ABSTRACT

This article reviews issues that graduate students face in their everyday academic endeavors and outlines several possible strategies to cope with those issues. The author addresses two primary issues: the financial concerns that pervade every aspect of graduate life to the point that living a decent life seems impossible, and the responsibilities—such as sending out publications, teaching classes, reading papers, and grading exams—that graduate students are expected to carry out during their studentship. With regard to these issues, this article focuses on two important prerequisites for success—commitment to hard work and financial security—along with several other cornerstones to guide grad students in their academic life.

Key Words: graduate life, academic responsibilities, prerequisites for success

Every year hundreds of thousands of students are accepted to graduate school. In the fall of 2009 alone, 1.7 million applications for admission to graduate programs were received and about forty-five percent of these applicants were accepted to some graduate school or another (Bell 2010). There are probably a lot more statistics where those came from, but who needs them? Bottom line: that’s a ton of students. And while it might be “the more the merrier” during that first year of your PhD program, it’s more like “three (or four, or ten, a million) is a crowd” during that first year of your post-doctoral life, when you and several thousand other freshly-minted PhDs are all fighting for the same job at a community college in Fargo.

I recently watched an episode of The Simpsons that deals with this very subject. In the episode, Bart acts out by cutting the ponytail from a graduate student and then holding the purloined ponytail behind his head: “Hey! Look at me. I’m a grad student. I’m thirty years old and I made $600 last year!” His mother, Marge, steps in: “Bart!
Don’t make fun of grad students. They just made a terrible life choice.” Meanwhile Lisa, who, in the universe of the Simpsons, is the most prone to studying and dreaming about going to a graduate school someday, is sitting by the lake, deep in thought and feeding the ducks. As she throws crusts of bread for the ducks, grad students rush in to pick up the crusts along with the ducks. Then, their advisor shows up yelling in an overbearing voice: “No food for you grad students till you grade three thousand papers.” And he whips them away. I find a strong correlation between what is reflected in the episode and the reality of what a grad student’s life looks like. Of course our advisors are not whipping us, nor are we collecting bread pieces from the ground. But for most of us, our reality is not far off from what has been implied in the episode. Wages that we get are not to provide a decent life; they are only to survive. Between subsistence wages, the search for a dissertation topic, the merciless taunting of animated ten-year-olds, and the burdens that we are expected to carry can sometimes reach an unbearable limit. Publications that we are expected to send out, classes that we need to teach, and papers that need to be read can quickly burn out all the excitement that we had at the beginning of school. By the time we truly realize what we’ve gotten ourselves into, and just how long the whole grad school enterprise is going to take, it is too late to back out; we are committed, like it or not. Several years might have gone by, and the future may not look too bright. Initial excitement may be replaced with a frantic sorrow and deep psychological turbulence in the blink of an eye. The stress of cutthroat academic competition, of trying to make a philosophical contribution to the discipline, and the grim actuality of the job market outside of our cubicles—not to mention trying to maintain some small semblance of a life—continue to be the everyday realities of grad students. Of course, material and psychological pressures that a grad student encounters in his/her grad life vary from person to person and place to place and, for that reason, recommendations to effectively deal with these stressful times differ. For instance, international grad students—of which there are many here at the University of Oklahoma — may have additional, and different, problems to start with, such as adopting to a new academic and social life in America, studying and/or teaching in their second language (not always the case, of course), and facing other problems and stresses that come from being international students in the U.S. Hence, suggestions to handle grad life stresses might also vary with each person’s path not only to graduate school, but the United States itself.

