

The Hidden Curriculum of Academia

(updated 08/28/24)

These are the things that many in academia expect incoming and current graduate students to know, but we rarely teach these things or effectively communicate this information to students, creating discrepancies in who has access to this information. Here we try to convey some of the information we wish we knew before graduate school. This is written by and geared toward students in ecology and evolution programs, although some of this information applies to many disciplines. However, our perspective is clearly biased toward E&E programs. We try to avoid presenting solutions to some of the negative issues presented here, because there are often many different solutions, or no good solution, but merely present these as things you should be aware you will face.

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Funding

-Funding varies considerably from program to program and also depends on whether you're doing a M.S. or Ph.D. You should inquire about funding before deciding whether to apply to a graduate program.

-Most students do not pay tuition for grad school. Unlike law school, medical school, or other professional degrees, many universities offer tuition waivers to grad students.

-Often those tuition waivers come with some strings attached, such as serving as a Teaching Assistant in a course, or making sufficient progress on your degree.

-Tuition waivers often do not cover student fees. These fees can be hundreds of dollars and cover things like parking, campus gym membership, and support of the student government.

-If you are being paid on a TAship or a fellowship, the first paycheck often does not arrive until after a full pay period, so you may need to budget for no income in your first Month. Often the same is true for health insurance (if it's offered at all).

-Grad school is a full time job. Although students are paid as part-time (up to 20 hrs/week), that doesn't account for classes, studying, reading, research, discussion groups, and many other things that comprise a large amount of time. Most students do not work outside the university while in grad school. Students are typically either (a) paid by the university to TA a course or (b) paid by their advisor/mentor/PI (Principal Investigator on a grant) as a Research Assistant to work on specific projects (which may or may not also be your own thesis research).

-The National Science Foundation (NSF) offers fellowships to graduate students in the form of the Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP). You can potentially apply for this fellowship twice: once as you're applying to grad school and once in grad school before the end of your third semester. The GRFP gives three years of funding to do your research. It also will make you VERY competitive for admission to grad school. However, the application process is rigorous and very competitive.

-The GRFP is a huge stepping stone, but also keep in mind that most successful students do not receive the GRFP and find other pathways to success.

-There are lots of fellowships, scholarships, and grants available for students to fund their own research. These can be found within the university, from professional societies, or other organizations and companies. These vary in amount (from a few hundred to several thousand dollars) and competitiveness. Before starting a project, you should ask your advisor whether you are expected to fund your own research, or whether they have grant funding to support your work. You should be VERY wary of funding your research with personal funds.

Grad School Applications

-Unlike many other grad programs, in E&E your application to the department/university is often a formality. Admissions decisions are often made by the advisor whose lab you want to work in. You should contact potential advisors well before applications are due. It's not unusual for faculty to talk to prospective grad students a year before they start the program. You should establish a relationship with potential advisors and ask them whether you should submit an application, rather than blindly applying to as many programs as possible. Without a prior connection, many advisors will not consider applications from students they haven't yet met.

-Fewer programs are requiring the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), or giving it as much weight as in the past. In many cases that is putting more weight on GPA. However, there is nothing that affects your application as much as a faculty member advocating for your admission.

Choosing a Grad School

-If at all possible, you should visit a campus and lab before deciding to apply or accepting an offer. Many programs will pay for your travel to visit. Some have recruitment weekends, during which they invite many applicants to the program. Take advantage of these opportunities to feel

out whether the program is a good fit for you. If not offered, ask if you can visit, as often funds are available, but limited.

- During these visits, you will likely meet with several faculty members and other grad students. Ask them about their research, but also ask them about the culture of the department and the local area.

- Ask current and past grad students if they are happy with their decision to be in that program. Likely everybody will have some good and bad things to say. Decide whether the bad things are things that you can live with and whether the good things are important to you.

