Scenario 1: BALANCE

Bernadetta knew from her previous degree that her first year was going to be busy. During her first university degrees, she had lived at home eventually moving in with friends but still in the same city. This was her first time moving away from her long-time friends and family. It was both exciting and stressful getting set up in Edmonton. During the first few months, Bernadetta buried herself into her studies, wanting to stay on top of her reading, and being prepared for her teaching duties. Yes, she went out every couple of weeks with people from her classes, but she missed her kick boxing friends and felt guilty when she was not working on her research proposal. She felt that she needed to have a good draft ready when the next term started and she was still struggling with her research question. The days were getting colder, the daylight shorter, and since she did not have the family dog to walk, it was easier to just keep working at her desk. Besides, how else would she stay on top of everything that needed to get done?

What opportunities are Bernadette missing? What would help Bernadette with her mountain of work?

- Over time, keeping up a frantic pace without looking after your health and well-being can lead to burn out
- Time management (plan for work and activities that bring enjoyment, quality vs. quantity of time, when is your most productive time - do the tough things then)
- Manage priorities and set goals (chunk large projects into smaller ones)
- Networking, Skype or Facetime with family
- Building up a pool of colleagues (may want to live with others rather than alone)
- Talk to supervisor to clarify expectations
- Get a pet or volunteer
- If you are struggling with course, get help
Points for students to consider:

- As a PhD student, you will be expected to develop your own research project. In addition to talking with your supervisor, library can be of help, as well as supervisory group, and people within your discipline.
- You will be expected to inform your supervisor of your progress.
- People that you connect with during your PhD can be part of your professional network for life – research collaborators, career and academic advice.
- Especially in our dark, cold winters, there is an absolute necessity of having an extracurricular activity for mental health. Mental wellness is important and people are encouraged to talk about it. Need to schedule mental health activities/breaks.

Sources of help:

- [Psychologist](#)
- [Student Success Centre](#)
Scenario 2: ALL BY MYSELF

Hossein will be a new doctoral student with Dr. Ling in Political Sciences who is a relatively recent hire to the faculty. Dr. Ling has one other student, a Master’s student who is in her second year. Emily will be a new doctoral student with Dr. Yagorsky in Chemical Engineering who has a team of 10 students and 2 postdoctoral fellows. Both Emily and Hossein found themselves immersed in classes for the first few months with little connection to their supervisor or people in their research group. Everyone in Ling’s and Yagorksya’s research group seemed like they were immersed in their own research.

What strategies would you suggest for Emily and Hossein to build a network of support for themselves? How could they get more engaged within their respective groups or department?

- Join lab/group meetings
- Start an activity within your group/department - play music, bring in a puzzle, set up a game
- Join/start a journal club or discussion group that meets over lunch/over dinner/coffee/beer
- Suggest/join social activities with people in your research group [lunch/movie]
- Attend/volunteer for department/faculty events (and introduce yourself)
- Go to conferences/join associations or societies that can grow your interest, have activities that appeal to you, and provide opportunities to develop your skills
- Stay in contact with people from today’s Onboarding event
- Talk with your supervisor about how to get better orientated to the lab/facilities
- Go for coffee/lunch with other students - will grow your social and academic support
- Get connected to people off/on campus who share a passion/interest/activity/faith to find a sense of belonging and to disconnect from “work”
- Ask more questions, ask for help and guidance, and be engaged
Points for students to consider:

- A PhD will take between 4-6 years to complete, so establishing support is important.
- Having people to talk to about life/academic issues is critical.
- Students have already demonstrated they have the capacity to do well in this environment through their previous academic successes.
- Growing your network can give you different perspectives on academic and life issues.

Sources of help:

- [GSA](#)
- [FGSR Events](#)
- Peers
- Grad Administrator
- [Student Clubs](#)
Scenario 3: AN APPLE A DAY

Ling had just learned she would be a teaching assistant for the Department of Physics. She had taken many physics courses during her undergraduate and Master’s degrees but had no idea what students in first year Physics would know. She had never had to teach before.

What will be expected of her? Will she measure up to her student’s and department’s expectations? What if she doesn’t know the answer to the student questions? How would you advise Ling so that she could be more comfortable and confident for her first class?