So then, what suggestions can be offered for everyone’s use? Or is there any way of dealing with these types of grad life issues? I don’t know and I don’t think I am in a position to write a prescription here. I am, indeed, one of those academic victims who need help as much as anyone else. However, I do have several questions to pose and suggestions to propose, at least for those who have just chosen to join the club of academia. To me, grad life requires one to have at least two important prerequisites: commitment to hard work and financial security. Commitment necessitates a dedication to and love of what you are doing. You should be more than excited to see your dream come true. If the metaphor of love is accurate, your graduate career should resemble a marriage more than a crush; that fire won’t burn as bright in the eighth semester as it did in the first, but the ember is still there, as hot as ever, if a little less volatile. A crush, in many cases, does not last too long. Love does. Therefore, the fiery horsepower of first-semester passion must be converted into a steady-running battery that will take you to graduation. But power is not enough. You also need a road map. If the destination is not mapped out before the journey begins, then you must be prepared to get lost in the dizzying complexity of reality. This does not mean you must calculate every step of your academic life. But you must have cornerstones to guide you to your destination both day and night. You can still make occasional stops to spice up your travel, but
you must calculate carefully how much time you can linger at these stops. For example, I find establishing good relationships with what I call the “two Ps” (people and place) is very crucial for a successful journey. Building good friendships with people around you, such as your colleagues, professors, and staff members, and getting to know places like libraries, student life centers, quick getaway sites, restaurants, public areas, and free amenities in your city is as important as studying. You need to keep in mind that the two Ps will have a great influence on your productivity and success even more than you may realize at the beginning, and ease your grad life stresses tremendously. What I also find crucial for a successful journey is to treat every course assignment that you are given as a first step towards future publications or a final project such as a thesis or dissertation. Thus, waste no time or effort on class work that will be thrown out of the window at the end of the semester. Instead, take given assignments seriously and treat them like they are your abstracts for future investigations. If possible, present the results at conferences and get feedback from experts in your field. When you get to your third or fourth year in a PhD program, you will realize that you are really not that far away from publishing those pieces you’ve been polishing throughout your graduate career; you might even have a few publications under your belt already. Writing your thesis or dissertation works the same way. If you plan things ahead, you may be able to write a big chunk of your thesis or dissertation during your course time. Again, waste no time or effort. For anything you read or write for any course, make it useful.

Another thing that you have to pay attention to is financial security. This is perhaps the most problematic facet of the academic journey. How to attain grants, scholarships, or assistantships is a challenging task, and one that stands prominent before you. We all are aware that the academy and the market speak different languages when it comes to where funding should be allocated. What research questions should you have so that you can find funding? How can you find that are “important”, and thus more likely to be funded by scientific corporations and political agents? Of course, this point comes from an observation of a student in a discipline where accessing funding differs noticeably from sub-discipline to sub-discipline. And while one should not let the question of funding control one’s academic growth, it cannot be denied that the more grants a student receives, the easier the research will go. As the economic condition of the US stays troubling and more students continue to stay in school (buying time, perhaps?), finding grants to sponsor your academic curiosity may become tantamount to—as they say in Turkey—getting your bread back from a lion’s stomach. It is too hard, too dangerous, and it requires careful timing and planning. Thus, it is your responsibility and best of interest to seek out where financial opportunities exist. To do this, you may need to be aware of where the news about grant applications is posted. For this, monitoring listservs, screening institutional newsletters such as the AAG Newsletter or AAG specialty group newsletters, and participating in student paper competitions at academic conferences (trust me, you can sometimes win one of these paper competitions by just applying) can be a good start. Getting involved in activities of specialty groups in academic associations may also help you meet with new people who may become part of an important network for you after you graduate.

A plan of action to make the complexities of grad life smoother and more productive is key. The grad school part of your life constitutes a vital stage of your development as a student, an academic, and a person. It makes up the best years of your life in terms of age, mental and physical health, and relative probability of getting invited to a really good party. Thus, I recommend you have a clear road map for your academic journey, from the beginning to the not-ending end. While we do all of this careful planning and executing, we never want to forget that we can only do so much. It is also important
not to lose sight of the balance between what is best for academic life and for your social life. Develop interests and activities outside of graduate work. For me, taking a small trip to somewhere, gardening vegetables or attending community-organized activities can be a good way of re-charging myself. If you cannot afford a trip to anywhere, turn your next AAG meeting into a business-plus trip. There are many ways of obtaining money for conferences, so use this student-friendly option to kill two birds with one stone. Find your own way of balancing your academic and social life, but no matter what you do, be the smiley one at the end. Though Bart Simpson’s statement will continue to resonate in our ears for some time, we, grad students, must make this life choice enjoyable and worth pursuing, and not a miserable life choice. I wish you all a happy and productive graduate career.

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REFERENCES