

CHAPTER FOUR

LIFE AS A GRADUATE STUDENT

People outside the academic world are often astonished to think that someone can spend four, five, or even ten years in graduate school. New students, who may feel overwhelmed with the financial and emotional stresses of coursework, can barely imagine staying in school for so long. It may seem surprising, then, that many professors look back on their time in graduate school with fondness.

Being a full-time graduate student is a privilege and a unique opportunity for intellectual reflection, stimulation, and community. It is true that most MA and PhD students are “employees” as well as “students” of the university, and many if not most have significant economic and family responsibilities. Still, in graduate school, you have the opportunity to read and reflect, and to take classes or join study groups with students who have similar intellectual interests. Graduate school can be stressful, but remember that there are many stages of graduate study. Your day-to-day experience will change immensely as you move from coursework, to studying for comps, to researching and writing your MA thesis or PhD. Think of every stage as a great adventure, and enjoy your life as a graduate student.

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 in return will expect the same from you. The relationships you form with other graduate students can be very rewarding both professionally and personally. If you stay in the academic world, these people will be your colleagues forever; regardless of your later career, some will likely become life-long friends.

A great deal can be learned about the nature of the historical profession from other students. Veteran graduate students will likely be founts of information, both positive and negative, about your department, the university, and the wider profession. Moreover, 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 and city, can make the first year lonely and stressful. Experienced graduate students can provide advice and help on some of the more stressful aspects of graduate life: choosing courses and supervisors, negotiating financial aid and your institution’s bureaucracy, getting hooked into the academic community and grapevine, and so on. Of course, you must also take the advice you get from other graduate students with some grains of salt. A few of your more experienced peers may have personal axes to grind or may have soured on the whole graduate-school process entirely. Check out warnings that seem particularly bitter before accepting them as true.

It is a good idea to 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 somewhat intimidating to new students, especially if you are shy, seem to come from a different background than most of your peers, or don't meet people easily. But remember, networking is not the prerogative of the gregarious, and it will get easier. Departmental activities provide excellent opportunities for social interaction and intellectual exchange with people of similar interests; at worst, think of them as learning experiences rather than simply awkward or "bad" occasions.

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 own interests. For example, form a Latin American or sexuality studies group, or a discussion circle on environmental history. Consider joining your department or university graduate student council or association, or getting involved with an organization like the CHA 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 indeed world wide. These organizations provide valuable networking opportunities, but be sure not to become so involved that it takes too much time away you're your coursework or PhD dissertation.

Everyone feels the stresses of graduate school, but 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 can be uncomfortable for those who are "different," and 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 a new society. The alienation felt by some may be exacerbated by a lack of social contact: many international students are barely visible in graduate programs, their presence largely unnoticed by the larger circle of students, and sometimes even faculty, beyond their supervisory committee. Mature students, students who are parents, and students with disabilities are often similarly invisible, and may be treated more like a curiosity than a peer.

Again, we advise that you need not be gregarious to "network." First, 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 and parties. Such 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, and university-wide organizations, such as the African or Chinese Students' Associations, or programs for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students, can provide both community and 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; but don't forget that you, in turn, have much to teach them.

For students with health conditions and disabilities, feelings of isolation and "difference" may be

compounded by the frustrations of having to fight for accommodations, the need to juggle appointments with medical specialists that always seem to come during class, or a reduced work load that gets 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 an equal colleague, and some faculty may be uncomfortable teaching students who are their own age – or even older. (Fortunately, they are in the minority; most faculty find such teaching a pleasure!) If you have entered graduate school for personal development, not a career, try to keep the anxieties and ambitions of your fellow students in proper perspective. If you do intend to pursue an academic career, remember that you have the same rights as other students to tap all the resources of your program.

Many students are hesitant to seek redress for problems they encounter. They may come from societies or cultures where students are not encouraged to speak out, or worry about losing funding, visas, or their professors' respect. It is important to learn what services and resources are available to graduate students and to be assertive – but positive – in making sure your needs are met. Consult your department's graduate student association, your graduate program director, your union or the Canadian Federation of Students if you need help.

Collegiality and Professionalism

While navigating new personal relationships with other graduate students, faculty members, undergraduates, and the support staff of your department, it is important to act professionally and treat others with respect. This is common sense. Keep in mind, for instance, that students come from many different backgrounds, both culturally and academically. Do not make unwarranted assumptions about other students' sexual practices, religious beliefs, or political views, and act civilly to all. Intellectual and political debates should be encouraged, but avoid *ad hominem* arguments and personally hurtful comments. Treat the office staff like professionals, not personal secretaries, and be sensitive to the demands on their time. Complaining about your students (or peers) in the graduate student lounge, or the room in which TAs hold office hours with undergraduates, is also not a good idea.

