

By Abigail M. Brown

Data-driven advice for grad school

“Do you have any advice for future graduate students?” I asked. The student had recently defended his Ph.D., and I was conducting an exit interview—something I do with every graduating biomedical Ph.D. student at my university, where I am in charge of evaluating our medical school’s Ph.D. training programs. He sat back in his chair and thought for a minute before responding: He wished he had started to plan for his post-Ph.D. career earlier. My shoulders dropped and I let out a sigh. “Program directors recommend this to incoming students every year, but some don’t seem to hear it,” I said. “How do you think we can get them to listen?” This time, he didn’t hesitate. “They are graduate students in *science*,” he exclaimed. “Show them the data!”

That was my aha moment. I immediately began to document the responses to this question in subsequent interviews. It has been 3 years now, and the data I’ve collected confirm my suspicions—the same answers come up again and again. As a new cohort of Ph.D. students starts grad school this fall, here are the five pieces of advice graduates offer most frequently.

CHOOSE YOUR MENTOR CAREFULLY

Thirty-two percent of graduating students said this is the most critical decision a Ph.D. student can make. Many students gravitate toward mentors who work in areas they find interesting and exciting, but it is also important to think about what style of mentoring you respond to best. Finding a mentor with the right mentoring approach for you is at least as important as finding one who studies a specific topic.

START PLANNING YOUR FUTURE CAREER EARLY

You need time to (a) decide which career paths you find appealing and (b) start preparing for those careers. Twenty percent of graduating students recommended exploring future careers as early as possible so you can use your time in grad school to build additional skills you will need. To learn about specific professions, you can conduct informational interviews, attend seminars where alumni discuss their careers, do an internship, or engage in a variety of other options.

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Graduate school is full of ups and downs. Thirteen percent of graduates said that if you feel the need to talk to someone on or off campus, don’t hesitate. “If you are not happy, try to do something about it and make a change,” one student said.



“Even when you’re just getting started, you need to look forward.”

If you feel isolated, another student recommended joining a campus group to connect with others.

MAP OUT YOUR GOALS

Twelve percent of graduates consistently and critically evaluate their progress throughout their training. Make an outline of your research and career goals and when you want to achieve them, and hold yourself to that plan. Some students use an individual development plan to prompt discussions with their mentor and thesis committee. But don’t wait for these meetings; setting goals and holding yourself accountable should be a continuous habit.

FIND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

This looks different for different people, but don’t ignore it. You should expect to work hard in grad school, but the right work-life balance can have an important influence on your mental health and overall quality of life. Nine percent of graduates recommended finding something that helps you unwind, such as pursuing hobbies, getting together with friends, or volunteering in the community.

Observant readers may notice that the numbers above only add up to 86%. Other pieces of advice included be assertive and ask for what you need, learn to trust your experimental results as long as the controls work, and plan your projects around what’s needed for a publishable paper. But the most important thing is to take these pointers to heart early on. Even when you’re just getting started, you need to look forward. ■

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