- As much as possible, try to determine whether your advisor is somebody that you will be able to have a good relationship with for several years. Ideally, you would like to have an advisor whose advice you can trust and who will treat you well. Look for a mentor, rather than a boss.

Teaching

- Unfortunately, nobody is likely to teach you how to teach. This makes this a very difficult and intimidating experience, especially the first time. If you're lucky, your program might have a short workshop about teaching at the beginning. It is likely that you will be placed in a classroom in which you are the sole instructor, teaching students nearly as old, or older, than you. Ask your fellow grad students for advice. Don't reinvent the wheel. Borrowing slides and materials from other instructors is perfectly fine!

- Seek out teaching workshops on campus, if available. These are often not advertised to grad students, but often welcome them.

- Teaching is a trial and error process. Try new things. Many will not work. Revise them or get rid of them. Don't try the same failing effort over and over. Pay attention to what was successful and keep those activities for the next time.

- Most students teach the way they were taught. That can be good if you take lessons from great teachers in your past.

- Teaching is not hazing. Your past teachers may have intentionally made a course difficult to weed out students. You needn't do the same. Teach with the intention of getting students to learn, rather than assigning grades. Don't be the gatekeeper to success in your class. Always keep equity in mind with regard to teaching practices. Intend for your practice to benefit everybody in the class.

Where do you learn?

- Grad programs vary in how many classes you are required to take, but regardless, most of the learning in grad school happens outside of the classroom. There is rarely a book that you can pick up that tells you everything you want to know about a topic. Even when there is, the book is

out of date as soon as it's published. Learning happens in reading primary literature that nobody assigns to you, in reading group discussions, helping other people with their work, and in conversations in the hallways. That learning requires an independent drive to know more about a lot of different subjects. It also happens by just being present. The latter is particularly difficult during the pandemic, as there is often no "there" at which to be present.

- At reading groups, it's ok to show up and just listen. You should read the paper for that day, but even if you haven't, you're still likely to learn something by just being present.

- When reading a paper on a topic, note which examples of past work have been cited and read those too. You can also use Web of Science or Google Scholar to see what papers have since cited the paper you're reading. This allows you to look backward and forward on research on a particular subject.

- As you start to dive into literature on a subject, use a citation manager to keep track of what you're reading. This will also make it easier to cite relevant literature when you're writing a paper on that topic. Endnote used to be the most popular, but is costly. Many grads are now using Zotero or Mendeley, both of which are free and easy to use.

- Ask your advisor how many papers they expect you to be reading each week. Keep in mind you'll also be reading papers for lab meetings, discussion groups, seminars, etc. Read a lot, but also keep this expectation within reason.

- Subscribe to tables of contents from well-respected journals and skim the titles in each issue just to see what topics are being covered in these journals. Dive into some abstracts and also a few papers. Here's a non-exclusive list of journals that are well-respected by both in E&E: American Naturalist, Ecology, Ecology Letters, Evolution, Evolution Letters, Nature Ecology & Evolution, Trends in Ecology & Evolution

 - Some other popular journals that cover a broad range of biology: Nature, PNAS, Proc B (Royal Society), Science

 - You can also set up citation alerts for keywords, or for new papers that cite foundational papers, to stay up to date on a specific area of research.

- Ask questions. You are supposed to not know a lot of things. Often the only way to learn them is by asking. Your advisor often doesn't know what you don't know, but they're eager to provide the information if you ask. The old adage about "no dumb questions" is particularly appropriate here.

- Don't skip class without talking to the professor about it. Unlike in large undergrad classes, your absence will definitely be noticed.

Networking

-Making connections with other researchers in your field is important for success. Network with colleagues at scientific meetings, but also within your own department.

-Networking comes easier to some people than others. Those of us who are shy or introverted may find it difficult to start a conversation. Know that most decent people are excited for you to initiate a conversation or ask them about their work. Also ask your advisor to introduce you to their colleagues or make an introduction with somebody you'd like to meet.

