

Student Notebook: Avoiding the 'Busy Trap' in Graduate School

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One of the first things I noticed when I started my PhD — and something that you’ve surely noticed by now if you’re also a graduate student — is that people in academia tend to be really busy. It didn’t exactly come as a surprise; constant busyness seemed a logical and necessary response to the high demands of academic life. But as I stumbled through my first year in graduate school, I came to understand, in a frustrating, firsthand way, that not all kinds of “busy” are created equal.

Much of my time throughout that first year was spent aimlessly toiling away at tasks that either didn’t benefit my development as a scholar or disrupted my work–life balance in a way that made me anxious and irritable. I took to these tasks not because I thoughtfully chose them, but because of an all-consuming, mindless urge to occupy myself with something — anything — that might seem productive. Although this fault of mine was due in large part to my unrefined planning and organization skills, it also stemmed from my desire to avoid the guilt I felt when I wasn’t wrapped up in whatever I had decided to call “work” that day.

Though I didn’t realize it then, this kind of work guilt is [common](#) throughout the professional world, and academics may be especially [prone](#) to it. Academia is a field with flexible hours and a blurry divide between work and recreation, and this can spawn anxiety — as well as [heated debates](#) — about what constitutes a job well done. And what better way to deal with anxiety than to burn time with busywork?

In his 2012 [essay](#) “The Busy Trap,” Tim Kreider wrote that “busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day.” This is not to say that the work we do as graduate students is trivial or meaningless, or that being booked all day is a sure sign that we’re wasting time and effort. Rather, the point is that by resisting the urge to be busy for the sake of busyness, we force ourselves to step back and ask ourselves what we’re really trying to accomplish with our time and how best to accomplish it. Sometimes our work truly demands lots of busyness. But treating busyness as our default state — whether out of ambition or anxiety or a desire to one-up colleagues — may just gray our hair without adding much to our CVs.

At this point, I’d like to be able to return to my own academic character arc and tell you how I’ve completed my metamorphosis from dithering novice to ruthlessly efficient scholar. But of course that’s not true. What I can say is that I’m now a little more resistant to the busy trap than I was before, and I’m working on solidifying a few habits that I think fellow graduate students may find helpful.

Use task-management software

This might seem obvious to many readers. But, if you, like many people seeking an advanced degree, were able to glide through high school and college without ever feeling a serious need to hone your time-management skills, adjusting to the somewhat vague milestones and relative lack of emphasis on grades

in graduate school may have been difficult.

One of the most effective ways to help yourself critically assess how you spend your time is to carefully organize everything you have to do, from long-term, big-picture goals to everyday minutiae. Task-management software serves that exact purpose. As Samantha Dubrow and David M. Wallace previously [pointed out](#) in the Student Notebook, trying to keep everything organized in your memory is not a good use of your cognitive resources. Use a program like [Todoist](#) or [OmniFocus](#) to keep yourself on track.

Be able to say no

At the start of graduate school, you might feel like you ought to latch on to every project thrown your way. After all, you want to show your colleagues that you're eager and capable — and that you're in graduate school for a reason. But there is a limit to what you can do before you burn yourself out or stretch yourself too thin. It's wise to spend some time finding your limit, but once you do, you'll find it necessary to be able to respectfully yet firmly refuse an opportunity.

As Helen Kara pointed out in an [article](#) for the *Times Higher Education*, habitual overcommitment is a pervasive issue in academia. It's easy to underestimate the heft of your current obligations and overestimate what you're capable of accomplishing in a given period of time. Strategically use a polite “no” as a filter for tasks that you don't think will be worthwhile.

And if you think your refusal to take on that project or to stay a few more hours on a Friday night might seem inappropriate, don't fret too much. Workplace [research](#) suggests that we tend to think we're being more assertive than we actually are. Behavior that you think is uncooperative or confrontational may be, in the eyes of your colleagues, completely reasonable.

Delegate

Entrusting other people with certain tasks is an essential part of research and a great way to lighten the demands on your own time, but it isn't always a straightforward endeavor. If you're lucky enough to have someone in your lab who is willing to help you with your work, whether they're a high-school-student volunteer or a postdoc, you owe it to them to learn how to effectively manage their time and effort.

Delegating is a skill, and it can be especially tricky to implement in academia because not all research positions are well-defined. For example, sometimes labs have paid technicians who are assigned a specific list of responsibilities. But just as often, there's an amorphous blob of stuff to do and a diverse group of people available to do it. To find the right match between people and tasks, it's helpful to talk with your colleagues so you can learn about their skills and experience and establish clear goals and expectations.

Don't use busyness as a badge of honor

My final suggestion for avoiding the busy trap in graduate school has less to do with specific actions than with attitude. One common reaction to the rigid hierarchies of academia is to equate busyness with

success and use the former as a way to measure oneself up against peers. It's an impulse I've unwittingly acted on for years — and still occasionally have difficulty avoiding — and it has the potential to be toxic.

There's a piece of advice that's been floating around Twitter that goes something like this: "In academia, everyone is smart. Distinguish yourself by being kind." To the first sentence I would add that everyone is smart and has a lot to do. Bragging or complaining about busyness can create a tense workplace culture that reinforces the [wrong kinds](#) of behaviors and attitudes. Instead of holding ourselves and others to a certain standard of busyness, it may be better to focus on concrete goals, such as submitting that manuscript, learning that new technique, or spending a certain amount of hours each week brainstorming with colleagues.

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