

Student Notebook: A Cohort Conundrum

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When I accepted my admission offer to graduate school, I was horrified to discover that two other students had also accepted offers of admission to the same research lab. It was not wholly surprising; the principal investigator (PI) I had interviewed with was relatively new to the program and had no graduate students. Still, I cringed at the thought of starting graduate school—an already hypercompetitive environment—at the same time as two other bright young scholars. We would all be competing for the same resources, vying for the same accolades, and, with any luck, entering the job market at the same time. When I told a friend already in graduate school about my incoming cohort, her comment was foreboding: “Tough luck, kid.”

Now, toward the end of my first year, I can say with quite a bit of certainty that “tough luck” it was not. In fact, my lab mates have become two of my most trusted confidants. However, it’s easy to see how things could have gone differently. Many faculty and graduate students can speak of firsthand experiences with intra-lab competition: stories of PIs pitting peers against one another and of lab mates reluctant to share materials for fear of being “scooped.” I feel fortunate that my experience did not become another cautionary tale. Yet it was not happenstance that led to my fortunate situation; it was a learning curve. Here are four of the most important lessons I learned.

Acknowledge and accept that competition exists

The first step in overcoming any great obstacle is acknowledging that it exists and accepting what you cannot change. Competition is a natural part of graduate school and academia in general. The truth is that there are a finite number of grants, awards, and research positions and a larger number of people vying for them. And the odds become worse as you move up the academic ladder—ask any graduate student currently on the job market.

Trying to ignore competition is like trying to suppress the thought of white bears (Wegner et al., 1987). Acknowledging that it exists is the key to removing its power. I remember the moment my lab mates and I discussed how we would all be applying for the National Science Foundation (NSF) doctoral fellowship this coming year. Was I filled with existential dread knowing I would be competing against my two friends for a national fellowship? Absolutely. Instead of ruminating on that dread, however, my lab mates and I acknowledged the awkwardness, openly discussed our NSF proposal ideas, and offered to give each other feedback. The relief I felt after this conversation minimized the dread. If I learned anything from Scooby Doo, it is this: The monster is always less scary without the mask.

Support and celebrate each other

It is hard to celebrate the success of others in academia when it often feels like a zero-sum arena, where a win for others means a loss for you. Still, a lonely road awaits those who spend their time agonizing over what others have accomplished. Plus, research shows that celebrating the success of others increases the celebrator's happiness (Conoley et al., 2015), which in turn increases the discloser's happiness (Gable et al., 2004). And we all know the multitude of benefits that result from increased happiness—including better health, higher income, and greater success at work (Diener & Tay, 2017). Further, when you finally secure that coveted grant (or fellowship, or faculty position), you'll be thrilled to have others celebrating your success in return.

And although it might be hard to see the forest for the trees, a success for one can be a success for all. The benefit of having peers who've achieved greatness is that you get to learn from their success. Many of the achievements I have accomplished in my (admittedly short) academic career were made possible by the mentorship of those who had accomplished those goals before me. I doubt I'm the only for whom this is true.

Friendship is vital

I cannot stress enough how important it is to become friends with your lab mates. The summer before graduate school, my lab mates and I had already formed a group chat and had virtual meetups. By the time school started, we were the best of friends. Very few people outside of academia can understand the pressures of graduate school: the self-doubt, the rejection, the uncertainty of it all—it is unlike any other experience. Throughout the process, you will want others by your side who understand that struggle. And that zero-sum arena—it will feel a lot less finite with someone trusted by your side.

It may seem like an impossible notion—the idea that you can simultaneously be disappointed in not reaching your goals and happy that another person has. However, it is possible and made easier when that other person is your friend. After all, who doesn't want a friend to achieve their goals? Who isn't filled with a sense of pride when someone they respect triumphs? My lab mate and I applied for the

same grant this year, and I can say this next sentence without lying: I truly hope she wins it.

Choose a PI who does not promote competition

A recent meta-analysis published by Sverdlik and colleagues (2018) demonstrated that advisors were critical to the completion, achievement, and well-being of doctoral students in graduate school. The same could be said for intra-lab competition. The PI sets the lab's tone. Therefore, it is important to choose a PI who understands the value of an open and collaborative environment. If you are applying to graduate school, make sure to reach out to current students in the program. They may not answer specifically—there is, sadly, a lot left unspoken in academia—but asking concrete questions can help. For example, “Is it common for graduate students to collaborate?” or “Do students socialize outside the lab?” Granted, you can't always know before starting graduate school if your advisor is the type to promote unhealthy competition. But you don't have to participate in that competition. Run your own race. Five years is a long time to chase other people's coattails.

Conclusion

It's important to note that competition is not always bad. No doubt many of the world's greatest ideas and innovations were driven by a healthy sense of competition. It can push us to work harder, learn new skills, and achieve personal bests. But competition driven by the assumption that there is a finite amount of success or achievement available in the world is not healthy (Ró?ycka-Tran et al., 2019) and is particularly unsettling when it pits lab mates against one another. You will, no doubt, leave your graduate institution with a few not-so-fond memories. My hope for you is that those memories have more to do with one or two failed experiments and less to do with insecurities about the success of others.

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