

5. Life as a Graduate Student

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People outside the academic world are often astonished to think that someone can spend four, five, or even ten years in graduate school. Many new students feel overwhelmed with the financial and emotional stresses of coursework. But many professors look back on their time in graduate school fondly.

There is a lot of life and learning that a graduate student has to navigate. Being a full-time graduate student is a unique privilege for intellectual reflection, stimulation, and community like no other. But most M.A. and PhD students are “employees” as well as “students” of the university. Many have significant economic and family responsibilities alongside and on top of the common stressors of being a graduate student. Graduate students are also an increasingly diverse group of people seeking higher education for a variety of reasons, so nothing in a “life as a graduate student” section will speak for all people. This section will discuss some points of stress that may come in and out of your life while you are a graduate student. Know, though, that there are many stages of graduate study. Your day-to-day experience will change immensely as you move from coursework to comps to researching and, finally, to writing your MRP, M.A. thesis, or PhD dissertation. Do your best to enjoy the stages of adventure and push through the ones of struggle, hoping they’ll make you a better historian.

Student Relationships

On entering graduate school, you will find that other graduate students form a new and important peer group for you. They will listen to your ideas, read your papers, hear rehearsals of your public performances, offer opinions on your efforts, argue with you, and will expect the same from you. The relationships you form with other graduate students can be very rewarding both professionally and personally. Whether you remain in academia or not, these people may be your future coworkers in other spaces. Some will even become life-long friends.

A great deal can be learned about the nature of the historical profession from

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other students. Veteran graduate students will likely be founts of information about your department, the university, and the wider profession. They can be a vital source of emotional support. Many people find the first year of graduate school particularly wrenching; the experience of a new and rigorous program, often at a new school in a new city, can make the first year lonely and stressful. Experienced graduate students can provide advice on some of the more stressful aspects of graduate life, like choosing courses and supervisors, negotiating financial aid and your institution's bureaucracy, or getting involved into the academic community. Be sure to take the advice you get from other graduate students with some grains of salt. Approach their warnings with caution and look into them for yourself before accepting them as true.

Introduce yourself to, and associate with, as many of your graduate student colleagues as you can. In most departments, there are a number of formal and informal activities for graduate students. These activities can be intimidating to new students, especially if you are shy or come from a different background than most of your peers. Know that networking gets easier with practice and can be an incredible way of finding both senior and peer mentors. Departmental activities provide excellent opportunities for social interaction and intellectual exchange; at worst, they are low stakes learning experiences that you can springboard from on the conference circuit.

If the general social activities in your department are not to your personal tastes, consider joining or organizing a discussion group that better suits your interests. For example, form a Latin American, sexuality studies, or environmental history group. Consider joining your department or university graduate student council or association, or getting involved with an organization like the Canadian Historical Association's Graduate Students' Committee or the Canadian Federation of Students. Other groups, like the Society for the History of Children and Youth, facilitate interaction among graduate students and faculty interested in specific sub-fields within Canada and worldwide. I've found some incredibly rewarding experiences outside of my dissertation work through my CUPE 3906, the research institute that I belong to, and at the CHA.

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Everyone feels the stresses of graduate school. Mature students, students with disabilities, and those from backgrounds that have been traditionally under-represented in the academy may feel particularly isolated. Whether your program is large or small, interacting with other students inside or outside the classroom may be uncomfortable; you may feel left out of the normal student networks or departmental culture. International students, in particular, often face enormous economic difficulties in addition to the stress of working in a second or third language and adjusting to different social norms. Mature students, students who are parents, and students with disabilities are often similarly alienated.

Try to break through the isolation by attending structured activities on campus. Many departments and graduate history student associations organize brown bag lunch series and other seminars. These events combine intellectual and social exchange and can be an important avenue for developing friendships. Wider graduate school social events can also be important ice-breakers. University-wide organizations, such as the African, Indigenous, or Chinese Students' Associations and programs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer + (LGBTQ+) students can provide vital community support. Departmental and university-wide student associations can help you become familiar with academic culture and to understand your rights as a student in Canada.

Feelings of isolation can be compounded by the frustrations of having to fight for accommodations, juggle appointments with medical specialists, or requiring a reduced workload that puts you out of step with your student cohort. Mature students may feel outnumbered by younger colleagues fresh out of an undergraduate degree program. Some of your classmates may treat you more like a parent or teacher than a colleague, while some faculty may even be uncomfortable teaching students who are their age or older. We all come to graduate school with a variety of knowledge bases, diversities, and experiences; seek out the people who hear you and intellectually stimulate you to create a supportive community.

