



On Making and Becoming a Graduate

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In a recent special issue of *The Southwestern Geographer*, “Advice to Early Career Academic Geographers,” William Doolittle provided welcome insights on making and becoming a professor (Doolittle 2014). In his article, Doolittle outlined the evolution of graduate students from an incoming Master's student to a defending doctoral candidate and stressed the importance of ‘reshaping’ one’s attitude during this process. He concluded the article with sage advice, based on decades of experience, for graduate students embarking on this journey and the professors guiding them through it.

Doolittle’s advice is valuable and presents succinct suggestions for managing the transition from graduate student to professor. Here, we mirror this approach and call on our experiences as students, teachers, and researchers to extend the suggestions to the undergraduate level. By encouraging academic independence and critical thinking early on, we can produce better graduates; students that rather than having just “completed 17 years of being taught,” may already be ready to engage in higher learning (Doolittle 2014, 12).

Doolittle states that the graduate student transforms from a “passive recipient of knowledge bestowed by a learned professor, to a professor from whom students learn” (Doolittle 2014, 12). Our position is that the transformation should begin even earlier. After all, why should undergraduates be passive recipients? While many introductory courses may be passive in nature - particularly the larger, general lecture courses -

upper division courses invite students to engage the material with critical thinking and active learning approaches. Senior-level capstone courses demand that students demonstrate achievement of the learning goals established by their educational institution and major department; as educators we should set our own demands as well. By pushing students to transition from being lower-division passive recipients of knowledge, to upper-division critical thinkers, we are creating scholars who can not only teach themselves but who actively contribute to our understanding of the world.

This transition is not as simple as a change in study habits. Instead it requires a change in attitude, just as Doolittle describes. Such a change requires not only maturity and self-reflection on the part of the student, but also new practices by the professors, instructors, and teaching assistants involved in their academic journey. Outlined here are our suggestions for both groups.

For Professors, Instructors, and Graduate Teaching Assistants:

1. Assign challenging work. Busy work only perpetuates “binge” work habits that plague the academic world today. In the goal of helping students ‘think like a geographer’, we must lead students to the edge of what ‘they know’ and into the realm of applying concepts and base knowledge to unknown and new contexts. Don’t underestimate your students - if you trust them to think critically, they will do so. Based on our experience, undergraduates have

repeatedly demonstrated their abilities to take concepts in classes and apply them to large-scale foreign affairs; to make educated assumptions based on geographic knowledge. They can do more than summarize, given the opportunity. Assigning a seemingly unsolvable problem will yield higher results and more intelligent insights than a memorization list.

2. Give your students the opportunity to fail. There is more likelihood for learning from mistakes and failures (Burger and Starbird, 2012), however our assessments, quizzes, and exams are often designed to punish students for wrong answers. There is a learning opportunity here that is often missed. We expect students to take chances and teach themselves; it is only reasonable to expect some preliminary errors. By recognizing their enterprise, we can encourage students to keep working in the face of obstacles, and help them understand that mistakes do not necessarily mean the end of their ideas.
3. Share your passion. Passion is infectious. Nothing makes for a better learning experience than genuine interest. While course evaluations have gained importance as metrics for faculty members — particularly those who seek tenure and/or promotions — watering down content or lowering grading standards are not solutions. Instead, we should aim to address these metrics in other ways. You have a unique opportunity to showcase the importance of your field to students. Strive to be an ambassador for geography (or any subject). Focus on convincing your students that geography is captivating and indispensable. You may be surprised at how many will agree with you in the end.
4. Make teaching a learning experience for you. There is creative energy in undergraduate students that, if directed, can surprise you and teach *you* something. With the right course design you can learn as much from your students as they can learn for you. If you are intrigued by a topic in an area new to you, consider designing a new course around that special interest.
5. Be Approachable. Informal interactions with students have positive impacts on a variety of educational outcomes like aspirations, intellectual and personal development, achievement, and first-year retention (Pascarella, 1980; Kim and Sax, 2009). Unfortunately, for many students the classroom is too structured and too generic to foster these types of interactions. Make yourself available to students outside of the classroom, take advantage of ‘hallway’ interactions, and use online communications to break down barriers.

For Undergraduate Students:

1. Take initiative. Professors and teaching assistants like students who take charge of their own education. Be bold, participate, ask questions, and make the most of your opportunities. While your K-12 education may have been restricted by state administered examinations, requirements, and approved textbooks, your college education is surprisingly unrestricted and customizable. There are, of course, degree requirements, but the collection of courses you take to obtain a degree is flexible. Take advantage of the opportunity to construct an education tailored to your needs and interests. Find a major that you are passionate about and strive to learn everything you can. Grades will come naturally if you are learning and enjoying it.
2. Treat your education as a privilege, not a requirement. Unlike primary and secondary school, there is no legal requirement for you to attend. While it is a choice to pursue a higher education, you are lucky to be a student. When you graduate you will become one of the 30% of people in the United States who possess bachelor’s degrees or higher (Census, 2010). You have a responsibility to use your education to deal with the challenges facing society. You should take this opportunity seriously.
3. Treat your professors like professors, not teachers. Doolittle highlights the pet peeve of professors being referred to as teachers by their students, and we re-emphasize it. We expect student to take initiative and learn from us, not to be taught. Additionally, professors and graduate students are great resources for career advice. They come from diverse educational and professional backgrounds and may have followed unique career trajectories.
4. Get involved in original research. Getting involved in research will prepare you for graduate school in a way that no course or discussion with your advisor can. First, it gives you a glimpse into independent study and the research and responsibilities that make a successful graduate student. Second, you will become familiar with the components of a thesis, such as a literature review and methods. Third, and most importantly, a research project provides you a golden ticket — conference participation — where you can interact

with prospective graduate-school advisors. A thesis or senior project can be converted to a conference poster or even a paper presentation.

5. Recognize your end goals and value your journey. College is a great place to explore new interests and passions, but also remember — you are here for a reason. Pay attention to your strengths and weaknesses and think about how they may advance your professional career. You can always change your mind, but chances are, if you can't picture yourself enjoying it (your career), you won't.

What we have offered is a short list of recommendations based on our experiences as undergraduates, graduate students, and instructors. There is much more advice that can be given, but the best advice for making or becoming a thriving college graduate is the same advice Doolittle concluded with on making/becoming a professor, "if you are not having fun, you are doing the wrong thing."

About the Authors

The authors represent a range of educational experiences from doctoral candidate to upper-division undergraduate. Each has worked in a teaching capacity, ranging from instructor to teaching assistant, lab instructor to proctor, and as trainer in workshops. Each has also engaged in original academic research projects that range from independent studies to theses, and from conference proceedings to journal articles.

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