Surviving and thriving in grad school.

University of Guelph Graduate Student Orientation, Fall 2020

Transcript:

Hello everyone and welcome to your new lives as graduate students at the University of Guelph. I'm Georgia Mason and I'm a professor in the Integrative Biology Department. And I want to give some advice to you on how not just to survive grad school, but also to thrive there.

And my first bit of advice is not to panic and not to get too fed up if you find that things get tough intellectually. Uh, we may give you tons of books to read if you're a historian, we may give you text back covered in red ink or covered in comment balloons if you're in any discipline, and this can be sometimes overwhelming.

But the truth is that when you're undergraduates, we hide complexity and doubt from you and then as graduate students, we suddenly give you the grand reveal that actually scholars disagree, that things aren't as certain as we might have told you before, that phenomena can be interpreted in different ways, and methods that were once relied on suddenly aren't believed anymore. And this can be worrying and infuriating. It can leave you struggling. But I would remind you that this is the great fascination of primary research that you're in uncharted territory, and you're doing difficult scholarship.

So just remind yourself if it was easy, everyone would have a Master's and everyone would have a PhD. And if your particular topic was easy, someone would have done it already. So, you are a pioneer, and that can sometimes be tough, so corrections, corrections, and more corrections are just part of producing a top quality product. It's a normal part of the process. It's a normal part of the training, and your advisor went through exactly the same with their own advisors in their own committee members, and the criticisms are often meant really to help you, and to help you produce really fantastic scholarship.

A professor I knew at the University of Oxford, I arrived as a postdoc there actually in the mid 90s, and I had just got my first ever grant and I sent a copy of it to someone I've never met before, but I really admired his books and he returned the grant to me a few days later and had written on it, "Thank you for this, but it's basically rubbish", and this was obviously a bit dispiriting, but actually he meant it in the best possible way. He was trying to help me. He was actually correct, there were massive flaws in it that no one aside from him had spotted. And he went on to become, actually a very supportive mentor, if often slightly challenging. So just just try and take criticism in the spirit in which it's intended. OK, so graduate degrees are challenging.

My second piece of advice would be that you should use your advisor and use your advisory committee because they're useful and it's their job. So this is my first thing. It's our job to help you if you're our student or if we're sitting on your committee, we get credit for that. It's
monitored. It's logged. When we're assessed ourselves, we get credit for being on committees, so it is our job to help you if we are listed as a committee member for you, so don't feel guilty about bothering us, and often times actually, we do really enjoy it too.

You might need to manage us and you mustn't be afraid to do this, and the reason you might need to do this is that very often, especially towards the end of a heavy teaching semester, your advisor is going to feel something like this, probably utterly overwhelmed, and many of us also are just guilty of saying "yes" to too many things. We take on too much. We're pulled in too many directions, and then we start dropping the ball.

So a colleague of mine again at Oxford is famous for once doing this to a graduate student. So grad student went into her office. They were going to have a meeting about a chapter that my colleague had just read and was going to give the student feedback on. They sit down. My colleague opens her briefcase and pulls out a slice of pizza that she looks at with a rather puzzled expression, and my colleague says "Hmm, I'm terribly sorry. I think this means your chapter is in the fridge". So, this is just the archetype of the crazy overloaded professor, but we all do get a bit like this.

So, what this means for you is, that, for example, if we don't reply to an email, don't start getting paranoid. This doesn't mean that we don't want to reply or that your email was utterly uninteresting. It just means we've lost control of our inbox. So, this was a screenshot I took when I prepared this talk last year, I had 6000 unread emails in my inbox, so if yours gets lost, please don't take that to heart.

Another way in which you might have to just sometimes manage your advisor; supposing you've not had a committee meeting for ages, and you'd really like one. Just be brave and say so. That your advisor will just be really happy you've done that. Also, if you're a PhD student and you feel it's probably time for your qualifying exams, the clock is ticking, but your advisor hasn't said anything about it, this isn't because they think you're not ready. This isn't because they secretly think you're not worthy. They've just forgotten what semester you're in, probably what year it is right now, and so you should just say that you want to start planning, and again, they will just be happy you've done that.

