Advice for Incoming Grad Students
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As a sixth year PhD student I have some small tokens of advice which I tend to give to incoming graduate students, especially graduate students who are first-generation. I was the first in my family to graduate from high school, attend college, graduate from college, and now attend graduate school. This isn’t an exhaustive list and it’s important to remember that everyone’s journey is different. What may work for on individual or in one situation may not work for another person or situation.

- Find a support system – My support system includes family, friends (many of whom are not in grad school), peers (other grad students or cohort mates), my partner, faculty members, and more recently my dog. These folks help me in different ways. Some can offer advice with research, fellowship applications, while others help to remind me to take care of my health (physical and mental).
- Take time for yourself – Making sure I take time for myself helps ensure that I’m refreshed and energized when it’s time to work. For me being tired or hungry means I will not be doing my best work. So, I make sure I get plenty of sleep, eat regular meals, and get some sort of exercise every day. It also means that I see my therapist regularly (I have issues with anxiety). Some other things I have done for myself include training for half-marathons, taking naps, reading for fun (non-academic books), watching television, and taking my dog out for regular walks.
- Seek help – If you need assistance, ask for help. We are all human; we don’t have all the answers. However, we are surrounded by brilliant people with tons of experience, and they might have helpful suggestions (if they don’t, they might be able to point you in the right direction). Utilize the resources around you (health center, therapists, mentors, writing center, etc.). These resources are meant to be utilized, don’t let them go unused.
- Take advantage of opportunities – Take a chance and connect with folks with similar interests. Join that organization or club. Apply for that fellowship or grant. Volunteer to chair a committee. These are great opportunities to network and learn more about others and yourself.
- Go at your own pace - We are all not similarly situated; we are all different and have different abilities. Don’t worry about what other people are doing and keep focused on your own goals and work. It’s hard but try not to compare yourself to others. Also, we don’t necessarily know what other people are dealing with or going through, and the grass isn’t always greener on the other side of the fence.
- Acknowledge that this is a learning experience - Sometimes things aren’t going to work out, and I’ve learned it’s okay. I say it is not a failure unless I fail to learn something. Sometimes we won’t get that “A” in class or win that award, but if I managed to learn something or come out better/wiser than I was before, I won. It doesn’t mean that I won’t be sad but think about the bigger picture.
- Enjoy the journey – We have but one life so let’s try to make the best of it.