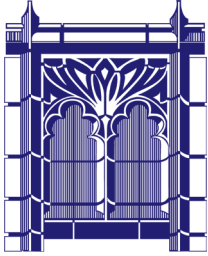


Staying Motivated in Graduate School



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL **mentor memo** AUTUMN QUARTER 2009

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This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at baldasty@u.washington.edu.

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At times during your graduate career it can become difficult to stay motivated and avoid burnout. During graduate school you must learn not only how to become an effective researcher in your field, but also how to manage frustration and, at times, a feeling that you lack the necessary motivation to move forward. There are several things you can do to remain motivated and focused on what it takes to progress through your program and earn your graduate degree.

Focus on the end prize

Think about your goals. Identify one prize that you will receive when you graduate. This should be something that makes you happy when you think about it. Is it receiving the title "Dr.," getting that job you have been dreaming about, or walking across the stage at your graduation ceremony? Hold on to an image associated with this end prize and when you are frustrated, remember why you are in your program. Let this goal carry you through the difficult times.

Be as organized as possible

Have a solid game plan for getting through your program. Know what the requirements are for each stage of your program. Find out when these requirements must be accomplished.

Set deadlines for yourself, even if there are no "true" deadlines for you to complete. Let others around you—your peers, family, friends, mentors, and advisors—know the deadlines you have set for yourself.

Keep a visual reminder of what you are working on in your office. On a bulletin board, keep a section for things you "need to do," projects you are currently "doing," and items that are "done." This visual aid will remind you that you have made progress, finished important projects, and are progressing through current tasks. This will help you avoid feeling bogged down and overwhelmed with the hurdles of graduate school.

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Find a topic that you are passionate about

If you don't enjoy your work, then you are not going to stay motivated when writing draft after draft after draft. Find a research question that really gets you excited or a substantive area that you feel has an impact on a community, issue, or problem that you feel is important.

Work with other motivated people

Make sure you work with other motivated students in your program and outside. Find a group of people on campus or in the broader community that share the same excitement for your topic of interest. Let their interest help motivate you to push forward.

Work toward finding a balance

Remember what is important to you outside of school whether it be family and friends, maintaining your physical and mental health, or working on a hobby. Each week, set aside a few hours ~~or so~~ to spend time on something other than school work. Remember to set priorities in your life and every now and then check in to see whether you need to adjust how you are allocating your time.

Don't doubt yourself

You can complete graduate school because you are well qualified to be here. You are working in your substantive area because there is something about this field that drives your intellectual curiosity. You will finish your thesis and/or dissertation because you are now the expert in that area. Do not waste time wondering whether you are good enough to be here—just know that you are.

Let the guilt go

Feeling guilty for not finishing a project by a certain deadline, or for not working through the entire weekend, or for not devoting as much time as you feel you should to something outside of your program, will only hold you back. While you should set goals, priorities, and deadlines, recognize that you will not always be able to meet them. Let yourself off the hook and let the guilt go. Acknowledge that you are not going to be perfect at everything and that you will never have that perfect balance (no one ever does!), but at least you are trying—and ~~that~~ your persistence will be rewarded.

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