The Question: “Do I have to Leave my Family and Give up my Possessions for Graduate School?”

Sage D’Vice
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In The Question, our very own Sage D’Vice shares his wisdom with Bulletin readers who are struggling with some issue in their fieldwork. Whether it’s job woes, school blues, or an awkward social situation, Sage D’ Vice has thoughts on how to navigate your situation. Have a question for Sage? Email the editor, taking care to keep names of people discussed anonymous. The Bulletin team makes sure to redact them to keep things copacetic.

Dear Sage D’Vice,

I went to my graduate school’s orientation hype! Undergrad was fun and games. Graduate school was going to be no messing around. My friends had heard me say I wanted to be a scholar. Now I was going to prove it.

The start of orientation was meh. The speakers and current students talked about how wonderful their program was as if we hadn’t already turned in our first tuition deposit. Most of the cool stuff is out of reach of first-year MA students. Study abroad, internships, independent research is reserved for the upper-MA students and doctoral students. We were assured that our time would come. It’s just not yet.

Then <name redacted>, who specializes in <redacted>, came to the podium and started dropping
bombs. “Graduate schools is the hardest thing you’ve ever done.” “Some of you are married or have families. If you want to do this right, you’re gonna need to go home and tell them, ‘Sorry Mom and Dad. Sorry, Honey. You’re not going to see me much for the next few years. I have to study. I have to study a lot!’” Then he said, “If I’m going to be honest with you, this is a hard road ahead. Look at the person to your left. Look to your right. One of those people is not going to be here when you graduate.”

What the actual hell! This seems a bit much. I emailed <name redacted> a mentor from my undergrad at <school redacted> who said I should start reading the Bulletin since I’m going to graduate school. She said that the guy who spoke was full of it. I guess I’m writing you for a second opinion. How bad is it going to get?

From,

<Author’s Name Redacted>

Dear New Graduate Student,

I’m going to go with your mentor on this one. The guy at your orientation strikes me as a particularly wounded soul. My recommendation is that you steer clear of him. Someone who’s going to use his 15 minutes on the mic to scare a captive audience from the very thing they signed up for...well, that doesn’t sound like someone with a lot of classroom awareness. I could be wrong, but I’m probably not. That you’re bold enough to ask for a second opinion suggests that you don’t want to jump to conclusions without ample information. That’s a good way to approach all hard decisions in and regarding graduate school. Take note of what you see. Discreetly ask more senior students. Use campus lectures and events to observe potential professors. See if they might be a good fit or if you have all the more reason to stay away from them. This will help you move through graduate school with a sense of direction.

Just a second ago, I surmised that you’re asking for a second opinion meant that you had a good head on your shoulders. It also strikes me that you want what you want and don’t want to put up with anything else. Graduate school is going to be a place where you hear things and do things that, at times, won’t be all that pleasing. I’d like to tell you that these are the vegetables or medicine that make for a healthy post-grad life. Sometimes they are. Sometimes graduate school is a stuffy place built on weird traditions where stuff is done a certain way and you have to fall in line even when you don’t understand or agree. You don’t have to do these things. You also don’t have to graduate either. You put it well...the deposit has been cashed.

Maybe that’s why the person on your left left? And if they did leave, is that the worst thing in the world? If graduate school is going to make you miserable, there’s no use sticking around. My advice is that you position yourself to reflect often on what is and isn’t working for you in your program. Keep a journal. Go to therapy. Talking to your peers. Keep meeting with your undergrad mentor and find a mentor you can trust on campus. These second, third, fourth and so on—opinions may hold the key to distinguishing between a bad day and a bad life choice.

Let’s talk about the good stuff. Your program has some cool stuff behind the glass of experience. You can look but you can’t touch until you pay your dues. That’s a tough beat. It’s not the end of the world though. Use these as motivation for determining how you use those first years wisely. What can you do now to prepare for those experiences when their time has come? Learn more about them from people who are engaged in those activities. Get in touch with the people responsible for these activities. Convey your interest and ask what you can do now to learn more and to ensure you are prepared when the glass is lifted. These are prime ways to build your professional network and to keep graduate school from being a lonely maze.

Speaking of loneliness, let’s do a minute on this family and friends clause. There’s a lot going on in that guy’s statement at orientation—some of which is likely his own cry for help. Don’t dismiss it but take it for what it is. To me it’s a façade for two truths and a lie.

Truth #1 is that you are going to have to study a lot. The question is why. A lot of people presume that graduate school is by definition more difficult than undergraduate education and thus requires more study time. It’s a valid conclusion but it may be incorrect on account of faulty premises. Graduate courses of study are generally more focused than the swath of courses one takes in baccalaureate education. Graduate students benefit from the wisdom of having completed undergraduate education. And some undergraduate programs are just plain hard. Even were all these the case for you, you should study more in graduate school because the stakes are higher. You presumably care more about the subject so your investment should match. Even if you decide to go in a different
direction, the increased effort makes your discernment that much clearer.

Truth #2 is that you should probably have a conversation with your family and friends. Graduate school is a new variable in the equation that is a relationship. You’ll be studying more so that you can make the most of graduate school, so what does that mean for everyone else you care about? Where I disagree with the guy at orientation is the idea that you’ll have to cut them out of your life. That’s the lie. You just need to be clear about the time and energy required to keep the main things the main things. I am well aware that time is finite. But consider this: studying more doesn’t necessarily mean study longer. Double down on learning how to study more efficiently. What tips do your professors have for you? Are there resources on campus for you to use. Learn a system like Cornell Notes or mind-mapping to help you read actively. Commit to mastering a citation manager—you’ll thank me later. And get an egg timer to let you know when time is up. Empower yourself to use your time wisely and graduate school will be what you make of it.

How’s that for a second opinion? And thanks to <name redacted> for the recommendation!

Sage D’ Vice