. Tradition drives a lot of the process partly because it helps add clarity, not only for graduate students but for programs that have to decide students' training and measures of progress. So this idea of reproducing academic systems carries some weight—people remember how they were trained into the discipline, what their major formative experiences were, what seems to separate them from the ones who didn't make it as far—and they try to create a program in that image. Along with innocuous traditions like funny graduation hats and flouncy robes come some more questionable traditions, like the preservation of an elitist academy.

So, I won't mince words—some of the traditions and processes in academia function like hazing (whether or not they are intended that way) [13], [14], [15], [16], [17]. There are secret rules people won't tell you because it keeps the knowledge more valuable, and there are ways of making processes more nerve wracking in the name of rigor that do not actually increase the intellectual product. There are some of us in academia who recognize this [15], [17], and yet we aren't totally in control of all aspects of the process, and some aspects of reproducing PhD processes within academia still turn out close to the status quo.

As one example, I was very confused why my dissertation proposal committee needed to begin the meeting by sending me out of the room to discuss my work before I presented to them. At the appointed time for the meeting, I was informed that the first step in this process was for me to leave the room for the committee to discuss my work without me, and my advisor was supposed to take notes on the critical feedback on the written proposal. This rattled me on the day of and left me with only partially understandable notes from that crucial component of the meeting. When after the successful proposal defense I asked if I could seek more information about those notes, my advisors suggested not to talk to the committee members further—in case they made more demands on the final product than had been agreed to in the meeting (while I was out of the room). It was very strange for me, and uncomfortable. Why couldn't the committee just schedule their private meeting for 20 minutes before I arrived, rather than assemble and have me leave the room? If the written proposal was deemed good enough to pass, couldn't I just hear the critical feedback in person? The process seemed designed or unintentionally created to make me less comfortable (or perhaps to make the committee more comfortable?)—not to end up with the best intellectual product for the proposal or the best designed study, which I believe would benefit from an open, honest, and constructive discussion between candidate and committee. And yet, my

committee was just collectively conducting this academic tradition, one that was so commonplace at that university, they hadn't thought to warn me that I might find it strange.¹

There are more besides this one, but that's one that I remember as impactful. In retrospect, it definitely wasn't that my advisors or committee members wanted to haze me, then or ever—but the traditions, the lack of explanation of the traditions, and their impact still functioned as making the academic process more stressful for me passing through it, something which can be incorrectly interpreted by those who maintain the traditions as rigor. I found it an unnecessarily uncomfortable experience, something I certainly survived and others who made it past the proposal defense stage survived. And it's true that it's an ordinary stress, the way many proposal defense procedures operate.

I think the primary difference between an academic tradition functioning for learning and intellectual merit versus functioning as hazing is in transparency of process and purpose [17]. If a particular process is well-intentioned and helpful, there will be a good reason for both process and purpose that can be clarified before the tradition (as well as during and after it). Being able to make sense of the process should loosen the feeling of an arbitrary system testing you to see if you can survive it. Advisors and programs should be primarily responsible for this, but graduate students can and should ask advisors for clarity of process and purpose as well.

3.5 Win Accolades But Don't Put Too Much Stock in Accolades

Many people who make it to graduate school are well-practiced in academic achievement-- that is how they get there. They have taken on challenging courses and degrees, risen to the top of the system, overcome barriers, and made themselves appear the most curious and capable applicants to pursue PhD research. So, many PhD students will be familiar with the process of winning academic accolades, at every stage from elementary school to college there were consistent opportunities to win accolades: spelling bees, honor societies, valedictorian, dean's list, etc. Once you are a PhD student the opportunities only increase: high impact journal publications, best paper awards, prestigious fellowships, awards from your university or disciplinary organization, and eventually next academic positions.²

Academic accolades are an important component of a PhD—they can raise your profile within your field and are important for a young scholar to be able to point to as proof that they deserve the next level of career advancement. You should talk with your advisor about eligibility for awards in your university and disciplinary organizations, and self-advocate if they do not tend to proactively think about award opportunities. A surprising number of academic awards that require applications end up with a relatively small pool of applicants.

