The hidden perks of grad school

When I was in grad school, I couldn’t wait to get out. The learning curve was distressingly steep, everyone seemed to know more than I did, and I was scraping by at just above the poverty line. That’s why, after successfully convincing the university that I could graduate without being a total embarrassment, I was thrilled to take a job with a small nongovernmental organization that provides outdoor environmental education and habitat restoration activities to the local community. Just 1 year in the rat race, however, has given me a new perspective. I’m just far enough removed from graduate school to look back fondly on many of the experiences I had and to truly appreciate some of the lessons I learned.

Easy access to peer-reviewed literature is one of the biggest perks of grad school. Mining this resource was a crucial part of my first semester, when my adviser was on sabbatical and decided (wisely) that I should hold off on beginning my research until she returned. Instead, she gave me a reading list and told me to learn my way around the lab and help the other graduate students with their research so that we could hit the ground running when she got back.

This freedom to read and explore was particularly important for me because I was a business major in college and lacked much of the scientific background that the rest of my graduate school cohort had. I was determined to show that I belonged in my program, so I made a goal of reading three papers a day to catch up. By the time my adviser returned, I had read more than 100 papers and gained the knowledge and confidence I needed to design and carry out my master’s research.

I took for granted the fact that I could get my hands on just about any paper. If you leave academia, there’s a good chance that your access to the literature will be limited. If you have friends who are still in grad school, you can usually trade drinks for PDFs, but it’s not as easy as logging on with an institutional subscription. So, if you’re in school and you aren’t already an avid reader, my advice is to start now.

A second privilege of being a graduate student is having the time to read in the first place. I left academia partly because I wanted to work on applying research findings to make a difference in the world. The thing I didn’t acknowledge, though, is the basic principle of scarcity (I never said I was a good business major): The more time you spend implementing research, the less time you have to consume and digest new research in your field.

These days, I squeeze in most of my reading on evenings and weekends. It’s difficult to find time during the workday to read primary literature when you’re also responsible for advancing projects with lofty deliverables and tight deadlines, often on a tight budget. In academia, in contrast, many advisers value students who dedicate time to reading the literature. I wish I had more fully appreciated the culture of curiosity that academia fosters while I was part of it.

There are many perks to working outside academia, including, in my case, the incredibly rewarding and satisfying opportunity to work on projects that apply scientific knowledge to real-world problems. And there are things about grad school that I’m happy to have left behind: I despised grading papers and resented living in near poverty, and I still fundamentally disagree with the publish-or-perish mentality that drives most academics.

But there are also things unique to higher education that are pretty amazing. And although graduate school can seem endless at times, in hindsight, the time between your orientation and your thesis defense will feel like a blur. So, to those of you still in grad school, my advice is to appreciate what you have while you have it because, for better or worse, it won’t last forever.

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Science 352 (6285), 622.
DOI: 10.1126/science.352.6285.622