As a professional, you should also be aware of your online presence. Be careful what you post on social networking sites or blogs; you don't want embarrassing pictures or comments to be seen by prospective employers, or to come back to haunt you years later. If your program has a listserv for students to communicate with one another, and a heated debate breaks out, think twice before you send. This is not the place for angry comments or personal vendettas. Keep the personal out of it; you may offend a future colleague.

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. PhD students in particular are like junior colleagues,

serving an apprenticeship that will eventually lead you to become one of their peers. Still, different universities and graduate programs have quite different cultures when it comes to student-faculty relations. 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 one student refers to faculty members by their first names that it is acceptable for you to do the same. There are no universal rules, and it is probably best to err on the side of formality until you find out the norm in your department. Other students may tell you departmental conventions; or you can always ask.

Your most important relationships with professors will be with your MA or PhD thesis supervisor and, if you are a PhD student, with the 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, and 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, however, 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. But in many cases, you may not have much choice.

For PhD students, putting together a dissertation committee means matching your interests with two or three faculty beyond your supervisor. Try to avoid putting all your eggs in one basket: instead of relying on one superstar, a single individual expected to meet all 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 she is well versed in your time period, another because he has a similar theoretical or methodological perspective, and a third because he is known as an excellent and helpful editor.

It is important to stress that the relationship between graduate students and faculty is an unequal one; it is a professional relationship informed by an imbalance of power. Most faculty members treat graduate students with friendliness, decorum, and respect, but no matter how friendly and accommodating professors are, they still hold considerable power over your potential career.

Faculty-student relationships are complex. A professor's sex, 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 her first name when all the others expect more formal modes of address, for instance, does not mean that she will necessarily be more "laid back" or "easier" in her grading. The reverse may well be true. We also caution students to avoid 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 GLBT students, and faculty of colour want to provide support for students of colour, your shared gender, sexuality, race, or political perspective does not mean that you have a right to 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, some other issues about your relationship come into play. Performing teaching or research work for your supervisor or other faculty members can change your relationship profoundly. Think carefully about your relationships to your professors, for faculty members have a degree of power over your career. You should never "blow off" a teaching or research contract; take your work obligations seriously. This does not mean that you have to bend to a professor's every whim; quite the opposite, in fact. Keep in mind your own needs and goals, and assess the merits and drawbacks of professors' expectations when theirs and yours diverge. 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.

In some cases, professors exploit their students. Sometimes this occurs without 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 told 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; that is, a compliment. However, 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 he or she is unaware of your personal situation or difficulties. If a polite "no" and a reasoned argument do not rectify the situation, then you may have to consider going above the individual to the graduate director, head of the department, or school. You have rights; the power of the professor is not absolute. Many teaching and research assistants are unionized, and most schools offer some avenues of appeal and the means to empower students when problems arise. Fortunately, such confrontational situations are rare. In general, there is a degree of collegiality between graduate students and faculty, and both parties can learn from interacting with each other.

Occasionally, graduate students become intimately involved with faculty members. When these relationships are entirely consensual, they are a grey area in terms of professional codes of conduct. We make no moral judgments, but want to stress that the power imbalance between

students and professors raises pressing ethical and pedagogical questions that should be carefully considered by both parties. A sexual relationship between student and supervisor is particularly problematic, and universities prohibit such relationships.

Discrimination and Sexual Harassment

All students, faculty, and staff have the right to work and learn in a safe and welcoming environment. Sexual harassment, and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, age, race, religion, and ability, creates a barrier to equality and is discriminatory under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. University procedures differ, but every school has some kind of office for equity and human rights. If you have experienced harassment, seek redress immediately.

Harassment can take a variety of forms, including sexually suggestive remarks, persistent jokes or comments about your age or appearance, pestering phone calls, the display of sexist or racist pictures, inappropriate physical contact, and assault. While the most apparent harassment may seem to take place between male faculty and female students, male students can be harassed by female professors or teaching assistants, and female professors or teaching assistants can be harassed by male students. The harasser can be the same sex as the person being harassed, and students can harass professors as well as each other. Harassment can take place once or over an extended period of time. Because harassment creates a negative or hostile environment that can interfere with your job performance and academic success, all forms of it should be taken very seriously.

