Description

Even the longest stays in grad school go by in a flash and most of it seems to be filled with reading, research, and writing. I interviewed a group of recent PhDs and asked them, in retrospect, what would they spend more time doing if they had it all to do again. The answers were interesting and I thought to take them to the entire academic community. Here are the top 4 things new PhDs wish they had done more.

Sleep

This was a favorite among most of the people I talked to. Austin, a recent grad, commented that he thought "every department should have a nap room for grad students." He said that late nights plus stress and brain fatigue means that sometimes in the middle of the day you just need peace and quiet, even if it's only for 15 minutes.

Others said they would've skipped the all-nighters. "Your work is never good," explained Asti, reflecting on the nights she stayed up to finish a paper. "I tell my students now that I'd rather have them submit their paper in late than finish it by staying up all night."

Socialize

Colleen, who recently completed her PhD in the Humanities remarked that she didn't necessarily think she in particular needed to socialize more, but that she "saw a lot of people who just needed to step away and let lose for a little."

"It's too much stress," she explained, "to not go out and have fun with your colleagues—or someone—at least once a week." Go for a walk with a friend, grab a beer, watch a show—it will do you good!

Ask More Questions at the Beginning

Puja explained that she wished she had asked more about the process and about the most successful students and what they did and how they did it. "I was under some delusions when I first came to grad school—especially about how long it would take."

Others agreed with her. "And ask your advisor how he or she did it," Dan chimed in. "If nothing else, it will make them more human!"

They both have a good point: you may think you know what you're doing, but don't make it harder on yourself than it has to be—follow in someone else's steps.

Commiserate with Your Colleagues—But Not Too Much!

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Aside from sleeping and napping more, Austin revealed that he wished he had opened up to his peers earlier about struggling with the dissertation process. “I thought everyone but me was sailing along. I was afraid to admit I was having struggles because I was afraid everyone would think I was a failure.” A number of other recent grads agreed. “But when I did finally open up to a friend,” Austin explained, “she was having the same problems as me. It was an immense relief and we were able to support each other.”

But this brought up another topic. “But don’t complain too much!” Laura added. Again, the group nodded in agreement. “There are always a few grad students who seem like they are constantly complaining. They bring everybody down, and that’s not good.” Colleen said, “After a while, you wonder why they are even there.” Nobody likes a whiner.

These answers reveal the difficulty but also the potential joys of grad school—yes, it’s hard, but you’re part of an elite cohort and share an experience with them that very few other people can understand. Put in efforts to cultivate these relationships as they can be some of the best friendships you ever make. Through the thick and thin of grad school, as much as studying is important, so is being happy with your life. Don’t forget to live your life as you begin your new life as an academic.

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Date Created
2015/07/20
Author
editor

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