At the same time, academic accolades can feel arbitrary, biased, and hollow. Academic accolades can famously reward the top few programs and graduate students with famous advisors. They may not recognize a highly original or interdisciplinary form of research as easily as one that is highly consistent with the specific norms of the discipline. Trying for and not receiving an award and watching someone you feel is less qualified win for reasons that are not about their work, can be quite difficult. Chasing academic awards in competition with your colleagues can lead to an unhealthy individual mindset and even more unhealthy academic culture.

¹ Attending open dissertation defenses before you need to defend is a great way to see these sorts of quirks of that process. At my university, dissertation proposals were not open to other graduate students, so there was no real way of gleaning this process ahead of time.

² By the way, in my industry experience this category of "Honors and Awards" on my curriculum vitae was non-existent—a lot of other career paths do not hand out awards at nearly the same rate as academia.

These days, I try to put reasonable effort into winning academic accolades while remembering the many aspects that can make them arbitrary and biased. I try to think about it pragmatically-- it is certainly useful, functionally, to me to win an award. It will help me have social capital to move on to the next more impactful project. I do not need to put the measure of my self worth in the academic accolade. All academic accolades come down to the decisions of a set of people, who may be very knowledgeable, but are still fallible. I try to remind myself that I do my work for bigger reasons than my own self-promotion. Any academic accolades are tools that help me do that work, not an end in themselves.

4. Collective Findings: Wisdom from the Academic Community

To underline the point that many individuals share these sets of knowledge, I will now present several pieces of advice that came from twitter replies from the #AcademicChatter³ community, shared in response to this initial tweet, which garnered 163 total engagements:

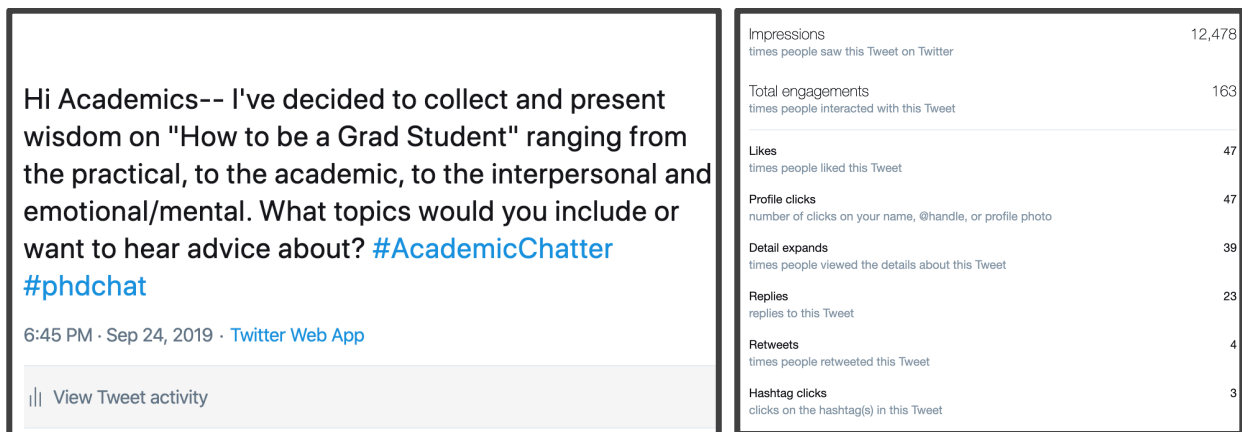


Figure 1: Tweet soliciting advice from the #AcademicChatter community (left) and total twitter engagements (right)

In each case, I attempt to embellish the original piece of advice with my own understanding of what the author meant.

“Grad school for the single international student.”

