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The author argues that first-generation college students (FGS) have compounded challenges when they pursue graduate education. As a first-generation college student, he was not able to gather advice from family or his job supervisor, who had no experience with graduate school. Drawing from his experience and the existing FGS-related research, the author details practical advice for making a successful transition from college to graduate school. He concludes with a list of essential questions that prospective graduate students should ask themselves and their mentors when considering graduate study.

When First-Generation Students Go to Graduate School

Brett Lunceford

One of my graduate students recently asked me why I help them so much. The long answer involves my conception of what it means to be a professor and mentor to students. The short answer is that I have already made many mistakes that they might also make without the advice of someone who has been there.

I was the first in my family to earn a bachelor's degree, and I did not know anyone who had attended graduate school, so I applied to graduate school without really knowing the process. I decided to obtain my master's degree while working full time, so I only applied to the local university. I asked work colleagues to write recommendation letters. My boss had not attended college, so he made me write the letter with him—a process similar to the blind leading the blind. Fortunately, the school where I applied for my master's seemed to admit students who met the minimum requirements. This is not necessarily the case in doctoral programs or selective master's programs.

When I applied to doctoral programs, I made many mistakes. Because I planned to complete my master's degree in one year, my recommendation letters came from the three doctorate-holding professors I had taken that semester. This must have seemed a strange mix to the admissions committee because only one of these professors taught in the subject area for which I applied. In hindsight, my writing sample was awful and a poor choice. In my rhetoric program applications, I submitted a research proposal for an ethnographic study. I wrote one statement of purpose with

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little thought of adapting it to different programs. I had not presented research at academic conferences, nor did I know the professional organizations to which I should have belonged. I sent a résumé because I did not know what a curriculum vitae was. I obtained most information about graduate programs by finding them on the Internet and knew nothing of their reputations. Unaware that Iowa was one of my field's top programs, I applied to Iowa thinking that the program was probably not that desirable because of its location. I received advice even though I did not seek it out. My adviser suggested I apply to her doctoral alma mater, Penn State, which was the only school where I was accepted.

I provide this narrative to illustrate two points. First, just because we are dealing with graduate students or potential graduate students does not mean they understand what it means to be in the discipline or how graduate education works at other institutions. Second, when students are left to their own devices, they sometimes behave in ways that seem puzzling to those who know better—despite the internal logic of such behaviors—as they navigate a system of trial and error. Education researchers have found that FGS already have significant challenges in undergraduate education (Strayhorn, 2006; Collier and Morgan, 2008; Orbe, 2008; Merritt, 2008, 2010). These challenges are likely compounded when they pursue graduate education.

The subject of this chapter is how to best help FGS make the transition from college to graduate school. To this end, I address three different areas that build on each other: the period in which the student is considering graduate school, the process of applying to graduate school, and preparing the student for graduate school. I partially wrote this chapter to remind faculty of the processes and knowledge that we often take for granted. However, my main intention is to help students gain a clearer understanding of the process and know what questions to ask at each stage.

Contemplating Graduate School

Academic departments often have weak advising. Students are left to their own devices, armed only with a course catalogue and an online registration system. Advising should be more than helping students choose classes. Faculty should develop relationships with their advisees. Pragmatically, faculty needs to write recommendation letters regardless of whether students apply for graduate school. Second, advisers must be able to assess aptitude and desire for graduate studies. The first step to helping FGS who may go to graduate school is to know if graduate study is a likely path for them. This assessment is difficult to do without understanding the student's goals, desires, and values. Advising can come from not only the student's academic adviser, but also from another faculty mentor. For the remainder of this chapter, I will simply refer to that person as the student's mentor.

In my experience, students wishing to pursue graduate education frequently do not know if graduate study will enhance their chosen career. Some students think that they need a graduate degree when they may only need a bachelor's degree and internship/job experience. Goyette (2008) observes that the expectation that high school students will go on to attain a bachelor's degree "has, over the past twenty years, become the 'norm'" (p. 475). Consequently, many students conclude that they must pursue graduate school to stand out. However, graduate school is not always the best path. The student and mentor should thus together weigh the pros and cons of graduate school.

There are other issues mentors and students must consider in addition to the student's career and life goals. First, is the student willing to relocate to pursue a graduate degree? This will be discussed further in the next section, but there may be family considerations, such as caring for aging parents or the necessity of having a family support structure, that the student should consider.