Collegiality and Professionalism

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When navigating new personal relationships with other graduate students, faculty members, undergraduates, and the administrative staff of your department, treat others with respect. Everyone comes from many different backgrounds. Do not make unwarranted assumptions about other people. Intellectual and political debates should be encouraged, but avoid hurtful comments. Treat the administrative staff as the professionals they are rather than your own personal secretaries. Complaining about your students or peers with other students or peers in-person or online is not a good idea. Gossip is damaging, especially in a competitive environment like higher education. Do not engage. There can be competition for resources in graduate school. This doesn't mean you can't treat your colleagues with kindness. Share resources like books, applications, and CVs. Talk things through together and read each other's work. Celebrate successes together! Your work will be all the stronger for it.

Sometimes, problems arise. Universities have people in the role of ombudsperson who are trained in conflict resolution. There are also departments for equity, inclusion, and/or accessibility that may be appropriate avenues to seek out information and support. If workplace misconduct occurs in any way, record what happens and who is involved. A paper trail is important to keep as you work with administrators, other students, and the appropriate officials if a given situation escalates.

Relationships with Faculty

As a graduate student, you will have more contact and interaction with faculty members than you did when you were an undergraduate student. PhD students, in particular, are junior colleagues who may become a future faculty peer. Different universities and graduate programs have quite different cultures when it comes to student-faculty relationships.

It may take a little time, for example, for new students to learn the accepted form of address between graduate students and faculty. Is it Professor or Dr.? Do you call faculty by their last names or first? Do not assume that, because

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one student refers to faculty members by their first names, it is acceptable for you to do the same. There are no universal rules, so err on the side of formality until you know otherwise. As a mature student in the latter stage of my PhD, I refer to senior faculty by their first names once we have spoken or worked together. To reverse power dynamics in our department, another PhD student referred to male faculty members by their first names while referring to all the women as Doctor. Do whatever is comfortable for both parties, and be sure to ask if you are unsure.

Your most important relationships will be with your thesis supervisor(s). If you are a PhD student, this will also include other members of your dissertation committee. The role of the faculty supervisor is multi-faceted. It may include (but is not limited to) helping you formulate your research project and consulting with you about your progress, reading drafts of your thesis, providing general advice about your academic work and career options, and writing letters of recommendation.

Choosing an appropriate supervisor is not always easy. Your choice may be limited by a number of factors. At some institutions, a provisional advisor is assigned for you; at others, it is up to you to find someone who will take you on as a student. When you do have the chance to choose your supervisor, you should consider not only reputation and area of expertise, but also style of supervision. Different supervisors, like graduate students, approach their tasks in different ways. Some are very "hands-on" and insist on regular meetings and formal updates; others offer less direction and wait until you are ready to report to them.

Be aware that having a close personal relationship with one's supervisor is not necessarily beneficial. Some teachers who develop intense relationships with students are seeking hero worship or other kinds of psychological nourishment, and have trouble maintaining pedagogical rigour. Some students find it difficult to accept scholarly criticism from professors they think of as friends. You might want to talk to other students to find a supervisor whose approach to supervision suits your own needs if you have the choice.

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For PhD students, putting together a dissertation committee means matching your interests with two or three faculty beyond your supervisor. Instead of relying on one superstar supervisor you expect to meet all of your needs, consider approaching a variety of faculty members with different strengths. For instance, you might ask one professor to sit on your committee because they are well versed in your time period, another because they have a similar theoretical or methodological perspective, and a third because they are known as an excellent editor. My committee is made up of a human rights expert, a heavy-handed editor, and someone who understands memory studies; all of them have a distinct, though varied, interest in my research.

Faculty-student relationships are complex. A professor's gender, politics, age, or teaching style will not determine how that person relates to you and your work. Do not assume that younger or more casual faculty members will treat your work more sympathetically or less rigorously than anyone else. Just because one professor allows you to use their first name when all the others expect more formal modes of address does not mean that they will necessarily be more "laid back" in their grading. Avoid, too, the pitfall of assuming that faculty members who are "like you" will automatically be friends or allies. While feminists and openly queer professors will want to encourage feminist and LGBTQ+ students, and faculty of colour want to provide support for students of colour, your shared gender, sexuality, race, or political perspective will not mean that you will have a privileged relationship.

As a junior colleague, you should treat all the faculty members in your department in a professional manner *and* expect to be treated the same way. If your supervisor is also your employer, other issues about your relationship come into play. Undertaking teaching or research work for your supervisor or other faculty members can change the relationship profoundly. Although you should certainly never "blow off" a teaching or research contract, you do not have to bend to a professor's every whim. Keep in mind your own needs and goals, and assess the merits and drawbacks of professors' expectations when they diverge with yours.