International students may be dealing with a range of additional issues. They may be writing a dissertation in a foreign language. They may have visa issues that mean they can't or don't know how soon they can travel back in a given semester. They may have trouble getting a bank account, getting human resources forms filled out to get paid, or having a community to help them when sick. They may not be able to afford to travel to visit friends and family, and they may be alone in trying to navigate various personal issues (hospitalizations, emergencies) that would benefit from a local social network. While an international grad student may not individually be able to create these networks and resources on their own, they can benefit from building a community of support among themselves and to advocate for themselves and work with faculty / departments to help create further systems for support.

³ The hashtags #AcademicChatter #AcademicTwitter and #PhDChat provide a helpful community to participate in, ask questions of, and share resources with as graduate students.

“Ask for help! Learn how to ask early and don’t be afraid of it.”

Related to the prior topic but broader than it, it is important for graduate students to ask for help. When they are given open-ended tasks or tasked with things they’ve never done before, the best attitude is to ask early about their confusions or challenges so that advisors and supervisors are able to help clarify and support. A student who is afraid to ask for help can spiral into an unproductive mode of work and over time this can magnify and exacerbate the challenges. It’s admittedly uncomfortable to have to develop and project your expertise (i.e., combat imposter syndrome) while admitting to needing help, but it’s worthwhile to develop that comfort with discomfort early on.

“Understanding power dynamics between professors and graduate students.”

There are many power dynamics between professors and graduate students and may be too large to summarize in a short section, but I’ll suggest a simple one—when and who to call Doctor / Professor versus their first name. I personally have some rules of thumb about who should call me doctor but I’m flexible, others are much less so. I’ve noticed that particularly some individuals from underrepresented backgrounds in academia are sensitive to what they perceive as diminishing their PhD accomplishments by referring to them by their first name. So, in email especially (where intent and sensitivity can be challenging), I err on the side of calling people Dr. until they indicate to me that they want to be known as first-name only, either in person or in their sign-off as first-name only. This is a power dynamic that has different meaning for different people, but one that doesn’t take too much extra work to accommodate.

A bigger issue is the area of giving an advisor feedback about how they are doing in terms of advising, for which I recommend setting aside a time for in an annual review, that you may need to request yourself. Ask directly for feedback from your advisor and give your advisor feedback. For any deeper issues of harassment or mistreatment from a professor / student power dynamic, I would say seek allies with stature and perspective on the situation. These are tricky but real dynamics and should always be handled with caution.

“How to deal with negative emotions especially the guilt after procrastination.”

Dealing with guilt after procrastination is an important topic. I have developed a sense of honesty with myself about my work—if it is just not working or not beginning, I ask myself why and try to shift things (my work setting, my topic, my collaborators, my order of tasks) to get things working again. And I suggest making a running list of very specific small tasks for you to do (e.g., on a Google doc that you can have anywhere) and then using a strikethrough font to have some satisfaction at things getting completed. I find this way I can scan a list of important things to do and get excited about one specific activity that matches my mood. This helps me break through a procrastination mode that might have set in.

“Prepare to be surprised about what type of research you’ll get excited by.”

I think this one speaks for itself. I myself would definitely not have known I’d become a qualitative / anthropological researcher focused on equity in engineering, but a combination of showing up in a PhD and taking teaching roles, observing educational culture, and reading what the literature said and didn’t say about these topics, cemented this focus for me. I’d say stay open to those types of surprises in the first year or so of the PhD and you’ll make sure you can align your research areas with passion areas that connect to important topics for the field.

“Don’t compare yourself to colleagues / See your colleagues as allies not enemies.”

This one is hard for me, I think I suffer from a tendency to compare myself, for a sense of peace of mind that I am doing ok (but “ok” tends to mean better than others). But it is truly important. This is again a topic I try to have an honest conversation about with myself. If I am slipping into comparative and competitive mindsets, I remind myself that all of us are different and there’s not really any comparison, and all of this work (improving education in engineering) is important beyond the accolades and achievements. This can be easier said than done when many systems and academic cultures seem built to compare and evaluate us, but overall it gives us a healthier relationship to each other and to ourselves.

