

Professor Sears' Top Ten List for Students Thinking about Graduate School
or
A Few Key Lessons Learned Along My Graduate School Journey

1. There is no one right path to graduate school or one right way to do graduate school. How you make the decision and how you move through the journey will in many ways reflect who you are
2. Seek out a mentor NOW!!!
3. Do not let money (the availability or lack of availability) be the deciding factor. Your passion is most important in completing the process.
4. Meet the other graduate students. While potential advisors are very important, it is your peers that will really help you through the process. If the students at a school seem unhappy, choose a different institution. If that's not an option, you will at least know what you're getting into.
5. Self discipline and motivation is critical. Just as there is a qualitative change between high school and college, there is qualitative difference between undergraduate and graduate school. Basic workload is 3 or 4 courses a semester that meet mostly 1x week. For that week you are expected to read an entire book and either lead the discussion or actively participate in it. Classes are seminar style, with at least one long (20-25pg) paper at the end and maybe response papers or questions throughout the semester.
6. Take writing/ reading seriously. Both are skills that can be developed. Ask for help, especially with the writing and the training (teaching/conference presentations/papers) that go along with the profession (here I'm mostly thinking about social science and humanities programs).
7. Know what you know! This has two parts. First don't be intimidated by the perpetrators. Much about the grad school process is like pledging a sorority or fraternity or joining a club. Those in the discipline try to make sure newcomers belong (know the language, tools and history) and newcomers have the task of proving they do belong. So, in classes there can be a lot of posturing and "perpetrating" by students to prove they are worthy. Don't be intimidated by this! My personal strategy was to simply ask the student and sometimes the professor (but only when you have read) "What do you really mean when you say xyz?" If you still are unsure of the concept or theory under discussion, seek out peers and professors for conversation. Know what you know, also implies acknowledging what you don't know.

Second, if you read something and you find that it is challenging the very core of your being, don't discard your beliefs. Evaluate the evidence presented and begin to articulate why you are confused or not buying the argument. Because grad school is not just about "book knowledge" but is also about learning about yourself, some of your beliefs will be and should be challenged. And some will change (an open mind is critical). At the same time, as a person of color some of the knowledge learned in graduate school will challenge your experiences and your sense of reality. Often this is because the text is wrong. Trust yourself.

8. **Create** don't **assume** solidarity or lack of alliances with faculty or other students based upon racial/cultural identity. As a person of color, look for places that seem to have some people of color and ask them about the environment. You can also ask non people of color about their experiences and how they think students of color have it at the university. You might be surprised at what you find out. Most importantly create alliances across and within racial/ethnic groups.
9. Balance. This also has two parts. First, life goes on while you are in grad school. People marry, die, have children, move and get sick. While life can complicate grad school, it does not have to derail the process. Second, HAVE FUN!!!
10. Finally, be a survivor not a victim. Things will go wrong. You may miss a deadline. Your work maybe criticized. How you handle that criticism, how you deal with that missed deadline is what's most important. If you wilt and don't write, you won't finish. Take responsibility, take the criticism (whether intended as constructive or not) and respond.