- See if there are any teaching seminars on campus/department
- Find someone who taught the course last year and find out where students struggle
- Get notes from previous instructors
- Sit in on someone else’s class
- Talk with her supervisor/course instructor/course coordinator about student experience and knowledge base
- Attend pre-lab talk or see if you can get access to course materials/labs before hand
- Review course materials beforehand
- Read textbook/related materials for the course
- Attend the class with the students [if time allows]

Points for students to consider:

- You know how to solve problems and analyze information, and that makes you capable of helping students solve their questions.
- You have experience and discipline specific knowledge that is why you are suited and selected to be the instructor.
- You have passion for this discipline or you wouldn’t be doing a PhD.
- It is OK not to know the answers to all of the undergraduate students’ questions, and it is OK to tell them you don’t have an answer for them right now. Together you can find the answer.
- There are many people who can provide you with teaching assistance – supervisor, FGSR, Centre for Teaching and Learning, your peers, department teaching support.
Sources of help:

- FQSR
- CTL
- Former/Current Instructor
- Grad Coordinator
Scenario 4: GIVING AND RECEIVING

Sergei was looking forward to his doctoral program in Sociology. He had a good idea of the scope of projects he wanted to do and the course on Social Structure and Public Policy had peaked his interest. The course had a seminar component that would allow students to share their insights with each other. Three weeks into the course, Sergei was struggling to bring himself to the class. He felt others were attacking his ideas, particularly a student named Nelson. He was also confused when he read comments on the draft of his paper that started off complementary, then pointed to some corrections, but ended stating he was on the right path.

*Was his work meeting expectations? Sergei was starting to wonder if he belonged or even wanted to belong in grad school. How should he interpret the verbal and written feedback that he was getting from peers and the instructor? Was this part of the PhD experience of getting feedback?*

- Do you need to act on the student criticism? Can you just acknowledge the point and then state why you took the action/viewport that you did?
- Talk with his supervisor about the course work and what the feedback means
- Talk with other colleagues about your work
- Talk with the course instructor to get clarity about the feedback and assignment
- Canadians give feedback in the form of a sandwich (good news, areas of improvement, positive reinforcement) and this can make it difficult to understand how critical it is to make changes to your work

*Points for students to consider:*

- A PhD is about growing – academically, morally, socially, and politically.
- As a PhD you will be expected to develop your own opinions and to stand up for them
- You will be expected to critique the work of others – perhaps including the work of your supervisor.
- You will be the expert one day, so you need to learn to accept and deliver criticism – kindly and constructively. This is something we are all learning to do.
Sources of help:

- FGSR - Associate Deans
- OmbudsOffice
- Supervisor
- Student Success Centre
Scenario 5: ACADEMIC READING AND WRITING

Entering his PhD, Ricardo knew he would need to work hard to keep the quality of his writing high. He was never the A+ writer but he was able to get his assignments in on time and usually got a decent grade. How much harder was this year going to be? He didn’t have the support around him that he was familiar with and he knew that he would be expected to read a lot of journal articles. It didn’t take long before Ricardo found himself immersed in his courses and there was an expectation of a paper in one of his classes. He was still trying to get oriented on campus, never mind all the other things that seemed to be piling up around him. The pressure to be reading and writing were building and it seemed even harder to sit down to get his assignment done. Self-doubt about his ability to write crept in while he listened to his classmates talk about their first draft of their papers.

What can Ricardo do to feel he is still on track with his writing assignment?

- Talk to the subject librarian for assistance with finding resources, tracking references, and much more
- Set up a writing group with his classmates
- Find resources on campus that help with writing
- Schedule writing time for period of day when most productive
- Figure out what space you write the best in – may not be your office or at home

Points for students to consider:

- You were selected for the PhD program because you met the requirements to be here, and the requirements are set high to make sure people will succeed.
- Writing is difficult for everyone and does get better the more you write.
- Getting help is not a sign of weakness – it shows that you understand that you want to improve yourself.

Sources of help:

- Student Success Centre
- UofA Libraries
- Centre for Writers
- Writing Bootcamps