Second, can the student handle the workload of advanced studies, especially with a teaching or research assistantship? In the humanities and social sciences, graduate students may teach two courses per semester in addition to their own studies. Science students may be part of a team that logs hundreds of laboratory hours. I was personally unprepared for the intensity of my doctoral program's workload. In fact, I thought that I had made a tremendous mistake and would fail all of my classes. I often had to read 200–300 pages per week in multiple classes each semester. In addition, my professors expected me to write at least one major research paper of conference quality for each class. Of course, there are less-rigorous programs, but even those require a significant time and energy investment. However, a student's status as a first-generation college student has less impact on his or her success than intelligence, stamina, and willingness to persevere.

Finally, the mentor should help the student understand the necessary training for the desired job. Graduate school has little benefit for some careers. In addition, some fields are saturated with highly qualified candidates and some universities have difficulty placing graduates because of inadequate training. There is also the issue of gaining appropriate training for the desired position. For example, my brother assumed he would need an MBA to practice business development, but he attended law school after discovering that most people in the field had law degrees.

Once a student has decided to pursue graduate education, the mentor can guide the student toward opportunities that will make him or her more desirable to graduate programs. For example, many universities have departmental committees that require student participation. The mentor can steer the student toward these opportunities or recommend him or her for the position. Students are often unaware of academic conferences where they can present their research. Some national and regional conferences encourage undergraduates to present in designated student sections. Of

course, this requires that faculty provide research opportunities that demonstrate that the student is not simply a student, but an active and participating member of the discipline.

Applying to Graduate School

Once a student has decided to pursue graduate school, the mentor must guide him or her through a seemingly convoluted process with early deadlines. Students are sometimes surprised when they are told that the end of their senior year is too late to begin graduate school applications. It is therefore imperative to identify students wishing to go to graduate school well before their senior year. In addition, effective mentoring helps students realize that graduate and undergraduate admissions have different requirements. Students must take the required aptitude tests, such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), before they apply. Students should ideally take the exam early so they can retake it if higher scores are necessary.

The most important aspect of mentoring a student applying to graduate school is helping him or her select potential graduate programs. The mentor and student should carefully discuss the student's research interests to determine the best graduate programs. Most undergraduates have little understanding of different programs' strengths and weaknesses. Even exceptional programs cannot be all things to all people. Although a school's reputation may be a factor in selecting an undergraduate program, students often choose a graduate program to work with a particular adviser or scholar. Many undergraduates do not initially realize that graduate education thus resembles an apprenticeship.

In my experience, when FGS want to remain in a specific geographic location, this poses unique mentoring challenges. It is often difficult to explain that the programs that will best help the student meet his or her goals may be far away from family and friends. The student may be tied to a location by a spouse's job or by family obligations, and may be reluctant to uproot the family, especially if personal identity is rooted to the location. This situation requires both sensitivity to the student's feelings and honesty. If a nearby program is unlikely to fulfill the student's goals, it does little good to encourage enrollment. The best a mentor can do in this situation is to help the student weigh sometimes conflicting interests and desires.

Once the student and mentor have identified worthwhile graduate programs, the mentor should help the student craft an appropriate statement of purpose, curriculum vitae, and writing sample. Students often think of the statement of purpose as an autobiography. I encourage students to instead think of the statement from the standpoint of faculty members who will read the statement and ask questions such as, "Would I want to work with this person?" or "Why is this person applying here?" Faculty look for clues that will help them know if the student will be a valuable and successful member of the program.

Students often underestimate the importance of recommendation letters. Faculty members develop extensive professional networks through publishing, conference attendance, friends from graduate school, and other activities. These networks can be pivotal in the application process. I know a graduate student who was admitted to an excellent doctoral program. He had solid grades and presented research at conferences, but his GRE scores were below the required threshold. In competitive programs, there would be many candidates with the first two characteristics in addition to acceptable GRE scores. Yet this student obtained letters of recommendation from faculty with connections at the desired university. In addition to writing the letters, the faculty members called their friends at the other university and discussed the student. Because graduate education closely approximates an apprenticeship, departments are more likely to take a chance on a promising candidate recommended by a trusted friend, or at least someone that they know by reputation.

Unfortunately, in many universities large lecture courses are becoming the norm, making it difficult for students to develop relationships with faculty. In such situations, the impetus often lies with the student in developing these relationships. This can be done by discussing the material with the professor during office hours and participating in class. The student might also take multiple classes with the same professor if his or her area of expertise coincides with the student's interests.