In some cases, professors exploit their students. Sometimes this occurs without

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the faculty member realizing it. For instance, a teaching assistant might be asked for help in putting together a course kit or syllabus, or a research assistant might be asked to draft a book proposal or pick up a package. It can be difficult to say no to a faculty member who is on your supervisory committee, writes letters of recommendation for you, and/or teaches one of your graduate courses. The professor may think that asking you for help is an acknowledgment of his or her confidence in your abilities. If you are not being paid for this assistance, and/or if these requests start to impinge on the time you should be spending on your own work, you could find yourself in a difficult situation. It is always best to give the professor the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are unaware of your personal situation or difficulties. If a polite “no” and a reasoned argument do not rectify the situation, you may have to consider going to the graduate director, head of the department, or school. You have rights here; the power of the professor is never absolute. Many teaching and research assistants are unionized, and most schools offer means to empower students when problems arise. Read your collective agreement; it will inform you of your rights, responsibilities, and protections. Confrontational situations are rare, as there is a degree of collegiality between graduate students and faculty; both parties can learn from interacting with each other.

Remember that central to graduate student success is a good working relationship with your supervisor(s). If, at any point, you are having serious doubts about the efficacy or appropriateness of your supervisory relationship, solicit advice from trusted colleagues and/or your graduate director about how to get your supervisor to hear your concerns, or about how to change your supervisor entirely.

Occasionally, graduate students become intimately involved with faculty members. When these relationships are consensual, they remain a grey area in terms of professional codes of conduct. The power imbalance between students and professors raise pressing ethical and pedagogical questions that should be carefully considered by both parties. An intimate relationship between student and supervisor is particularly problematic. Universities usually prohibit such relationships. In general, open or not, such relationships still

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expose the student to situations that are unsafe, and professors to charges of harassment.

Balancing “Life” and Graduate School

Graduate school is a major part of your life. Try not to let other activities take priority over your dissertation research and writing; at the same time, do not make your dissertation or university-related activities your entire life. The pressures of coursework and the isolation of research and writing take an emotional toll.

Finding balance is particularly important when you are working on your dissertation. Stay healthy: eat well, get enough sleep, and try to stay active by playing sports, taking a yoga class, or going to the gym. Relax with friends and family when you can. Read books that have nothing to do with your immediate research. This may be a good time to find or revive a hobby or to take an art, music, or language class unrelated to your studies. Do some volunteer work or participate in political campaigns. Take holidays. Many students treat the dissertation like an office job, working from “9 to 5” while taking the evenings and weekends off. There may be times when this seems impossible, but a regular and balanced structure to your day can be more productive than binge-working towards deadlines.

You will likely be happier and write a better dissertation if you devote some of your time to forgetting about your dissertation.

When a Crisis Happens, or Circumstances Change

Life happens. Your carefully laid plans for taking M.A. courses or writing your PhD dissertation get interrupted or go awry. You may get pregnant, your partner might get a dream job and want you to move to another city, or you might face a financial downturn, family crisis, or major health problem. If an unforeseen event gets in the way of your studies, you don't need to simply give up your plans. Talk to your supervisor, graduate program director, and/or TA or union representative to find out your options. They have lots of experience

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with students in similar situations and most will be happy to advocate on your behalf. Within the first months of my PhD work, I fell off my bicycle on the way to university and suffered a concussion. I was just starting my comps reading and, as a result of the injury, was told not to read. I told my supervisors what happened and we figured out a way to balance my health with the degree requirements. Do not try to deal with it on your own or without letting your supervisor(s) know. They will support you the best way they can. Professors can help you navigate graduate school rules regarding incompletes, withdrawals, accommodations, and medical leave, too, but only if they know you need the help.

Occasionally, even the most carefully chosen path needs to be revised. Old interests wane, circumstances irrevocably alter, or you find your program unsuitable or unbearable. If this occurs, consult with relevant faculty, graduate students, and academic advisors about the possible ramifications of changing fields, programs, or institutions. Will your progress be delayed? If so, by how much time and in what ways? Through serious consideration, you can decide whether the extra burdens associated with a major shift are worth enduring.

Do not, however, confuse discouragement for failure or incompatibility with the History profession at large. If you have feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, or if you feel like an “imposter” just waiting to be “found out” and kicked out of school, you are not alone. In 2017, UBC’s Graduate School Newsletter published an [article](#) about “feeling like a fraud,” which footnoted sources going back to 1994. Your feelings are common. Many faculty members suffer from it. It indicates the need for more support systems for graduate students and faculty. While self-doubt is common, students should not subject themselves to constant unhappiness. If the benefits do not outweigh the difficulties of graduate study in History, consider leaving graduate school temporarily or permanently.

You do not need to complete every degree you start. If you decide that a particular path is not for you, it does not mean that you are unable to do it. In some circumstances, a leave of absence may help you return to your studies with renewed commitment. And, in others, you may find out that you just want

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to move on to new things. Be realistic about your options and make informed decisions that meet your needs.