Who Are You Married To? Balancing Graduate School and Marriage

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ABSTRACT

Stress is prevalent among graduate school students. Many universities and departments place a heavy burden upon their graduate students to complete large amounts of coursework, teach labs, grade student work, present at conferences, perform research for faculty, and many other responsibilities. Married graduate students face the competing demands of being both a graduate student and a spouse. This paper is a brief reflection on what it is like to be both a married graduate student and the spouse of a graduate student, a perspective rarely examined. Through these two perspectives, some coping strategies are identified. While competing demands are certainly an issue, we argue here that they do not necessarily have to be competing demands. The two roles can actually be very complementary.

Key Words: graduate school, stress, marriage

INTRODUCTION

Stress is synonymous with graduate school. With papers to write, articles to read, labs to teach, and research to complete, student life can be a dizzying experience each day. Furthermore, this incomplete listing of responsibilities does not even take into account that at some point, graduate students need to eat a meal, wash some clothes, and perhaps even, get a few hours of restless sleep. These stressors can all be compounded by the tenuous nature of funding given the current economic environment. The pressure on today’s graduate student to get everything done, to do it well, and in a timely manner, is significant. However, what happens when the role of a graduate student intersects with that of a marriage? The responsibilities of graduate school certainly do not change; there are not two different sets of standards for single and married graduate students. However, marriage has responsibilities also,
and when the two roles mix, the potential for discord in both is certainly present. This paper provides perspectives from a married couple on this conflict and the stresses that come with it, in addition to coping strategies. Chris is a 29-year-old doctoral student and Anna is his 29-year-old wife. By including the perspective of a non-student spouse, this paper shows an often neglected viewpoint on this issue. Legako and Sorenson reported that spouses of graduate students felt that the added stress of graduate school negatively impacted their marriage (2000). Consequently, it is important to not ignore this particular perspective. In this article, we provide each of our perspectives on the twin roles of graduate student and spouse.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Chris, spouse and graduate student

I can personally attest to the difficulties and stress that come from being married and being in graduate school. The competing demands of being both a spouse and a graduate student are significant and at times overwhelming. On the one hand, it is important to be the best graduate student possible, which means doing well in coursework, presenting at conferences, publishing papers, and passing preliminary exams. The list seems to grow every semester. Given the current job market, it is never too far away in my thinking about how competitive I will need to be in order to find a position after graduation. On the other hand, I want to be a good husband, which means helping out around the house, spending quality time with my wife, and being emotionally present. Often, these two roles seem mutually exclusive. I can either be good at one and bad at another or mediocre at both. I find all of these outcomes to be unacceptable, so I must work for a better balance.

I have found that the most important strategy in approaching the conflict between graduate school and marriage is to understand, from both our perspectives, what is important and what is not. After two years in a doctoral program, I have begrudgingly accepted the fact that I cannot get everything done that my department (and I) would ideally want me to achieve in my time here. I will not present at every conference possible or have straight As in all my courses, for example. Consequently, we have to decide what things are most important to us. This is actually the easy part. We knew each other for several years prior to getting married, so marriage did not bring that many surprises. We both believe in the importance of family and not allowing work to define who we are as individuals or as a couple. However, we also believe that I am in graduate school for a purpose. By completing my degree program and finding a tenure-track faculty position, we are working towards a life that we have envisioned for ourselves. This understanding has come about through lots of discussions, plenty of experience, and growing older and wiser.

The hard part comes in being committed to focusing on those important things because it is one thing to say that you are committed, but it is another thing to actually do what you are committed to doing. When we are pulled in so many different directions and society (and academia) provides so many conflicting messages about what is important, it is easy to get sidetracked and focus on the wrong things or get priorities out of order. This is where knowing oneself and making the personal decision to not compromise on those values and beliefs is critical. Spending quality time with my wife, working on my dissertation proposal, and preparing to teach are three of the most important things I can do on a weekly basis at this stage in my career. I certainly do not want to suggest that there have never been times when I did not have my priorities straight. When I first started my doctoral program, I found it easy to be distracted by smaller things, like answering an e-mail, making sure I understood every last detail of the article we would be discuss-
ing in class the next day, or washing dishes in the sink. Today, I still struggle with these things now and again, but for the most part I can focus on the more important things during the day, like working on my dissertation proposal, preparing a draft of a paper, or spending time with my wife.

Another "technique" I have found helpful is when I go home for the evening; I leave everything in my office. Most nights of the week, I simply do not bring work home. This makes it much easier to relax and spend time with my wife. This brings me to another point. This does mean that I sacrifice getting more work done, but spending time away from school and work can be very beneficial. In my experiences, it only takes a few weeks of working constantly to see greatly diminished returns. I have found that this is the primary reason marriage can actually be complementary and advantageous to graduate school. Getting to come home to a loving wife who I can relax with and enjoy spending time with allows me to put some of the stresses of the day behind me. The next day I can come back refreshed and ready to start again. Taking small trips on the weekends has been beneficial as well. Again, leaving work and school behind and experiencing something new together has a very restorative effect.

The danger also exists in making our life all about me, the graduate student. However, it is very important to be sensitive to my wife's needs and to understand that her career and interests are no less important than mine. For obvious reasons, I am very concerned that Anna has a stable and predictable income. However recently, the job she was in became overly stressful and she wished to experience new professional opportunities. I had to accept the fact that Anna would have to leave this job (and the stable income) for another job that was perhaps less predictable in terms of income, but one that offered less stress and a new and different work environment. Understanding and being cognizant of one another's needs is simply a part of a healthy marriage, graduate school or not.