Also, you should really make the most of your meetings with your advisors because my other point is, although our job is there to help you, you should also remember that we're probably going to be your number one referees, so it's probably worth your while to kind of subtly impress us, if you can. And one way in which you can do this is to not waste opportunities to meet with your advisor, but to really make the most of them.

Uh, so you want to make them efficient and you want to make them really useful for all parties. And so yeah, this is just a reminder that although it's your advisor's job to help you, they'll also be your number one referee probably for future jobs, future academic positions, so just bear that in mind. Don't always run to them for every little thing.
So here's a couple of examples I'll just give to you verbally and have a think about which student is most likely to be impressive. So here are two imaginary students meeting with their advisor about the comments that a student got back the week before on a draft chapter for their thesis. So student A opens their laptop, scrolls down the copy of the chapter with the comments, and deals with each comment one at a time. So the student A might say something like "Oh yeah, and in the next comment you said this. Oh, and then 2 pages on, then your next comment, this is your next comment". OK, so that's student A.

Student B comes into the meeting and says, "I read all your comments and most of them just made sense. So, thanks a lot. But there were three I didn't understand and one where I really feel that we were at cross purposes, so can we just go over those three comments? And I think start with that last one, because that might be the most complicated and the most urgent".

OK, so hopefully you can instantly see that student B is doing a really fantastic job here. The advisor is not having to watch their profile as they scroll down a chapter, and I have to say it for me, I find that absolutely infuriating. The student is not wasting anyone's time going over comments that everyone just finds it easy and sensible and easy to deal with. And student B has also done a brilliant job with just prioritizing, so they're making the meeting really efficient, but also really useful.

OK, so prepare in advance. Prioritize, come with a list. Come with notes. Come with your highlighter pen. Don't go over every little thing.

OK, here are two more, three students, actually telling their advisor about some kind of research roadblock. OK, student A; "It's a disaster. The machine is broken". OK, that's student A. Student B; We have a problem. The machine is broken. I called the manufacturer. They can mend it if we FedEx it, but it might take four months to mend. I also talked to a lab in Waterloo who have the same machine, and they can let us use it, but they'll charge us $50.00 an hour. What do you think?" OK, so student B is clearly more impressive than student A.

Now let's look at student C. Student C; "We have a problem. The machine is broken. I called the manufacturer and they can mend it if we FedEx it to them, but it might take 4 months. I also talked to a lab in Waterloo who have the same machine. They can let us use it, but they'll charge you $50.00 an hour. Now, I have about 100 hours worth of work to do, so if we go the Waterloo route, it would cost $5000. But if we get it mended, there's something else I can switch to for that 4 months. So my hunch is to do that". So hopefully you can totally see that student C is really coming across very impressively here.

So I would say, if you can, go to your advisor with problems, of course you should do that, but if you can come to them with solutions as well, that's fantastic, and it's also a great way for you to develop good problem solving skills as well. Now you may feel "help, never in a million years am I going to be like student C", but actually you will. It's time, experience, practice, screwing up occasionally, but in the end you hopefully will become a really fantastic problem solver.
OK, and then my third and final bit of advice is not just to rely on your advisor and your committee, but also to use all the other fantastic training resources on campus. So, the Graduate Student Learning Initiative is a great portal online as a way to find out what's happening on and off campus.

So one nice example is something run by the Office of Research, which is a graduate student research and project management course, and I've heard many good things about this. I'd really recommend it. Another fantastic thing run by the library is the Dissertation Boot Camp, which is run once a semester. This fills up fast, so if you see it advertised and you know you need somebody to basically help push you through the final phases of writing up, this can be just a terrific program.

And then there's great things off campus as well, so I would really recommend some of the Mitacs training workshops. The networking one is supposed to be particularly good.

And then there's other resources as well. So the American Association for the Advancement of Science has an Individual Development Plan, which can be really useful, and I'm sure you'll hear through the Office of Graduate Studies about other training opportunities as well that hopefully you will find useful.

OK, so that wraps things up for me. So just to reiterate, don't panic or get fed up if things get tough intellectually. You're allowed a day of being fed up if you get criticized, but then it's just normal.

Use your advisor and your advisory committee. It's their job to help you, but do it well and strategically, and then use all the many other training resources on and off campus. OK, that's it. Best of luck everyone. Bye.

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