“A PhD is a marathon, pace yourself.”

Some of us might have gotten through prior milestones (college, high school) by cramming for tests or sacrificing sleep and health. But five(ish) years is a long time to be working in a feast and famine way. The worst thing you can do is overwork, burnout, and then be unable to look at or make progress on your work later. Take breaks and make steady progress. Many people advocate setting aside a little bit of writing time or other writing-related productive work (e.g., outlining, proofreading, reading for a literature review) per day. I’m an advocate for slow and steady progress, although I also think if you are genuinely excited about your work at some point you should capitalize on that and get even more done.

“Learn to say no to things, and say yes to some significant things that bring you balance and joy.”

I personally get very stressed out by saying no to things (it’s literally something I’ve worked on in therapy), so I resonated with this comment. For me, my main non-work elements that brought me balance and joy were 1) playing with my nieces (who I was privileged to live near during PhD), 2) exercising, especially going on hikes and long walks in nature, and 3) learning a new musical instrument (the cello). These gave me a good balance of social, physical, and intellectual pursuits that could take my mind off of the intensity of the PhD. Personally, I liked that none of these activities came with extra commitments that I had to say no to—I even self-taught the cello during this time so I didn’t have to feel like I had obligations to a group I joined or a teacher I was paying. I just wanted some non-academic tasks to invest in. In any case, as this tweeter says you can find those things that bring you balance and joy.

“Treat it like a job and set boundaries. Have a life outside of academia.”

I think this is an important one, perhaps particularly for people who go straight into the PhD from college. In a healthy job, you have hours and duties you are responsible for in your work, and then you have free time. In a PhD those categories may blend, your exact responsibilities may be nebulous (e.g., make as much progress on your research as you can) and your free time may get consumed with homework, conference travel, and many other tasks and opportunities for your development. Thinking of the components of your work (a research or teaching assistantship, your coursework, your research, and any other commitments) as each having a set of tasks associated with them that, once completed, you are not obligated to go above and beyond for has helped manage expectations for these nebulous roles. And you are well within your rights to give your supervisor feedback if their tasks for you are exceeding the 10 or 20 hours a week that they are paying you.

“Find small windows of time in a busy and scattered day and productive tasks that fit within those windows.”

I think this is a great idea! Grad student life is so fragmented and strange, with lots of day where you have to come to campus for one early morning meeting and then stay very late for one evening class. Using that running to do list (Item 5d) helps me take advantage of small and even surprising windows of free time to be productive.

“Do some career planning for post-graduation and it doesn’t have to be what everyone else wants you to do.”

This is a great topic too. It may feel too early to consider what happens post-graduation—what if you never even finish or produce a dissertation-worthy idea? But post-graduation realities really sneak up on you. That last year of dissertation writing is such an odd time. While trying to complete this one large task of original research and writing that you will only ever complete once, you are simultaneously exploring academic and non-academic options that you would not have had access to previously and so do not have an conception of how they work. Starting early to ask advisors and other mentors what your options are, what’s realistic for you, and how to prepare for those options is a really great idea, and another great topic for an annual review.

5. Conclusion: A Call for Sharing Wisdom

A conclusion is often a place where the author makes their own recommendations and implications, but as this paper has constituted entirely of recommendations in my and others’ voice, I will conclude with just a few final wishes. I hope that these pieces of advice have been useful. I hope that I have represented the perspectives of the #AcademicChatter community accurately, and I hope that our own engineering education community will engage in efforts that promote a similar level of community and awareness for and by graduate students. I hope each of us who endeavor down the process of a PhD find some benefit from a sense of collective wisdom about the process, that you each contribute some of your own individual wisdoms to the community when you are ready. And before you too, forget.

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