Social Issues

-Many people perceive academia to be more progressive than other institutions. Some things you should know:

-The personal politics of individual people may be more progressive than average, but this often does not translate to the institution.

-The Academy remains a conservative institution that is highly resistant to change. You'll often find "that's how it's always been done" a common response to very strange practices.

-Despite efforts to diversify academia and make it more equitable and inclusive, most campuses tend to be very white spaces, especially among faculty and administration.

-Microaggressions happen in academia too and you will have to decide how often to call them out, particularly when they come from people in power.

-Make friends with others in your program. You're going to be spending a lot of time with them. Commiserate and celebrate together. Also be sure to maintain friendships outside of grad school to keep perspective on what's important.

-Often living with other grad students can be helpful and keep you "in the know".

-You will be expected to socialize with others in your program. You don't have to, but be aware that such pressure exists.

-Programs vary in how competitive students are with one another. Ask the current grad students what the culture is and decide whether this fits with your own needs. Even in the least competitive environments though, many people find themselves envious of other students' success who seem undeserving. Find a way to be okay with that.

-You will experience imposter syndrome. The irony is that so does everybody else.

-We know of few people who have left their comprehensive exams (or prelims, or thesis proposals, etc.) thinking "that went great". Unfortunately, these often serve as a form of academic hazing, intended to find out where your knowledge ends and you break down. Passing these events is success, even though it often feels the opposite.

-Mental health issues are more prominent among grad students than in the general population. Academia will probably exacerbate any underlying mental health issues you have, or identify new ones. Keep your eye out for symptoms in yourself and in your friends. Seek help early and often.

-Although it's not explicitly stated, you will likely need a laptop. The CSUN Library has a device loaner program, although you will have to return it each semester.

-Work-life balance is important. You may find yourselves working many nights and weekends. If you find yourself working every night and weekend, that is too much. Make time for yourself. Each person has their own vision of work-life balance. This is defined by you, not your advisor. However, a discussion of expectations with your advisor is healthy.

-There is a long history of advisors taking advantage of students, both sexually and non-sexually. Any sexual request is inappropriate and should be reported immediately. If you feel that other requests are inappropriate (e.g. expectations, chores, intrusion into your personal life), ask other students whether this is "normal". Also, normal does not necessarily mean appropriate.

-Finally, grad school is a personal journey. For some, it will take them on to a career in academia. For others, it will lead elsewhere. Either path can be successful! However, academics often guide students toward careers in academia because it's the route they're most familiar with. You will hear non-academic careers referred to as "alternative careers". However, those are the jobs held by MOST people! You can be a scientist with a PhD, or with an M.S., or with a Bachelor's degree. Aside from a research or teaching career in academia, there are lots of careers with non-profit organizations, with government agencies, in many forms of science communication, and on and on and on. Seek out professionals in the career you want and ask how they got to where they are and ask for advice.

CSUN-specific information

-All TAs and GAs have a mailbox in the mailroom. The mailroom is two doors down from the Biology Office in Chaparral Hall. You also have access to a copier in that room.

-Campus keys can be obtained from Jim Hogue (jim.hogue@csun.edu). Your advisor will need to send Jim an email first requesting the specific keys you need.

-The four digit room numbers in the science buildings can be confusing. The first number indicates the building (1=Live Oak Hall, 2=Eucalyptus Hall, 3=Citrus Hall, 4=Magnolia Hall, 5=Chaparral Hall). The second number is the floor number. The last two digits are the room number. So 5301 is located on the third floor of Chaparral Hall.

-CSUN is a big campus and it's often quite hot. If you're moving around campus a lot, a skateboard or scooter might help.

-In Chaparral Hall, there is a gender-inclusive restroom on the 2nd floor.

-Most students in E&E take a core set of classes: Proseminar, Biometry, Colloquium, 3 seminars, and 6 units of thesis. Thesis units are technically a class, but really just give your course credit for working on your thesis (i.e. no extra work is required). Students often take another elective course or two to meet the full unit requirements for the Master's degree.