If appropriate, it may be beneficial for the student to work with the mentor in an independent study that will help the student demonstrate the ability to conduct original research. First, independent study allows the mentor to assess the student's readiness for graduate school and identify areas needing improvement. Second, because many undergraduate courses do not encourage original research, an independent study provides an opportunity to create a writing sample that will showcase the student's research interests. Third, the project could be presented at a scholarly convention, which enhances the student's curriculum vitae.

Preparing for Graduate School

When students ask me what graduate school is like, I tell them about the beginning of the television show "Kung Fu," in which a monk has to move an iron cauldron filled with burning coals from one fire to the other with his bare arms pressed against strategically placed dragons. After completing this task, he thrusts his arms into the snow to stop the burning. I explain that graduate school is similar: "It will be painful, you'll be scarred for life, and you'll never again be the same—but you'll have some bitchin' dragons on your arms to show for it."

The capacity to succeed in college seems to be related more to involvement or aspiration than to first-generation status (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Strayhorn, 2006).

It seems reasonable to concede that this is likely the case for FGS who attend graduate school. Yet there is more to graduate education than simply being able to do the work. Graduate school is doubly difficult for students lacking a passion for knowledge that will sustain them though the difficulties that inevitably arise. Therefore, the most important thing that faculty can do to prepare FGS for graduate school is to inculcate a love of the material (Espinoza-Herold and Gonzalez, 2007; Próspero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

I have seen several students leave graduate programs because they did not have a burning question that would sustain them through their coursework, thesis, or dissertation. Of course, faculty should help the students find the material engaging. This may include helping students find opportunities for presenting their research at conferences and submitting it for publication. However, to help students develop a love for the material, faculty must also *demonstrate* a love for it. Helping students enjoy the material is an essential strategy for success even when dealing with FGS who do not wish to pursue graduate education.

Another way that students can prepare for graduate school is to become more knowledgeable about their chosen research area. In graduate school the required readings are merely the beginning; it is assumed students will seek out additional readings that will help them in their research. The readings will become much more intense in graduate school, and textbooks that condense and synthesize the subject matter for the reader will largely become outdated. Students will need to become familiar with the language of their chosen field by reading original research in journal articles and scholarly books. In addition to learning content, students should develop an orientation to their chosen discipline (Lunceford, 2009).

Finally, the student should begin developing a research agenda. After all, a graduate degree is a research degree. There is no reason why the student cannot begin participating in research activities as an undergraduate, and some schools actively encourage faculty to involve undergraduate students in research. The student should discuss with the mentor opportunities to participate in a research project or the possibility of doing an independent study. In this way, the student can begin to see how his or her research agenda fits into the field's larger scholarly discourse. This is the beginning of the transition from an undergraduate mentality to that of a graduate student where one becomes not only a consumer of knowledge, but also a producer.

Conclusion

Because more students in general are pursuing graduate studies, it is therefore likely that many FGS will also become graduate students. The issues confronting them as undergraduates—integration, employment status, family situation—will be just as pressing, if not more so, in graduate

school. Faculty must be prepared to discuss the pros and cons of graduate school with these students in a way that acknowledges their life situations, yet also provides an honest assessment of how graduate school will further affect their lives.

To summarize, students should ask the following questions of themselves and their mentors:

1. Would graduate school help me attain my goals?
2. What should I do to maximize my chances of admission to graduate school?
3. What schools would best serve my interests, and am I willing to relocate to go to one of them?
4. Am I prepared to invest the necessary time and energy to succeed in graduate studies?

Once these questions have been carefully considered and honestly answered, the student can then discuss with the mentor the process of applying to graduate schools, as each discipline has its own quirks. Ideally, the student should begin this process well before the senior year to develop a network of faculty members willing to assist in the application process and to gain research opportunities.

Graduate school is a difficult experience that is often compounded when the student comes from a family uninformed concerning the intricacies of graduate education. First-generation graduate students may not know where to get the information that will help them succeed, and processes that faculty take for granted can seem an impenetrable maze to students. As we help FGS make the transition to college, faculty must recognize that for many of them an undergraduate degree is only the beginning of their experience in academia. With appropriate guidance, it is likely that many of them may become not only our students, but our future colleagues as well.

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