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ADVICE

Graduate School Should Be Challenging, Not Traumatic

By Kathryn R. Wedemeyer-Strombel | NOVEMBER 14, 2018

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As a doctoral student, I have at times found the culture of graduate school to be toxic.

When I've mentioned that — in conversations in person or on Twitter — some professors and fellow students rush to contradict me. "You're just complaining because you don't want to work hard," they say. Or, somewhat more politely, "a Ph.D. *should* be challenging."

Yes, graduate school should be challenging — but it shouldn't be traumatizing. There is a difference.

I recently created a Twitter thread to share my views on the difference between intellectually demanding hard work and a toxic or hostile work environment. The response was astounding: In 24 hours there were more than 1,000 likes and 300 retweets. Even two weeks later, the thread was still getting traffic. Clearly, this topic resonates.

I am open and honest — some may think too much so — about the struggles I have experienced as a doctoral student. Hearing on Twitter from hundreds of people who can relate makes me feel less alone, but it also angers me that these struggles are widely relatable yet not talked about nearly enough. So let's talk about them.

What are the differences between a challenging graduate-school culture and a traumatizing one? I've experienced both and, in fact, got myself out of a toxic situation. Here are some key differences that I have either observed myself or heard from other graduate students.

Challenging is:

- Long hours spent understanding a complicated concept, improving a course plan, arranging a remote fieldwork trip, coordinating international collaborators, or writing efficient academic prose.
- Research setbacks, grant and publication rejections, and "revise and resubmit" decisions.
- Disagreeing with your advisers or colleagues on methods and having a healthy debate about options.
- Hard, focused studying for candidacy exams, but in an environment that prepares you well for those tests.
- Failing at some task but being encouraged to keep going and to ask for help when you need it.

Toxic is:

- Being yelled at — told you are awful and that you need to "pull up your big-girl panties and deal with it."
- Dreading going into meetings with passive-aggressive or outright abusive supervisors.
- Taking time off to attend a family event and being told that "seeing family is a childish excuse for a vacation."
- Promoting extreme competition among doctoral students.
- Being told to your face that everything is fine, but hearing from others that the same person is saying just the opposite about you to peers, future collaborators, and potential employers.

If those abusive behaviors sound familiar, take them as warning signs: This is not "just how graduate school is" — you are likely in a toxic environment.

I do not shy away from challenging work. I enjoy it and I am good at it. I do loudly dismiss noxious environments because I felt trapped in one — and it took me years to undo the damage. I know that I was not the perfect graduate student then (or now). I made mistakes and I will own them. But in graduate school, making mistakes should be OK. That's why we are students — to learn.

My goal here in sharing all of this is to help other graduate students understand: You don't get a special commendation on your doctorate just because you survived a traumatic environment. You're not stuck in a toxic program or with a toxic adviser. You *can* make a change. Extricating yourself will be difficult, and some situations (e.g. visa requirements, dependents) provide more obstacles than others, but you can break free and start again elsewhere.

Your task: Find an adviser who creates and promotes a challenging yet healthy work environment — someone who pushes you but knows when you need a break, someone who sees you as a whole person and emphasizes your health above your research. Such advisers do exist and they make all the difference. If you are one of those advisers, thank you. If you have or had one of these advisers, please thank them.

I do not have exact answers here. I am not a psychologist — just a graduate student who has struggled and recognizes the power in being transparent about those struggles. But I do have some suggestions on how students and their advisers can best navigate the academic environment. If you have suggestions, I hope you will share them, too.

For professors and graduate-program directors looking for ways to promote a healthy, challenging culture in your department, here are some ideas:

- Provide graduate students with links and phone numbers to campus counseling services. Normalize seeing a therapist in graduate school for your students.
- We all know that a Ph.D. program means long hours of reading, writing, research, and stress. Recognize that your students are more than research robots. Encourage reasonable work hours, mental and physical health, and time with family.
- Encourage your students to pursue hobbies unrelated to the degree program. For students new to the area, recommend local sports leagues, book clubs, and the like. Support their having a life outside of the intense focus of graduate study.
- If you notice a student in your department who appears to be stuck in an unhealthy, toxic relationship with an adviser, reach out to that student. Or find someone in your department who can. Struggling students may not know whom they can trust — you can at least let them know they have options (including the three I suggest below). If they decide to change labs or switch advisers, support them however you can, even by just being an advocate and a positive reference as they search for a new adviser.
- Especially if you have tenure, work to resolve problems in your own department. Or find someone who can in the departmental or institutional leadership. Do not put that onus on the student.

For current graduate students feeling stuck in an environment that seems more toxic than challenging, here are some suggestions:

- Talk to a psychologist. I was nervous at first to use my university's counseling services, but I realized I needed help to deal with a situation that felt overwhelming. Counseling helped me tremendously, and I wish I would have started sooner. Almost every graduate student I know has, at one point, talked with a psychologist and, honestly, I think every graduate student should. I cannot recommend it more. I do realize this is not always affordable, but check with your university and see what is available to you.
- Do some serious self-study. Why are you in graduate school? What do you want out of your program? Are you happy? If not, why not? If you decide you want to stay in graduate school, great. If not, that is OK, too. Leaving does not equal failure. Doing what's best for you is the most important consideration.
- Talk to an ombudsman. This is an impartial observer, either in your department or in the office of graduate studies, who will talk with you confidentially. You can speak candidly to this person about your situation, and he or she can help you figure out what you need to do to move forward.

If you are in a position of power to help create a positive, challenging culture for doctoral students, please do so. Or at least start talking about these problems openly. Your graduate students need to know they have options.

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