Why I Created Graduate Perspectives
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Check it out here: http://bit.ly/PhDPerspectives

We were four months into our graduate program, on lab rotation 3 out of 4. Of the 13 people in my cohort, about 7 had found labs that they would be joining for their remaining 4-6 years of graduate school. This means they (1) found labs, not only with open positions, but (2) with professors they wanted to work with, (3) projects that suited their interests, and most importantly perhaps,(4) funding (or a plan to get it) in order to allow them to join the lab. They’d checked all 4 elusive boxes in just two and half rotations.

For the rest of us, we had about 6 weeks to check at least 2 of those boxes and it horrendously felt as though the 6 of us were vying for just two positions. Most of us had enjoyed our rotations and thought they went well. We were constantly wondering aloud “How did we get ourselves into this position? What could we have done differently?”

I took 3 years off of school to work in a research lab full time before going to grad school. I used that time to interact with and learn from grad students at all levels, to figure out how I thought the system worked, to get to know how faculty tended to function, and how to best approach them and broach the awkward subject of funding. I felt very prepared when I set foot on campus the first day of grad school. So, how did I end up as a labless ball of stress in the middle of February?

It was easy, too easy, for me to point to the flaws of my actions, and recognize that many things in a research setting like grad school just aren’t in your control. But, these were things that I already knew. I knew it from personal experience, from hearing it from older grad student peers, and from friendly faculty, and yet, here I was. I was surrounded by my own stress, and the immense stress of my housemates and our cohortmates, when it clicked.

Mentors have a way, because memory has a way, of glossing over difficult details after the fact. It wasn’t that older students gave us bad advice, or overly placated us by consistently saying “It’ll all work out, you’ll all join labs, everyone always does.” Because that’s true, it does always work out. But good luck getting several overly stressed, imposter-syndrome-ridden first years to ignore their recent missteps and just trust that they don’t need to take drastic and
immediate action to overly impress their labs of interest. Nothing an older, established student can say will ease that kind of panic.

As graduate students we are inundated with first campus orientations, college orientations, program orientations, and lab orientations. Next, we sit through seminars, meetings, workshops, classes, and mentor programs. Finally, we are sent email upon email of resources from Deans, administrators, faculty, and student organizations. I love and support the thorough dissemination of these resources, I really do. These are necessary resources to have access to. But it isn’t always enough. This information isn’t always in a form that is immediately relevant, applicable, or specific enough to help students.

I realized that the best resources were the people who had JUST gone through the same thing. People like us who had suddenly realized their mistakes, and noted how the advice they were given had technically advised against those mistakes but had not explicitly done so. Furthermore, I was sure that the older students giving that advice also needed advice for their current struggles. If they are the mentors and the oldest in the graduate group, who do they ask?

So I pitched an idea to my new and old outreach groups, asking for reflections and advice pertaining only to the last 6 months of their grad school journey. The goal was to create a place where struggling third years could find advice on how to research after you pass your qualifying exam and suddenly no longer need to study all day, every day. Where currently rotating students could get a fresher idea of the nitty gritty details about pursuing labs that mentors forget to tell you. Where fifth years could read about the strategies other fifth years use to be as optimally productive as possible and healthy while wrapping up a PhD.

And so Graduate Perspectives was born. It is young and ever changing, but I hope that it grows into a larger community and database where graduate students can look for moral support, study strategies, and immediately relevant advice from peers in the same stage of graduate school as they are. As an ulterior motive, I also hope that those who participate take the 10 minutes to submit their advice as a time to reflect on everything they’ve done, or not done, or struggled through, in the last 6 months. Yes, grad school is a marathon, but not one that we each need to run in isolation.

Keep an eye out for the new Perspectives Series covering academic stories of injury, illness, and perseverance! If you’d like to share your recent advice and reflections, email me! gradstudentperspectives@gmail.com