

Your Ph.D. Experience Is Great Work Experience -- Part I

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You've heard it a million times: being in school isn't the "real world," and the longer you're in school, the less you know about how that "real world" functions. The laws that govern everything and everyone else, especially in the working world, haven't been applying to you. And you -- the coddled, brainy, time-wasting human being who dares to think that intellectual pursuits are worth valuable years of your life -- you are in for a loud wake-up call. Just wait and see.

Contrary to popular and judgmental opinion, however, your doctoral experience is some of the best working world experience you can get. The clearer you are about why that is the case, the more it can help you survive -- and sometimes thrive -- both in graduate school and in whatever jobs or careers come later.

The work never stops. Really. It never stops. Even after grad school.

This reality can be tough to accept, especially for those of you who are used to successfully accomplishing goals and exceeding others' expectations. But it is true, and it never changes, no matter what graduate program, profession, job, boss or colleagues you have. In addition, those of you who excel the most and have the highest expectations for yourself will consistently be gifted with increasing opportunities to work harder, do more and then tie it all up with a nice ribbon, too.

However, as many of you may already know, though you might get more stuff done before it happens, the vicious whirlpool of work will pull you in. It happens in grad school, it happens in jobs and, in both contexts, this whirlpool really can drown you, mentally, spiritually, emotionally and/or physically.

Your doctoral experience teaches you to live with this reality.

Your Ph.D. program is a perfect time to learn to live with this state of affairs, day to day and year to year. Yes, it is tremendously difficult to take yourself out of the rushing water of tasks and responsibilities. That is especially true because your work is fed by the eternally gushing springs of grant-funded principal investigators, tenure-track advisers, needy undergrads, waiting-for-your-data collaborators, overwhelmed classmates, confounded family members and dubious, even hostile, members of the public. Then, even if you can somehow handle all this, you also have that deep aquifer of your own intellectual curiosity, desires and aspirations feeding the groundwater. Like I said, that river never runs dry, and dangerous whirlpools can come out of nowhere.

"OK," I hear you saying. "But how do I get out of this madness?"

Frankly, there is no shortage of advice to guide you in this regard: time-management approaches, spiritual practices, life hacks, mental tricks, wellness guides and technological gizmos galore. What there often is a shortage of, both in the grad school world and the working world, is the necessary encouragement and recognition to take this nonwork work very seriously.

You need encouragement to commit to the challenge of exploring real solutions until you find what actually works for you. Then, when you do find solutions, you soon recognize that you need different ones. Don't let that discourage you; instead, find someone to encourage you again.

You also need some explicit recognition of how important this solution finding is to your survival, as well as to your success. Yes, it is more important than your data collection, grant applications, email correspondence and exam papers. And you can tell your professors I said so.

Later, when you are interviewing to become a mitigation specialist, neuroeconomic analyst, county commissioner,

cosmetics scientist, education director, technology commercialization associate or just a plain old professor, all this will come in very handy. It is very likely that you will be asked, explicitly or implicitly, some version of the question “How do you manage a fast-paced working environment, shifting priorities, multiple stakeholders and competing deadlines, especially when there are only 24 hours in a day?” That will be your moment to shine, rather than sigh, because you will be able to honestly and substantively answer their question.

The good news -- because doctoral experiences can be so grueling and isolating, you do end up committing yourself to finding the people, practices, encouragement and recognition you require to see you through to becoming Dr. So-and-So. To prove it, I have the data of many years of lived experience: every person I have seen finish a Ph.D. has earned their degree because they've learned to do this successfully.

Do take heart. When you're able to periodically pull yourself onto the grassy banks of the mighty river of stuff to do (even if it is only by your fingernails) and avoid drowning in those whirlpools, you'll be able to see that you've learned a transferable skill that will serve you throughout your life.