In practice, it is not always easy to know what constitutes harassment – or what to do about it. Students who object to ethnic jokes or sexually suggestive remarks may be told they should “lighten up.” Because many victims of discrimination, particularly those who have experienced sexual harassment, understandably prefer not to publicize their experiences, others may think they have encountered nothing unusual. Confusion, shame, or even ambivalence about your own feelings may make you believe you are misreading the signals. Yet if a relationship between a student and a professor (or another student) is characterized by sexual innuendoes or provocation; or if the expected level of intimacy is not consensual; or if you feel that you have been discriminated against in any way, seek out help. The bottom line is that if you are having a problem with someone, you do not have to deal with it all by yourself. Most universities have free psychological counseling services. Your graduate director or graduate student representatives can help direct you to the appropriate university officials. Your union is another place you can turn to for help. You are entitled to work and learn in a healthy and safe environment.

Balancing ‘Life’ and Graduate School

Whether you are taking courses or writing your dissertation, graduate school will be a major, and perhaps even the most important, part of your life. Earlier, we stressed the importance of not

letting other activities impinge too much on your dissertation research and writing. But you should also try not to make your dissertation, or university related activities, your entire life. The pressures of course work, and the isolation of research and writing, can take an emotional toll. Stay healthy: eat well, get enough sleep, and try to stay active by playing sports, taking a yoga class, or going to the gym. Take time to relax with friends and family.

Finding a balance is particularly important when you are working on your dissertation. 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 volunteer work and participate in political campaigns. Take holidays. Many students treat the dissertation like an office job, working from “9 to 5” and taking the evening off. Of course, everyone has different work habits and not every student will want to follow this model. But everyone can set aside work time and play time. As with anything in life, balance is the key. You will likely be happier, and write a better dissertation, if you devote some of your time to forgetting about your dissertation.

Many graduate students wonder about the “best time” to have children. Some begin graduate study with young children or other family responsibilities that take time away from writing and studying. Others who do not have children when they begin their program start a family before finishing the PhD. If you have children, you will undoubtedly need some form of child care and a lot of support from family and friends. Having a baby is absorbing and may be intellectually isolating; you probably can’t attend many lecture series or social events, and you must make an extra effort to maintain friendships and intellectual bonds with grad student colleagues. Children also provide a quick lesson in the importance of managing your time. If your baby is napping or with the babysitter, take advantage of your “free” time to write that paper or work on your dissertation; it won’t last long, and you want to enjoy your child when she’s home and awake! Some student-parents treat graduate school like a conventional job and put preschool children in full-time day care so they can concentrate on writing or researching; others use part-time babysitters or trade off “time to work” with their partners and friends. There is no single “best time” to have children; you have to find what works best for your personal situation.

When a Crisis Happens or Your Circumstances Change

Sometimes “life happens” and your carefully-laid plans for taking MA courses or writing your dissertation go astray. You may find yourself unexpectedly 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 of your own. If an unforeseen event gets in the way of studies that you want to continue, don’t simply give up your plans. Talk to your supervisor, graduate program director, and/or TA or student union representative to find out your options. They probably have lots of experience with students in similar situations, and most will be happy to advocate on your behalf.

As a student in Canada, you almost certainly have access to the many counseling and health services available in your university and city, and are entitled to non-discriminatory treatment. If

you are expecting a baby, find out the parental leave policies associated with your university, teaching contract, or SSHRC award. If you are suffering a mental health crisis, such as depression, or any other medical problem, get help immediately! Visit your school's counseling or health service, and tell your graduate director and supervisor about your situation. There is no need to feel embarrassed or ashamed; most faculty will be supportive, and some will have experienced similar crises themselves. You may have to battle your university's bureaucracy, but especially in cases of sickness and disability, students do have rights. For example, Dalhousie student Connie Wawruck-Hemmett had to fight to stay in her PhD program when she had brain surgery to remove two tumours, but eventually she found out that she qualified for five years medical leave. Professors can help you navigate graduate school rules regarding incompletes, withdrawals, accommodations, and medical leave – but only if they know you need 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, and if so, by how much and in what way? 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 historical profession. 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, know that you are not alone. Your feelings indicate the need for many more support systems for graduate students at every stage of their careers.

While doubt is common coin, students should not subject themselves to constant and fruitless unhappiness. If you do not see the benefits outweighing the difficulties of graduate study in history, consider leaving graduate school, temporarily or permanently. There is no law that you must complete every degree you start, and deciding that a particular path is not for you does not mean that you are unable to do it. In some circumstances, such as when personal problems become overwhelming, a leave of absence may help you return to your studies with renewed commitment. In others, you may just want to move on. Be realistic about your options and capabilities at the moment, and make decisions that meet your needs.