

If you could go back in time....

What advice would you give yourself when starting graduate school?

- I would tell myself that it is *never too early* to start a job and career search!
- Make a point of going to at least one career services and/or networking event per semester. It's just an hour of your time and truly helpful!!
- Get involved with a group outside of your department, having friends in other disciplines is invaluable. Be friendly with the other students in your department, those ahead of you have been through what you are going through, they can give you good advice.
- Start writing your dissertation now! Seriously, outline Chapter 1, or write your materials and methods WHILE you are doing the work. It will save you time and sanity at the end. I promise!
- Schedule your quals as early in the spring semester as possible (if applicable)- nothing will be worse than trying to sit indoors and study for quals when the weather is finally nice. USE ALL YOUR RESOURCES!
- Talk to your committee members often, use them for their knowledge, let them get to know you. They will be more effective advocates for you if they know you.
- Use the McDougal Center. Where else can you go where there is a team of people who will help you revamp your CV, develop a syllabus, write more effectively, and balance work and play? They care about your success, and helping you find your true path.
- You only pass this way once, experience as much as you can. Use every opportunity you can to make your process richer. Keep your eye on the prize. Even when you hate everyone and everything, just keep pushing forward. It WILL end someday, and you will have achieved your goal.
- Be flexible. Your plan- the one you have on day one- will change. Your project will change. Know what you are willing to let go, and what is important to you.
- Take off all 1 week of Thanksgiving break, all 3 weeks of Christmas break, all 2 weeks of spring break, and at least 2 weeks of summer break during your first year. In subsequent years you are (most likely) paid by your advisor (i.e. you are an "employee") so it becomes more difficult to get vacation time. 2) Your relationship with your advisor matters more than grades in classes, assuming you can get HP or better.
- Be confident! You know more than you think you know.
- Talk in class. When the professor asks a question, speak up. Don't be afraid of being wrong. In seminar classes, speak often, even if you're feeling shy. This is how professors get to know you and your intellect, and gives you more choices when you need the (inevitable) recommendation letters. Make yourself known, and rise to the top!
- Know what you want from graduate school- not just for getting a graduate degree and everybody's doing it
- Be wise in choosing an advisor - your relationship with him/her is by far the most important factor for succeeding in grad school.
- If you want to work with someone, if they can't take you because of funding, don't take "no" for an answer. There's always a way to be funded. (As a corollary, apply for every fellowship you're eligible for until you get something. It can take many tries.)
- Start research as early as possible -- I mean the first year of grad school.
- Take the classes you think will be useful for your research. Don't worry about grades at all (except to get the couple Honors that you need). Grades completely don't matter!

- Try to publish your results as early as possible (at least in the sciences). This will get you familiar with the process.
- Try to become known in your field. Go give talks at conferences and other schools. This is especially important if you want an academic job later.
- You'll need lots of letters (3-5) for academic jobs, so try to work with a diverse set of faculty.
- Recognize that what's good for your advisor or coauthors isn't necessarily optimal for you. So stand up for your own interests (as long as you need advice (9) in mind).
- Keep your advisor happy. You cannot graduate without their approval and you cannot get a good academic job without a good letter from them. ----- ps. (I have already graduated, but this form won't let me indicate that, so I am putting May 2010)
- You don't need to be in the library 14 hours a day. Throw yourself into whatever you have chosen to study, but also maintain and develop your other interests. Volunteer, find an interesting part-time job, or take advantage of the opportunity to learn a language. Priorities change, people change, job markets collapse. Developing a broad range of skills and interests will prepare you to alter your career path if you one day find that you want to. Also, it can be a lot of fun.
- Read more! Read, read, read the literature! And take a good biostats course.
- Think carefully about what you really want out of this. Know that your choice of mentor is more important than the research you are doing. (The research might change; the mentor won't.)
- Try not to get too anxious, and if you do, get professional help.
- Try not to let grad school swallow your life. I look back and wish I hadn't been quite so hard on myself and that I'd had more faith in my own abilities, which have turned out to be pretty considerable. Remember that when you finish, no matter how hard it is and has been, you will have a Ph.D. from Yale, and no one can take that away from you.
- Spend the first year talking to tons of people. Listen to their comments about potential advisors, and remember it's possible to look for an advisor outside your own department. If during the year you find yourself totally lost in grad school, it may not be a bad idea to rethink about it and consider whether to stay or just quit.
- Remember: You, too, were an obnoxious undergrad at one point.
- Think carefully before you really start and take courage to make switch in your life!
- Be more proactive. Every minute in graduate school is precious.
- Talk with people in other disciplines as much as possible.
- Have a plan B. Get an internship. Don't have time? Yes, you do. Going to Yale is not a guarantee against unemployment.
- Make a strong effort right from the very beginning to set up a career goal & be more confident with it. I spent about 5-6 years trying to find out whether I like teaching and research as a career and forgot about a back-up plan. I was trying to answer this question without actively pursuing other potential ideas. Since I had always the question hanging over my head "yes or no, yes or no?" to being a professor, I missed out on working towards a goal/a dream. This held me back in my motivation. Thus, I can only recommend that it is not only important to set a daily/weekly/monthly deadline for papers, but what seems more important to me would have been to look beyond. What could I do with my qualifications once the program is over in case I do not want to be a professor?! I should have realized that I needed a career coach right from the beginning.
- Don't fret the day-to-day details... you WILL graduate! Everyone before you has gone through the same uncertainty, the same feelings of "this is never going to turn into a thesis....", but it works out in the end!

