

Written by Witten: So long, and thanks for all the tips

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Daniela Witten writes:

Daniela Witten writes: I've never been shy about asking for advice. As a first-year grad student, I'd beg more senior students for tips on passing quals and writing a dissertation. And as junior faculty, I asked senior colleagues how to manage my time, prioritize projects, advise students, and ultimately get tenure. *Advice is free, and by nature I'm a hoarder.*

But time passed, as it does. And one day I noticed something funny. People had started to ask me for advice. *Me!!* A person who knows absolutely nothing about anything!! Me, who always asks other people for advice! How bizarre!!

And that's when I realized that *we are all just mucking our way through.* All of the advice that I had pursued for the previous decade was just a bunch of flawed attempts by imperfect humans to make sense of a world besieged by chaos. In other words, *advice is free, and you get what you pay for.* I'm not saying that advice is useless. On the contrary, it is often extremely valuable. It provides a window into someone else's life. It's a reflection of what worked for them, and what didn't. But it is not a mirror into your life, nor is it a crystal ball that predicts your future (if only those existed!).

I've since learned that when receiving advice, there's no need to hoard. It's best to follow the [KonMari method](#): I keep the advice that speaks to my heart and sparks joy. Otherwise, I *let it go*.

So, without further ado, I'm going to dedicate this column to my top 10 tips for PhD students. If you're a PhD student, then I hope that some of this advice speaks to your heart. And if it doesn't, then you know what to do with it!

10) **It's not about the destination, it's about the journey.**

Yes, some of your PhD classmates derived their first minimax bounds *in utero*. Good for them! We all have our own paths, and it's not a race.

9) **Give it your best shot.**

Once you decide to do something — whether it's going to grad school, pursuing a summer internship, carrying out a research project, or writing a column for the *IMS Bulletin* — commit to it 100%.

8) **If at first you don't succeed...**

We all deal with rejection: rejected papers, unsuccessful grant applications, and more. Anyone who says otherwise is either new to academia, or lying. Pick yourself up and try again, and always celebrate your successes 100 times more than you mourn your failures.

7) **Choose your PhD research advisor wisely.**

This is the single most important professional relationship of your PhD, and potentially of your entire career. Are they approachable and supportive? Will they help you achieve your potential? Talk to their current and past students, but remember that what works for you might not work for someone else, and vice-versa.

6) **Round out your skill set.**

A successful career in statistics requires not only solid technical skills, but also strong written and oral communication skills. Your overall career success will be limited by the weakest of those three sets of skills. Work to improve your weakest skill set. Take an improv class or try your hand at creative writing... the possibilities are endless.

5) **Play to your strengths.**

Are you incredibly talented at deriving concentration inequalities, consulting for non-statisticians, teaching undergrad service courses, collaborating as part of a large interdisciplinary team, *and* programming? If you answered “yes”, then please stop showing off. Most of us humans have strengths in just one or two of those areas. Your PhD is an opportunity to discover those strengths, and to identify a dissertation project — and, ultimately, a career path — that makes the most of them.

4) **Find balance.**

No matter how much you love your work, it will never love you back. And you may never again have a schedule that is as flexible as during your PhD. So, get your work done during the week and enjoy your weekends. Backpack through Europe, become an extremely accomplished knitter, or dive deep into the Netflix archive. Carpe diem.

3) **Hold your cohort close and your enemies clos...**

— that's not right. What I meant to say is, be friends with your PhD cohort. These people will be your primary professional contacts throughout your career. And remember, there are no enemies. Everyone's just trying to pass quals.

2) **Give yourself some grace.**

You're doing something spectacularly challenging that most people would never even consider attempting. You're absolutely amazing!!!! Yay for you!!!! And always remember that *done is better than perfect*.

1) **Have fun.**

You don't need to love every minute of your PhD, and I promise that you won't! But make sure that, on balance, you like what you're doing. Otherwise, you may achieve your career goals (a tenure-track job at a great university? a well-paid job at the company you've always wanted to work at?), only to discover that you were chasing someone else's dream.

That's it for now! Reach out to me [@daniela_witten](#) on Twitter to let me know what joy-sparking tips for PhD students make your top 10 list.

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