Surviving your first year in Graduate School

Academia is a world of its own; it has its own language, culture, rules and lots of bumpy roads. The door to this new world is graduate school, which when you enter you realize that there is a lot of catching up that needs to be done. Oh yes! It could be stressful especially during the first year. The good news is that people have been doing it for many years.

This tip sheet outlines some of the obstacles that you most likely will face during your first year of graduate school and offers advice on how to cope and survive. When you earn your degree you will look back at your life as a graduate student and especially the first year with a sense of pride, of being able to overcome the challenges that pushed you to the limits of your abilities.

1. **Shock**
   You have decided to embark on a very interesting journey and as people face culture shock when they move to a different country, you could face Academic Culture Shock when you get into graduate school. If you do, you may go through the following stages:
   - **Pre-departure stage**: this is the excitement following your decision to pursue higher levels of knowledge.
   - **Honey-moon stage**: it starts when you begin your program, attend your first few weeks of classes and start thinking about your thesis topic.
   - **First failure**: this is when you hit your first dead end in your research, get your first paper rejected or fail to complete your first experiment.
   - **Cruising stage**: this is when your supervisor knows that you are on the right track in your research, when you overcome some of the challenges in your research and accomplish your first task.

2. **Inadequacies**
   You will meet smart people from different intellectual backgrounds who may make you feel you do not belong here. Always remember that the admission staff know what they are doing, and that you needed to meet the requirements set by the department to begin your program. Also remember that not everyone can be Einstein, but we can all contribute to our disciplines.

3. **Quitting.**
   It’s normal to feel you want to quit, the thought enters most students’ minds at some period of their program. But you have to want to get your degree more than anything. Survival in graduate school is not all about being bright; it’s mainly about commitment and willingness to overcome any obstacle that comes in your way.

4. **Fast Decisions.**
   Don’t make any major decisions such as quitting early-on, at least wait till the first year passes. You need to identify why you are feeling this way, so that you can identify how to resolve your problems. Maybe you need to gain more background in your research area, change your research topic or see your supervisor more often?
5. Get Support.
Remember you are not alone; your colleagues may have experienced the same difficulties and can provide good advice. Also try to seek advice from your supervisor, experienced colleagues, Graduate Coordinator, the Ombudservice, and student services.

6. Be Realistic.
Set reasonable and achievable goals to get a feeling of accomplishment early on. Talk to colleagues and other researchers to find out if you are being over ambitious.

Activities to do on your own

- Talk to your supervisor frequently to clarify the thesis topic and to set reasonable and achievable goals.
- Talk to your group members so you can learn from their experiences.
- Work hard on your courses. Graduate courses are much more involved.
- Spend the time to read the literature on your research topic. This will give you an understanding of what other people have done and what you could contribute. In addition, this will help you set your objective and the phases of your research.
- If you are stressed and thinking about quitting, try to get advice first from the Academic Support Centre or the Ombudservice available on campus from Student Services. http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/studentservices/
- Don’t get totally lost in your research and courses and isolate yourself, especially if you are an international student. Try to engage in social activities beside your work to lift your mood and relieve your stress.