

Advice from a College Graduate

After completing my Bachelor's degree in Political Science and taking some time away from school to gain some working experience, I found myself returning to University life to complete my graduate degree. Because I was not new to academia, I was more determined than ever to keep track of sound advice-- a running list, so to speak, for students embarking on the venture we call higher education. Below I share my insights and pointers for students already in College and those perhaps considering the path of College:

- Lot's of people will ask you, "what do you want to do with this degree?" You do not need to know the exact answer, but you do need to know what you love and what makes you passionate. The experience of College could be just that-- helping you find your path.
- Know your "why." Why are you here? Why did you choose to start this program? Always remind yourself of this and never lose sight of it.
- You WILL change your mind about many things-- your research interests, what you want to do for a thesis or applied project, or maybe even like me, changing your entire program. And that is OK.
- Attend as many things as you can-- orientation, workshops, club meetings, etc. But do not over commit yourself of course, just go to what you think is relevant and what you think can help you.
- Network! Talk to as many people as you can-- classmates, faculty, advisors, people even outside of the University but who have interests in your area. You never know who will come in handy.
- Related, make it a goal (given you have the appropriate amount of time) to meet with someone new at least once a week, or maybe every other week. Keep these relationships going if you find them useful.
- Document everything! For example, keep a running list of everyone you have contacted with their name and email and when you met with them.
- Many people in academia, students AND teachers, will throw at you their negativity-- that grad school is horrible, that academia is such a backwards place, to why even bother, etc. Do not let that get you down and remember why YOU are there.

- Get a sense of a program by reaching out to those already in the program-- start with an advisor, ask them to connect you to the director, to faculty, to current students. If you do not get a good vibe or if students seem to have lots of negative feedback, consider your options.
- If something does not have a deadline(s), like a thesis or applied project (besides the final submission date) , make your own goal posts and timeline to keep yourself accountable and to not fall behind.
- Even if you think something is not possible, ask anyway. By asking, you could be that one person who makes the wheels turn for something to change.
- Search for and apply to internships early!
- Try taking classes with professors who share similar research interests with you early on. This will help build a relationship with them and allow you to possibly have them on your committee later on.

Of course, everyone's experience is different and some of my advice may or may not apply to you, but I can guarantee that at least a couple of these points can be useful-- even if you don't know it just yet! For what it's worth, I have not left academia and currently work at the very same University where I earned my BA and MA. I find myself encountering students who need that reminder of WHY quite often. Even for those who are not in academia, I feel it important to remind ourselves why we continue whatever it is we are doing. We work so we can afford a comfortable life. We spend a couple of hours a week exercising to stay healthy. We nurture our relationships to create friendship and community. The list goes on and on. So if you find yourself floundering in school work or second guessing your choice of major, just ask WHY.