- A degree from Yale will not get you any job unless you prepare - years in advance - for potential careers. It is merely a check mark. Meet people, complete internships and keep one eye away from your studies, or you will likely find yourself at the mercy of the economic environment.
- If you want to leave, better to do it earlier than later.
- Don't start a PhD immediately after undergrad. Take a few years to get experience, try different things, and become more confident about what you want to do with your life before jumping into the years-long commitment of getting a PhD. Of course, if you're already starting a PhD program, it's a little too late for that advice. So what else?
- Be clear about what you want to get out of your graduate education--NOT what your advisor wants you to do. It's your degree and your life, so choose your topic and your plans for finishing on the basis of what makes the most sense for you. Meanwhile, look for opportunities to do things on the side while you're finishing the degree.
- It makes sense to have various career options available to you when you're done. Don't get caught up into thinking that if you don't get or don't want an academic career that you're somehow a failure. The culture of graduate encourages that mindset, and it's both unhealthy and counterproductive. Do what you want to do, not necessarily what your professors think you should do.
- It's imperative to have a backup plan before looking for academic jobs. Try to volunteer, take a few classes to get "practical" skills, and/or do an internship before you graduate. You never know how your plans will change or what the job market will look like. Plan ahead!
- Physical health is far more important than you think, and if you make time for it, your mental health, happiness, and the quality of your work will all benefit.
- Publish early. When working on a science project, start with an outline of the final paper, keep filling it in as the science progresses. Work on the intro as you read the current literature. By the time you have your science result you should also have a rough draft of the paper which will present it.
- Your adviser is the most important person in your graduate career. S/he can make grad school either a miserable or great experience. So choose wisely and carefully. AND Do fun things that let you cope and don't feel guilty at all about not working all the time.
- Be humble. Actively listen to the conversations around you before you jump in (but don't wait too long).
- Seek out at least two mentors: one to whom you can confide your doubts and anxieties without worrying about the impact on your letters of recommendation, and another who will actively keep you informed about conferences, journals, research opportunities, and so forth.
- Set aside a half an hour each day to write on a topic not required for class (the material will often produce good seeds for papers or the dissertation later on). Don't try to write papers or the dissertation in one long continuous chunk of time -- you will achieve a better work/life balance, and better results in your writing, with moderation.
- Think about the connections your research has to both the broader academic community and the world beyond academia. As you progress, actively seek out colleagues beyond Yale who will champion your research and help you connect with those working on related problems in other departments and fields.
- Secret parking tips: Parking meters are not monitored on Saturdays. Also, most meters downtown have trouble telling the difference between quarters and pennies. Enjoy the free/cheap parking! Koffee (on Audobon) has great tea and Willoughby's tea house has great coffee. Ironic, but true. The brownies and scones at Book Trader Cafe will knock your socks off.

- The PhD is not the equivalent of a professional school degree. The work is harder, more intense and likely much less rewarding financially, much less ensuring as a career trophy. However, measured over the looming expanse of your expected lifetime, experienced as an educated individual, it is immensely worth it.
- Three easy steps to happiness. Do not skip any step, take as much time with each as you need: 1/ Think carefully what you want to do with your life. If not sure of doing a PhD, you're probably better off doing something else. 2/ A PhD is what you want to do? Search in your field and look for the adviser that will probably fit you best, regardless the name of the university. 3/ Still here? Apply to the university where that professor is. 4/ Enjoy. You will never regret it.
- Start networking for postdocs early
- The sooner you realize that you are in charge of your own project, the better! Waiting for your PI or colleagues to help troubleshoot your experiments or help you plan a paper won't work....it's better to jump in, try things on your own (even if you feel like you don't know what you're doing), and then seek help early and often.
- You should decide on the subject of your thesis at the very beginning in order not to waste time with early projects, like a special investigation, that are not related to your final thesis. It should hopefully help you to graduate faster. Also, I encourage you to spend a few months or more in a partner lab outside Yale after the 3rd year. It is a good time to boost up the motivation and fresh up the mind in a new environment.
- Organization! Organization! Organization! As frustrating as it may sound sometimes, given to overwhelming quantity of material that one has to deal with, it is more important to learn how to administer this material than to really KNOW things. This is a bit too extreme of a statement, but looking back at my first days in grad. school, it would have been beneficial if somebody had told me: "be less romantic about knowledge and more practical!". Dear old Yale I am going to miss you so very much -- love you!!!!!!
- Keep an open mind about careers. Take more classes in other departments that interest you. Grad school is not a one-way launching pad to an academic career; there are so many opportunities for research in other places.
- Start attending career information sessions ASAP.
- Start doing volunteer work on campus in areas that can help you find a career of interest ASAP
- Try various things out to see what your calling is.
- Network, network, network! Stay in touch with your network
- Never pass up an opportunity to create a good piece of writing that can be used as a writing sample.
- Stay ahead of your deadlines. Always be aware of the next two or three things you have to do, this way you are never caught off-guard.
- You need to be truly dedicated and motivated to complete a graduate program.
- Don't be afraid to fail - setbacks bring you one step closer to success.