



How to Find Work-Life Balance in Graduate School

By Kelly M. Smith

Graduate school can seem daunting and may leave you feeling like you are spinning your wheels with nothing to show for your time. I've spoken with many who admit that graduate school is not what they thought it was going to be. If this is you — please pay attention — you are not alone! Whether you are transitioning from undergraduate studies or from a working environment, graduate school can seem to take on a life of its own. However, with realistic goal setting, good organizational skills, and taking care of yourself, you can do it.

First, I think it's important for us to recognize that graduate school is somewhat of a rare beast. Often the term student is perceived as a position that is "easier than real life." Entering graduate school, we may have a preconceived notion that our learning environment will be much like our undergraduate studies. No wonder it's such a shock to our system! I recently came across an online article from *Psychology Today*, titled "Five Truths About Graduate School that Nobody Tells You" by Nathaniel Lambert, PhD, which I found very illuminating.

Lambert suggests using the term "school" in the context of graduate studies is perhaps a misnomer as it is actually a professional apprenticeship. In other words, on day one of graduate school, our career begins as we train to become productive independent researchers which requires a shift from a student mentality to a professional one. This alone can cause dissonance because we still think of ourselves as students. I mean, we are in school right? Wrong — we are in the first phase of our research career.

Defining graduate school as work is the first step and a necessary one in order to set clear boundaries between work and life. Perhaps you have set a targeted completion date for your graduate program. That is great! However, keep in mind that life happens and sometimes we have to shift our focus so be sure to set incremental goals (weekly, monthly, by semester) as small successes are a must in this long journey. As part of your graduate school career, you may be teaching, taking classes and conducting research at the same time which makes for a very full workload. Consultation with your major advisor can assist with setting rational and realistic goals for your work.

Once you have set goals, create a schedule for time that you will devote to your graduate studies and all other activities/responsibilities that you have during a typical week. You may be juggling family life, caregiving, volunteer work, etc. Be sure to include all of this into your schedule. Carefully assess how your time is spent and consider removing any non-value added activities from your schedule. Clearly, familial responsibilities cannot be eliminated. However, if you have non-value added activities that suck up your time, consider limiting the number of hours spent and/or postpone involvement until your graduate work is complete. It is better to do a few things well than to do many things haphazardly.



CAREERS IN AGING WEEK

Finally, be sure to schedule time for yourself! This is the single most important item on your schedule and you should cherish and protect it. Too often, graduate students skip meals, exercise, and sleep in hopes of finishing a product. Relax; it will be there tomorrow. I can assure you that no one is going to swing by in the middle of the night and write that computer program or make those tedious edits for you. (I've prayed for it, believe me!) Failure to take time for yourself actually makes you counter-productive and may lead to burnout. If you feel that you are on the brink of burnout, reach out to other graduate students, family members or friends. More often than not, you will find someone who can relate to what you are going through and offer support.

For more helpful information on balancing work and life, visit www.geron.org/webinar to view the archived February 26 webinar titled "A Balancing Act: Navigating Work and Life in Early Career" presented by David Kaplan, PhD.