First and Second Years

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

FIRST YEARS

“As a first year, there is a lot of change and things to get used to with the transition into graduate school, especially knowing I'll be staying here for around 5 years. It took a lot of adjusting to get used to a class style that engaged you beyond memorization and asked you to reach beyond what is stated in
Some of the best advice I got was that you aren’t expected to do anything revolutionary in your first year and to make sure you have a life outside of science. There's always this frustrating feeling that you have so much more to learn to get up to the level of those around you and knowing you're here to get to that level, not because you're expected to be there already helps. It also helps to have interests and comforts outside of the lab and classroom. I’ve grown and learned a lot since starting my PhD and it hasn't all been in the lab.”

-Lorenzo Washington
Plant and Microbial Biology, UC Berkeley
Research Area: Plant and microbial interactions
lorenzo_w@berkeley.edu
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“My name is Elli, and I love plants and math - so I'm a first year plant biology PhD student at UC Davis! I'm currently rotating through four labs for about a month each. At the end of rotations, I'll pick one lab to join. Just like grad school interviews, rotations have exposed me to some brilliant scientists, methods, and ideas; there's a difficult decision to make in my near future. The rotation process
has been surprising in good ways and has taught me a few things about my own lab preferences. *I'd advise looking at rotations as an opportunity to spend time doing the most interesting research on your campus.* If you're in the process of grad school application now, *I'd suggest coming up with a mental list of labs where you'd want to spend five weeks, and let your excitement about those lists inform your decision.*”

- Elli Cryan  
Plant Biology Graduate Group, UC Davis  
Research Area: Quantitative Plant Biology  
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“If you have a research topic that your advisor has set up for you (or you are adding to another's project), the best way to find your own direction is to read current publications. Sounds obvious, but *it can be very easy to become completely engrossed in your research without doing outside reading* (e.g. if you are doing endless data collection without any prior thought to what the outcome of this data could be). Also learning to code in R helps with data analysis and data visualization. There are plenty of online resources to help you with that and *the earlier you learn, the earlier you have more control over your project* (mostly biology related advice).”

-Guy  
Plant Pathology Department, UC Davis  
Research Area: Characterizing Fungicide Resistance  
Twitter: @_GnRobinson
“Most of my expectations were spot on: coursework, rotations, available resources, etc. But I was not expecting my cohort to have such diverse educational backgrounds, which is a great thing. We all bring very different experiences to classes and labs, and I find that encouraging. It relieves the pressure to fit in some box of "plant biology graduate student" and helps combat imposter syndrome. **We’re all here to learn totally new skills and concepts, so don’t for a second freak out because you’ve never done PCR or bioinformatics or learned plant morphology, or whatever.** In the same token, take some risks with rotations; don’t let your lack of skills in one particular field stop you from rotating in a lab that really interests you. I did, and may have sacrificed my opportunity to join a project I’m really excited about because every skill required is unfamiliar. I came here to learn new things yet let my fear of not knowing something hold me back, which is just silly.”

-Mary Madera  
Plant Biology Graduate Group, UC Davis  
Research Area: Plant Genetics and Secondary Metabolism  
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“I was a nervous wreck when I was starting my lab rotations at the beginning of my first quarter. I had to go from not touching a pipette in my last year and a half of research to pretending to be functional in a molecular biology lab on day one. Making matters worse, my first rotation was the lab I wanted to join the most. I had convinced myself that I needed to put on a good show to make myself look like I was worth mentoring. Sadly, there was no good show; my rustiness at the bench couldn’t have been more clear…and that was okay.

I learned from my mistakes, worked hard, stayed active, and connected with the lab along the way. *I screwed up a lot and still managed to leave a good impression on the lab—a feat I would have thought impossible in the time before that rotation.*

Coming into graduate school, many people will tell you not to fret about the skills that you don’t have, but rather to enter with a mindset for learning and change. If I could go back and tell myself one thing before starting my graduate program, I would have told myself to heed their words. *My first rotation professor put it brilliantly: “We’re not concerned so much about hard lab skills. We can teach those. It’s much harder to teach work ethic, passion, and persistence.”*

-Cody Bekkering
Plant Biology Graduate Group, UC Davis
Research Area: Agricultural Biotechnology

**SECOND YEARS**

“It's really easy to over commit in grad school. Everything sounds exciting and like a really good opportunity to learn
something important, make valuable connections, etc. You can drive yourself absolutely crazy trying to make it to everything and do everything. You have to remember that you're not less of a person or a worse student for not showing up to an academic (or social) event. I'm not saying don't go to things, or don't go to things that are outside of your discipline, but remember that sometimes by doing everything and trying to learn everything, you stretch yourself so thin that you can't learn anything! I guess what I'm saying is that it's important to remember that you're a whole human in grad school and that you can (and should) advocate for and take care of yourself!"

-E

Plant Sciences Dept, UC Davis
Research Area: Coffee Plant Nutrient Management

“Your first year of grad school is all about getting a handle on the process and acclimating to academia. In my second year, I knew I would need to do more but I didn't expect to have to double my productivity. Coursework becomes less important and producing research becomes the focus. While not taking classes with my cohort-mates, social relationships have waned. Setting priorities and
**self-management have become so important.** I admire my labmates who consistently encourage and model work-life balance. I try to take direction from them.”

**-Lindsey**
Psychology Department, UC Davis
Research Area: Memory development in children
Twitter: @Linz_Mooney

“One thing I wish I had known sooner is to ask a lot of questions. **There is so much that I don’t know, but there are people around who do know.** There are many times I was struggling with something in lab, and just tried to work harder and push through. But I now realize that instead I should have asked someone who knows what they are doing for help or advice. Simply asking someone would have saved me a good deal of time and effort that could have been better spent elsewhere. **In asking, you only risk a bit of embarrassment, but the potential benefits are huge.”**

**-Alex C.**
Plant Biology, UC Davis
Research Area: Crop plant biochemistry