University of California (Northern)

*Third years and beyond*

Lessons learned, from grad students, for grad students

Everyone has vastly different experiences and expectations for grad school, even from one year to the next. Here, grad students at the University of California, Davis and University of California, Berkeley were asked to briefly share their current reflections so fellow students can learn from their mistakes, commiserate with their struggles, and celebrate our collective resilience. We are all unique, but we are never isolated.

*Get in touch, build your network!* Reach out to or follow the students below through the emails or handles they provided!

*Interested in getting your department, school, or graduate group involved?*

Email Mary at gradstudentperspectives@gmail.com
“I have run into many people who said 3rd year was their ‘most depressing’ year of grad school, and I’ve certainly felt the same is true for me (possibly a self-fulfilling prophecy). At any rate, I was totally exhausted after quals, and found third year was the time where both the emotional and intellectual demands of grad school really kicked up a notch. To any new grad student, my advice is: follow the science! If you stay in this field you will 100% encounter crummy PIs, funding issues, unreliable collaborators, and unfortunate accidents no matter how hard you try to avoid them. The only solid thing you will always be able to count on is the science. Read papers you love and let them inspire you. Practice designing your own experiments. Trust your instincts, set boundaries, and don’t be afraid to defend your ideas. When you are doing science you care about, all the other challenges become a lot more manageable.”

-Virginia

Joint Genome Institute Plant Functional Genomics Group
Plant and Microbial Biology Dept., UC Berkeley
Research Area: Genomics and evolution of polyploid plants

“As all PhD students, I love learning and research. Yet, I am slow at developing ideas, understanding implication, and writing. Further, I do not have the intense passion that allows me to spend every waking moment on my thesis. This year I have realized that my advisor will always want me to be a top student, yet my past attempts to fulfill these expectations had left
me depressed and following research plans that were no longer exciting as they felt unachievable. *I have become a happier individual and a more motivated and productive student through re-setting my standards and accepting that I am a thoroughly below average student* (that I will publish less, that I will win fewer fellowships, that I won't have time to do all of the side projects or analyses that my peers do) - *and there is nothing wrong with that! I will still have a PhD.*”

-C

Evolution and Ecology, UC Davis

“The 3rd year was what I was really expecting when I imagined what a PhD program would be like; with a thorough proposal in hand and the resources ready it was finally time to jump headfirst into research! *However, there have been countless hiccups, and projects that I wanted to get off the ground this past summer are still in the process of being prepared. This year has taught me to be patient, to find successes in my work (however small), and not to compare myself to the standards of others.* Science is so variable, it's a waste of energy trying to see how you stack up! And even though I was told this almost obvious fact countless times before, I finally understand what it means when people say a PhD is a marathon and not a sprint. Surround yourself with a supportive community and keep taking it one step at a time!”

-Dhruv Patel

Niyogi Lab

Plant and Microbial Biology, UC Berkeley

Research Area: Improving high light tolerance and photosynthetic efficiency in crops

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“What I did expect about this year: preparing for my QE would be hard. **What I have not expected about this year: post-QE is perhaps even harder.** It turns out that when you build habits for 3 months prepping for the QE, it feels great to study all the time and there's a strong sense of purpose. But afterwards, I've been surprised by how tough it is to rewire myself to have a normal life again. I wish I had known to set lower academic and personal expectations for myself for after my QE. **The most helpful thing has been to decide that "health and happiness" deserve to be real goals**, equal with my academic ones, and that they're worth the time and the energy.”

-Katherine Corn
Evolution and Ecology, UC Davis
Research Area: Macroevolution and biomechanics in fish
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**FOURTH YEARS**

“As a 4th year, I feel like the imposter syndrome has set in a lot more heavily than in previous years. I'm a "senior grad student" now, so I feel like I should've done a lot more to get to this point. However, something I've learned is that everyone’s graduate experience is different. We all experience failures and setbacks, and we all go through the post-quals slump (yes, that's a thing.) Something I didn't expect about this year is **the looming realization that I only have a short amount of time left here**, and I need to prioritize what experiments I want to do!”

-Tuesday Simmons
“What has surprised me about my fourth year of grad school is how much I know. Grad school has been all about learning what I don't know. Now that I'm a ways in, I finally feel like I'm an expert in my project and competent in the field. This time is like another world from my first and second years that were dominated by coursework and learning techniques. My advice to past me: Get organized, and keep chugging!”

-Katie Murphy
Plant Biology, UC Davis
Research Area: Diterpenoid biosynthesis and the maize stress response
Twitter: @GMOhmygod

FIFTH YEARS AND BEYOND

“This year has been incredibly unstructured compared to the previous stages of my degree. I was lucky enough to have funding that allowed me to wind down my outside obligations and focus in on the dissertation and career development. So I haven't been TAing, teaching, working in the lab, or mentoring undergraduates for a few months. All of my time and energy has been committed to data analysis, writing, editing, and applying to jobs. I'd highly recommend this approach if you can find funding to keep you going through the last quarter or two of your dissertation! I have a hard time focusing on writing if I have other tasks available to distract me; it has to be my top priority. I'm surprised by how open-ended this period is, in terms of how someone finishes their research and finishes writing the dissertation. There are very few defined guidelines or expectations, so it's hard to know when to call something complete. The best advice I can give is to
impose your own structure; set a writing schedule, with word or page minimums every day, and stick to it! Add in whatever incentives it takes to make that work for you. And optimize your work; find the best location, time of day, caffeine level... it all helps. I'm about where I expected to be, but it's hard to say until I actually finish the writing!"

-Nikki Soltis
Plant Sciences Dept., UC Davis
Research Area: Quantitative genetics of a generalist plant disease (Botrytis cinerea)
Twitter: @nic0lise

“I'm currently in my 6th year, and am not at all where I expected to be when I started grad school. My lab has changed, my research has changed, and my career path has changed. It's really important to realize that what you do today may not be what you're doing tomorrow and that that's okay! You will get through it. This year in particular I established some really good habits that I wish I'd established sooner. I write at least half an hour every day, something I suggest to every graduate student I talk to - ALWAYS be writing! This can be writing for a paper or thesis, yes, but could also be for a grant, a scientific blog post, a recap of a meeting, or just a brain dump. Just get into the habit of daily writing. Grad school is a marathon, not a sprint, so make sure you're proactive about your self care and sleep hygiene. I also started meditating regularly in the last year, which has done wonders for my motivation and focus, and I track my time, which helps me be realistic about my daily objectives and improves my time management. A last practice I've adopted in the last year that has been helpful is, when I'm about to switch away from a certain task, jotting down my current train of thought/where I plan to go next. This way,
when I come back to that task in an hour, day, week...I have some guidance on where to start back.”

-Rayne Logsdon
Animal Behavior Graduate Group, UC Davis
Patricelli Lab
Research Area: Behavioral Ecology
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POST DOCS

“At this point - as a postdoc - I should have known that everything in research takes longer than expected. But it seems I forgot that all important lesson once again. If I could give myself from a year ago advice, I’d reinforce that researching tough topics is, well, tough, and that doing a good job takes time. But it’s so much better to do it right than to do it quickly.”

-Becky Mackelprang
Lemaux Lab
Plant and Microbial Biology, UC Berkeley
Research Area: Genome editing in agriculture
Twitter: @bмackelprang