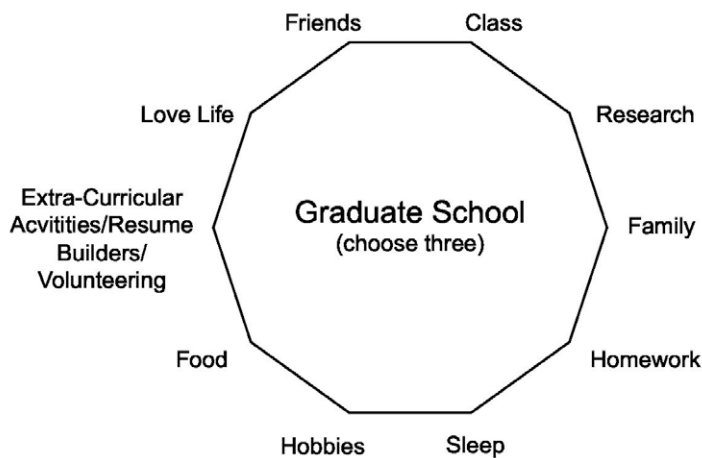


Creating Balance in Graduate School: The Ultimate Juggling Act

by Liz Gillispie

If you haven't come across it already in your program, you are bound to see the "Choose Two: Sleep, Social Life, or Good Grades" triangle depicting how students have to approach surviving graduate school. I thought the triangle was funny when I first saw it as a master's student but soon realized it was more true than I thought. After my typical work hours, I would ask myself, "Do I work on more research or go exercise?" or "Should I study longer or actually go have a dinner that's not just a protein bar?" I discovered that the real pressures of graduate school make the triangle feel more like a decagon, where I had to choose three from the following:



Yet, even the decagon perpetuates a common misconception of how students should approach graduate school. While we may have to focus on research more intensely than other aspects of our life, I believe it doesn't have to be as extreme as "choose three." I think we can practice balance while maintaining our sanity, but I learned this the hard way. While my master's project was rewarding in many ways, I later realized that I had overlooked opportunities to get involved, volunteer, and explore outreach activities of interest. I also found that I had neglected personal relationships with friends and family and sacrificed my physical health. I can probably speak for most graduate students when I say that academic obligations often lead us to neglect other very important aspects of our lives and vice versa, which leaves us feeling guiltier and more stressed.

Now that I've started a Ph.D. program, I am using what I've learned from my master's experience to better balance life and work: Namely, taking advantage of the many unique opportunities that graduate school affords. Not only

am I working on an innovative multi-scale soil hydrogeochemical research project, but I've also opened myself up to balancing other things like hot yoga, traveling to visit my family at least once a month, running my first marathon, attending weekly Sunday service, developing workshops for graduate students, and expanding my knowledge in the field of soil forensics. The flexibility of research allows me to work hard and efficiently during my most productive hours so that I can make time for these other activities.

I think the real key to obtaining and maintaining a balance in graduate school is through a good working relationship with your adviser. My adviser challenges me to push the limits of my research but also to explore areas of personal interest that might help me grow, academically or otherwise. Initially, it was tough to overcome the guilt and difficulty of introducing new activities to my life of research, but with practice, I realized I could handle the balance of outside interests while pushing forward with my research. I like to make sure my adviser is aware of what I'm involved with, and in return, he keeps me accountable for how much I can really do so as not to let my research slip. By creating this balance during my graduate program, I feel happier, have stronger personal relationships, and am thriving academically.



Above: Liz finds balance between working a soils booth in DC, research in Cambodia, and running a 200 mile relay race with her adviser, Dr. Matt Polizzotto, and fellow professors and graduate students.

Ways to Create Balance

1. Refresh your mind and body

Classes and research take a lot of brainpower and can drain you mentally and physically. Refresh your mind by picking up a fun book or trying meditation classes. Take the time to refresh your body as well. If that Results section you are writing hasn't improved in the few hours you have been staring at it, take a break and go for a walk or work out. Fueling your body can be just as nourishing as fueling your mind, and ideas may come to you during this time too!

2. Create multiple friend groups

Although many of us devote a significant amount of time on our research, we are much more than the projects we work on. Having a diverse group of friends can help serve as a reminder of that. In addition, friends that are not also colleagues can sometimes offer new perspectives about your work or distract you from the stress of research.

3. Step out of your academic comfort zone

As graduate students, we become so focused on the end product that we can lose sight of the opportunities our work presents us along the way. Be open to trying activities that would normally be outside your comfort zone, such as teaching a local middle school class, advocating for your research to your elected officials, or running for a graduate student leadership position. You may find that one of these activities was just what you needed to find your niche!



4. Go after what you are passionate about

If you feel passionate about a certain aspect of your research that seems impossible to explore, be persistent in trying to investigate that area. For example, I became interested in soil forensics but had no academic mentor to help me investigate whether this could be a potential career for me. Despite this challenge, the excitement never dissipated, and I tried to put myself in positions that would lead me in this direction. A year later, a local geologist is mentoring me in forensic geology and soils on a murder case, and I'm loving the experience!

5. Build academic relationships

Utilize the knowledge of those around you, especially your mentors. Experts from many different disciplines surround you and could provide collaboration, networking opportunities, or knowledge you may need now or down the road. You never know when you might need resources from someone you met at a conference. Lastly, the graduate students you work with today will be your colleagues tomorrow. Branch out and build these relationships, whether it's attending a workshop and meeting new people or working together on a committee.

Graduate school is a unique juggling act that takes time and patience. Building broad networks, friend groups, scientific interests, etc. not only balances your life, but it sets you up for the future in a way that could be otherwise limited if you only focus on your specific research. However, not all advisers are open to outside activities, so if you decide to pursue them, make sure you are keeping up with your research. Overall, I believe that through encouragement from your adviser or mentors, graduate students can find and add balance to their lives. As a pool of talented individuals, now is the time to challenge ourselves to grow

to our greatest potential in all aspects of our lives.



L. Gillispie, Polizzotto Lab, Soil Hydrogeochemistry, North Carolina State University, Raleigh

doi:10.2134/csa2015-60-5-20