Anna, non-student spouse

As the spouse of a graduate student, stress is just a part of life. I could make a list of all the things there are to stress over and worry about, like finances, job security and pressures at work, feeling overcommitted, staying healthy, and the list continues. Many are specific to this type of relationship that family and friends, as much as they love us, simply cannot fully understand. For example, we often hear, “Why don't you own a house yet?”, “When are you going to have kids?”, “Your husband is just a student, so why does he work all the time?” We cannot always expect those who are not in our shoes to understand that at this time, finances, family, and jobs work differently than they do for couples our age who are not in school.

A graduate student’s schedule can be so demanding that I am often left wondering, “What about me?” My husband goes to school and works and when he is at home he is often working too and when he is done maybe, just maybe, he will have enough energy to do something entertaining or relaxing. Early in our marriage, I remember weeks where I would realize that the most time we had spent together in the same room was the hour we sat next to one another on the same pew at church. When the service was over he would leave for his office. Today there are times that we make to be together; some are planned, while others are spontaneous. We are committed to having at least one night a week where we spend time together. It could be as simple as watching TV on the couch or it could be dinner and a movie. We also try taking time on the weekend to go for a walk together, watch college football, or just go to the grocery store (after all, the point is to spend time together). There really is no trick to planning these times. My husband and I both want to do them and do our very best to guard these times and not allow work to intrude. Of course, sometimes work does intrude, but we are both understanding and recognize that we cannot always be perfect. I also find it extremely helpful to
have friends that have spouses in graduate school. Through the social support, we have all found it therapeutic to know that there are others who struggle with the same issues. I recognize that there will probably never be enough free time but it is our belief that these sacrifices are all for a goal we are working towards rather than an unsatisfactory lifestyle we are begrudgingly accepting. Our goal is to create a life that we are proud of and enjoy, both in our careers and in our family.

So what does all this mean for a spouse? Sometimes it is being the voice of reason, someone who can see things from the outside and give permission to take a break or to keep working. A few years ago there was a “friends and family” type event at work. I asked Chris to put it on his calendar and to try and make an effort to attend. When the time came it was the end of a semester, and things weren’t getting completed as quickly as planned. That night I went to the event alone, and while I wished for him to be there by my side, I also knew he had to keep working. It didn’t make it hurt any less, but acknowledging the reality of the situation makes it less personal. I remember listing all the departmental events I had attended with him over the years. I think resentment is a common feeling among the non-graduate student spouse. It happens frequently in this type of relationship. I think acknowledging it and not making it taboo or ignoring that it exists is key. On a different note, we all encounter times in our lives when unfortunate things happen. For example, recently Chris had back surgery which required several months of recovery. My role changed in many ways from spouse to caregiver and nurse and many times to that voice of reason which I mentioned previously. Chris was afraid to miss a single e-mail, class, meeting, or assignment. But in reality, things had to be different. I needed to be the one to say, “now is the time to stop.” It was my job to say “you can’t.” Leave the e-mails to check later, relinquish control and allow a friend to teach the lab, and just explain to the professor that an assignment may be late. Many times you’ll find yourself the one in the position removed just enough to see the situation in a different light but still close enough to help your spouse make sense of things from a different perspective.

I think that being in a committed relationship with another individual, such as a spouse, can be beneficial. I learned very quickly that that are no fixed “roles” in this relationship. While I work a traditional job and he is in school, it takes the both of us giving all of ourselves to be successful. When my husband began his graduate program I would tell people, “I’m just along for the ride..”, but that’s not true. I cannot sit back and be a bystander, otherwise he would suffer. I have to be involved in what is important to him and right now that is his doctoral degree. For example, I listen to the issues that are important to him, I attend department social events with him, and I try to pick up the slack around the house during times that I know might be more stressful for him such as exams and deadlines. As a spouse I am involved by default, which means I get to celebrate the jobs well done, and suffer the hardships as well. It might be easier to think that his problems are just that “his” and to think I am not the one who signed up for this, but I made a sacred commitment to my husband and to our life together and this is why I will make a conscious effort to support him financially, emotionally, and in any other way that it takes to be successful in his endeavors. Will being married to a graduate student bring added stress to a marriage? My answer is absolutely. But, stress does not have to define it. I can enjoy these years because we are working together toward a common goal and I can accept them, not just as difficult and unpredictable, but also as exciting and adventurous. I take tremendous pride in having a spouse that has found something he is passionate about, works hard at his endeavors, and loves us enough to still make our relationship a priority.

CONCLUSIONS

Achieving balance between graduate school
and marriage is not something that happens overnight. It takes a significant amount of effort and a deep commitment to making both work. In our experience however, the first and most important commitment is our marriage. If our marriage is not on a solid footing, then no strategy for coping with the stresses of graduate school and marriage will make any difference. But when our marriage is on solid footing, graduate school, although difficult and stressful, can be beneficial and complimentary to both the student spouse and non-student spouse alike. While this can be a challenging time in a couple’s life, it can also be a time of personal self discovery and maturity, and even more so, a time for solidifying the strength of a marriage.

REFERENCES