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# Top Ten Tips for Successful Graduate Students

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**Abstract:** *This brief article presents advice for graduate student success. The article offers ten tips for success including the following: connect with peers, balance life demands, get advice from a recent graduate, attend conferences, provide support to others, create a supportive faculty committee, publish, involve friends and family, provide personal care, and find a good mentor. Following these simple suggestions can help graduate students build a collegial network of support through graduate school and beyond.*

**Keywords:** *Faculty mentor, graduate school, graduate degree*

Graduate school can be a daunting experience for anyone. Expectations in coursework are very different and certainly greater than when you were an undergraduate. The most obvious difference is that, as a graduate student, you have more responsibility for your own learning. After coursework, you are expected to demonstrate what you know and can do by successfully completing your preliminary exam and thesis/dissertation. The following top ten tips are my ideas from my own time as a graduate student as well as the time I have spent working with graduate students as an advisor.

## **NUMBER 10: POWER OF PEERS**

Surround yourself with your graduate student peers, particularly those studying in your own program area. Set up a regular time for social and professional activities. I recall a very successful group of students at the University of Wyoming a number of years ago. A core group of four or five took a leadership role and arranged for interested graduate students in our college to meet once a week for a variety of purposes. They talked about current research topics, read articles for discussion, and sometimes invited faculty to talk about specific topics. They also socialized outside of school, going out to dinner and even on weekend camping trips. They supported each other through the completion of their programs and have all moved on now, most in positions in higher education.

## **NUMBER 9: BALANCE**

Figure out how you can balance your commitments. For some of you, that also includes your professional life as you may be working while going to school. It is difficult to carve out time to focus on your studies, but you have to commit to doing that or your learning will be mediocre and disappointing. For me and for many of my

students, that means setting aside a regular time for writing, studying, and researching that is typically not interrupted by others.

**NUMBER 8: ADVICE.**

Find someone to talk with who has recently completed your specific graduate program. Advice from this person will be valuable as you will hear about pitfalls to avoid and ways to navigate the strange system of academia.

**NUMBER 7: CONFERENCES ANYONE?**

Take time to go to conferences and meet people in your field. There is nothing as exciting as attending a session given by a scholar whose work you have read and respect or by someone who is presenting research in your own interest area. In addition, make your own presentations. This is excellent practice for job interviews. Attending conferences is motivating and also provides future professional connections for you.

**NUMBER 6: SUPPORT OTHERS**

Be a source of support for your colleagues in graduate school. They might be struggling with a difficult course or with a project they need to complete. Your support might be to give them an opportunity to talk about ideas or maybe to proofread a paper. The time will come when you need help and it is easier to ask for it when you have given help yourself.

**NUMBER 5: FACULTY COMMITTEE**

Create a great committee of faculty to work with you. Think about your committee as soon as you begin taking coursework and consider who might be able to contribute to your work. Your faculty mentor (advisor) is a great source of advice for other committee members. The purpose of a graduate student committee is more than simply meeting the university's requirements of having a committee to sign your paperwork, saying you have successfully completed various stages of your work. Graduate student committees provide guidance, ideas and direction, connections, and expertise to help you make your work the best it can be.

**NUMBER 4: PUBLISH!**

If you are aspiring to a position in higher education, graduate school is a great time to publish. Your fellow graduate students and the faculty you work with, especially your mentor, are perfect candidates for co-publishing. What a wonderful opportunity you have, while you are spending time with others who have expertise and similar interests.

**NUMBER 3: IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

Do not try to do everything by yourself. Involve your friends and families in what you are trying to accomplish. They can help you by listening to you talk about your challenges and successes, by supporting your need to have time to be alone with your work, and by simply understanding how difficult and overwhelming graduate school can be.

**NUMBER 2: YES, YOU!**

Do not forget to take care of yourself. Think about your favorite things to do outside of school - getting a massage, playing tennis, going skiing or snowshoeing, reading a

novel (these are my favorites) and make sure you do them. Taking a little time away from your academic pursuits will help to stimulate your thought processes when you return to your work.

**NUMBER 1: A MENTOR**

Most important of all, you have to find a mentor (advisor) among the faculty in your program. Your mentor must be someone with whom you connect well and trust implicitly. Find someone who wants to meet with you regularly to discuss your progress in your program, your interests, and your professional goals. It should be someone you can work with on presentations and publications far into the future, as you move from being a student to being a peer.

**CONCLUSION**

All of these tips can help you be a successful graduate student. There may be times that you want to give up but having others who are counting on you can motivate you to believe in yourself. These are your friends and family, your fellow graduate students, your faculty, and your faculty mentor. The goal of achieving a graduate degree is lofty and rewarding. While it opens new doors for your career, it also provides an experience that is like no other - an experience of being a scholar and learning to do that with more support from others than you will ever have in your career. Take advantage of the opportunity to build a network of colleagues for the future.