

Emerging Identities of Graduate Students

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Many students find the transition from undergraduate to graduate education a difficult one. After all, it might be the first time individuals live away from campus and their childhood homes, cook for themselves, do their own taxes, and figure out how to get their own health insurance. It's a time associated with assuming adult responsibilities and independence as well as realizing one's true potential. In addition, success in graduate school is perceived as reflecting a student's future career trajectory. Given the many tasks that require our cognitive attention and eventual proficiency, the anxiety that arises during this time is to be expected.

Amidst juggling the different responsibilities and demands that graduate school entails, students also go through the process of identity confrontation and continuity (Nimbalkar, 2011). We are challenged to question our preconceptions and acquire new perspectives. One of the hallmarks of graduate education is critical thinking, which facilitates the challenging of one's assumptions, biases, and prejudices. It involves recognizing the different group and cultural identities with which one associates and being able to acknowledge and accept them.

Identity development is an ever-evolving process (Sokol, 2009). Graduate students display considerable insight and thoughtfulness. Embarking on an academic journey that is known to be difficult reflects courage, determination, and perseverance. As we start our education and assimilate more information about ourselves and our environment, we increasingly question ourselves; as we do so, we grow.

The salience of academics, work, and social and family life varies for different individuals at different points in their school lives. Students might endure several stages of confusion and crises. The ultimate hope is that we arrive at a point of stability, equilibrium, and harmony with self, as well as a unique solidification of one's identity. While securing a good GPA, gaining adequate research experience, and networking are graduate-school priorities, other factors are equally important. There are different components to this unique graduate-school identity, and they are important to highlight and consider.

Self-Reflection

It is safe to assume that going through the rigorous process of graduate school entails some amount of self-reflection. After finishing the intense competitive process of applying to and interviewing for positions, receiving a letter of acceptance, and starting a program, school can soon get overwhelming. It is only natural to get disillusioned and disheartened when we perceive the expectations to exceed our resources or abilities. Questioning life decisions and choices is also natural and common. However, examining stress and anxiety may help students address their worries. How well we understand ourselves is crucial in determining how well we cope. Some students may find self-reflection to be fairly organic; others might develop this practice over time. Understanding oneself better allows for a keen awareness of choices and options. Self-reflection isn't a prerequisite to having a good learning experience, but it is probably one of the most beneficial qualities to develop during graduate school.

Cultural Sensitivity

Developing a culturally sensitive and humble approach is another significant part of being a well-rounded student. Individuals differ in their levels of acculturation and identity integration. Students are sometimes confronted with culturally complex situations and contexts with which they have no prior experience. Discussions around race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, among many other multicultural aspects, can be new and challenging. Navigating these uncomfortable and sometimes intense emotional experiences can lead us toward a true appreciation of the cultural diversity and richness around us.

Professionalism

A student's conduct in graduate school is often expected to be similar to that of a junior colleague; at times, it might feel like being under a spotlight. We might also experience culturally incongruent practices. For example, it is often considered standard practice to refer to professors by their first names in the United States. This is unfamiliar to students from different cultural backgrounds. Professionalism often means understanding and clarifying these expectations. In addition, graduate school can be a time when students learn the delicate practice of writing and expressing important information (including disagreement) over emails. Professionalism extends beyond the classroom and applies to the interactions we have with our peers. It includes learning about the appropriate boundaries that are preferred by the various people around us. Most importantly, it is learning how to be ourselves and simultaneously present ourselves in a respectful and approachable way.

Advocacy

While certainly not a requirement of most programs, advocacy is becoming popular within psychological science and other disciplines. The realization that voicing opinions can empower a cause is not unique to graduate students. However, addressing societal issues and discrimination and engaging with historically marginalized groups calls for a deep understanding of the issues we face nationally and globally. Advocating for what we believe in requires well-informed ideas and beliefs as a starting point. We begin learning to make informed choices at a young age, but graduate school can help us discover what we feel most strongly about.

The Art of Saying No

With the constant pressure to keep achieving more and more, we sometimes forget that we have the power to say no. It might be difficult to decline or pass over lucrative opportunities for the fear of missing out, but determining what we can and cannot do is an important skill to develop. Not only does it help in prioritizing and balancing schoolwork, it also helps us maintain work-life balance and care for our physical and mental health.

Graduate school enables us to flourish and discover more about ourselves as people and as students. In Maslow's terms (Maslow, 1968), it sets us on a route of self-actualization. We realize what we are capable of and might even identify ourselves as agents of change. It is important to be aware of these different factors and realize that, although overwhelming at times, graduate school is most certainly an enriching experience that molds us significantly and allows us to make a difference at what we chose to

do.

References

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