

Balancing Responsibilities in Graduate School

The tips outlined below are particularly helpful for those who are beginning their graduate careers, especially during the first quarter. It's important to acknowledge that adding a graduate career to an already full life brings its own challenges. Transitions, even the most pleasant ones, can often be stressful.

Schedule Everything

In addition to the fact that scheduling makes things happen, it also provides you with the assurance and comfort that you actually do have time for everything. When the guilty feeling “you-should-be-doing-something-else-now” sneaks up on you, you can rest assured that this “something-else” is already scheduled.

Schedule Strategically

There are “easy thinking” times, and there are “focused intense thinking times.” Know which is which in your life. Schedule your reading, research, and writing times when it's quiet and your brain is ready to work on these tasks well. Dishes never suffered from being done at 11pm, assignments might.

Take Breaks

Schedule events and breaks that restore your energy and nourish you. Unfortunately, in our over-crowded lives, we tend to think of breaks and entertainment as luxuries we can't afford. The truth is we can't afford not to have them. Although restorative activities may take a different shape while you have the added responsibility of grad school, they shouldn't completely disappear from your schedule. You won't be able to take a two-week vacation in the middle of the quarter, for example, but you may be able to take a day or a couple of evenings off each week. You may not be able to go for a dinner and movie with your partner, but you may be able to take short walks or spend an hour in a coffee shop together.

Find Your Village

No one was meant to do it alone, and no one should. In your academic life and your personal life, you have allies. These are people whose main job is to see you succeed. Don't hesitate to draw on these sources of support. In the academic realm, for information on a topic, you might consult library handouts and tutorials, schedule a meeting with a librarian, use the chat function from the library's website. If you are unclear on certain assignment guidelines, you could visit your professor during office hours, e-mail her/him, drop in to the Academic Support Lab, or talk with a colleague.

The point is, don't waste emotional energy agonizing over not knowing how to do the work you need to do.

Get Help

Of course, no one will do your work for you, but universities are organized to be supportive institutions. If you are not supported in a way you like, advocate for yourself.

Find your village out of the university as well. Your family, friends, and coworkers can be amazing sources of support. Ideally, they are highly invested in your success as well. If you are worried about leaning too much on them, make strategies to pay it forward and pay it back. For example, during your down time you may want to schedule several playdates for your kids' friends at your house, exchange grocery-shopping duties with your neighbor, or carry your officemate's workload for couple of days. And, remember, most people like to be needed.

Practice Self-Care

In addition to the nurturing breaks and activities mentioned earlier, actively guard your sleep schedule and diet. Sleep and good food tend to be sacrificed all too easily when life gets over-crowded, and it's pure self-sabotage. I remember going on a strict vending machine diet during my first quarter of grad school—a tremendously bad idea that I deeply regret. Good health provides much-needed consistency and reliability in your schedule; don't compromise it! You can't do your work well if you get too sick, too exhausted, or too sleep-deprived.

Again, self-care will look different for everyone and may be different from what you are used to. You may not have hours to bake homemade bread or cook a labor-intensive meal, but you can learn to use a slow cooker, make healthy, stir-fry meals, and concoct amazing salads. It shouldn't be an all-or-nothing attitude.

Consider Alternatives

Flexibility is key here. Anyone who has negotiated juggling several responsibilities can affirm that the multiple roles they played made them more efficient. You will learn how to be ruthlessly efficient. You will become excellent at prioritizing responsibilities and delegating tasks. This is a time of change for you; it's normal for your strategies to be up for change as well. Make inventories of the tasks you have, and consider alternative ways to accomplish them.

Be Kind to Yourself

It's very easy to get overwhelmed. One look at an overflowing laundry basket, a ballooning inbox folder, an endless list of work meetings, three research articles, two writing assignments, and an unhappy child can cause the best of us a great deal of anxiety. When this happens, take a deep breath and remember the grad school

admission essay you wrote. Ground yourself in your motives. Remember the transitions you have successfully negotiated in the past, and draw on the lessons you've learned and the skills you've developed. It's simply a privilege to be trusted with all these responsibilities. Congratulations! You are actually living the life you've imagined.

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