Tips to Transition to Grad School

As a major life chapter, graduate school, whether a 5-year PhD, 2-year master’s, or anything in between, requires a transition period. You may find a lot of advice online like the importance of choosing an advisor and ensuring there is funding for your education, so I want to add a few less-common tips to ease the transition.

First, an important note to echo the more common advice. When I considered my PhD, a national lab scientist shared her insight. Paraphrasing, there are three components of a career, and it is difficult to obtain all three: who you work for, what you work on, and where you work. Consider those factors when selecting your advisor, project, and program! Be sure to reach out via email and/or Zoom meeting with faculty and current students. One of the best signs I have found indicative of collaboration and support is if students can accurately describe their peers’ work.

Next, let us focus on the holistic aspects of the transition: community, health, and well-being. While learning more about projects and research in your prospective department, it is equally important to explore the university’s resources. Good places to start are the tabs labelled “prospective students” on university and department websites. When I search “UCI grad school,” I find the Grad Division page. As a first-gen student with a bunch of identities intersecting, I am interested in the university’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, so I navigate to that tab and find a program called DECADE offering a summer research program, faculty mentors, and more. To further establish community, you may check out groups centered around LGBTQ+, racial identity or ethnic background, or cultural interest, as well as groups with intersectionality like Queer/Trans in STEM or the Latino Business Student Association. The graduate program AND the community that affirms your belonging are important.

In addition, consider your overall health and living conditions. Inquire with the department staff (usually there are appointed staff who know and are not faculty member advisors) about health insurance and housing. Check out the specific physical, dental, and mental health services included in the insurance plan. Set up appointments while you are transitioning! For example, schedule a check-up, and switch your prescriptions. Be sure to check out housing! Is there subsidized or special housing for grad students (which is especially helpful when you move to a new place)? A graduate student’s stipend is probably less than a job in the corresponding field, so knowing housing options helps since it is a majority of anyone’s income.

Finally, acknowledge where you are from and where you are going, in whatever form brings you happiness. For some folks, that might look like a graduation photo shoot or senior-year-summer-trip with friends. For others, there might be a party after your last day on the job to celebrate with your co-workers. Or (in the author’s personal preference), it could be a solo 14-mile trek to reflect in peace across an unpopular path at the closest national park. Do something to celebrate yourself and recognize how much you have accomplished. That is the first step to your transition.-Esther

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