-If you have taken all of your required coursework and are just finishing your thesis, you can enroll in a one unit Culminating Experience course that only requires you to pay tuition for that one unit. This "class" is called AR 601 and [you can enroll here](#).

-The Biology Department has a poster printer that is free to use. You can print your poster by emailing it to Mark Harris. It's best to give him a few days of notice before you need it.

-You have to apply for graduation well before your anticipated graduation date. You can keep track of these dates and other [deadlines here](#).

-The Graduate Studies office on campus is a great resource. Don't be shy about asking them questions or for help. Their website is: <https://www.csun.edu/graduate-studies>.

-Payroll can be strange, especially for graduate students. Although you may only TA a course for one semester (16 weeks), that pay is often distributed over six months. The upside of this is that you get a paycheck for the whole year if you TA in Fall and Spring. The downside is that you don't get all of your money right away. Also, if you are being paid off of a grant, this comes from the University Corporation, which functions as a separate entity from the academic side of CSUN. So you may find yourself getting paychecks from CSUN for TA/GA work, but from Univ Corp for RA work.

-CSUN provides a number of awards to students, some of which come with significant money. Consider applying for any of [these awards](#) for which you are eligible.

-CSUN does not provide health insurance to graduate students. There are some services provided by the Student Health Center, but this is not a substitute for insurance. For example, the Student Health Center is not available for emergencies.

-Graduate Studies provides Thesis Support for up to \$1200, although you must apply for these funds. Most students in our area get what they ask for, but you should still put in your best application. More info [here](#). Grad Studies also has some funding for travel, as do the department and college, though funds are often limited. Many students also apply for travel funds as a group through BEER or MBGSA to Associated Students.

-CSUN students are eligible for free childcare from the university, though there may be an extensive waiting list. More information can be found [here](#).

-The [Oasis Wellness Center](#) on campus offers wellness classes, a zen garden, and even nap pods!

-Finally, here is a long list of great campus resources put together by Dr. Stefanie Drew:

Academic Resources

- [Canvas Student Guide](#) provides resources for learning how to navigate through Canvas, the campus Learning Management System (LMS)
- [Oviatt Library](#) has many resources available including books, articles, media, device check outs, creative media studio and printing services
- [Learning Resource Center](#) provides a number of services that include workshops, one-on-one and group tutoring, and supplemental instruction classes.
- [Disability Resources and Educational Services](#) provides a variety of support services to assist students with academic accommodations that include alternative formats of instructional materials, testing accommodations, audio recordings and shared notes.
- [NCOD: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services](#) provides many services that include interpreting, transcription and notetaking.
- [Undergraduate Studies](#) provides numerous resources for undergraduate students including advising guides, degree road maps, university catalog and more
- [CSUN's Accessibility Policy](#) CSUN is committed to ensuring that campus communication and information technology is available to everyone

Technology Resources

- [Zoom Help Center](#) provides a variety of guides, videos and tutorials for getting started with and using Zoom
- [CSUN Device Loaner Program](#) provides devices that can be checked out that includes laptops, tablets, webcams, hotspots and webcams
- [Internet Connectivity for Users Who Do Not Have](#) It provides a list of resources and services for obtaining internet access, many are free
- [Information Technology \(IT\)](#) provides support many technologies including canvas, CSUN email, Microsoft Office, myCSUNbox, Zoom and software downloads. Hours are M-F, 8:00 am – 5:00 pm.
- Oviatt Library offers free 3-D printing for students
- CSUN Students can access a number of free software downloads (Adobe Acrobat, Illustrator, and Photoshop, Microsoft Office, etc.). They are available [here](#).

Health and Well Being Resources

- [Klotz Student Health Center](#) offers medical services including free Telehealth services that include primary care, sports medicine, wellness coaching and nutritional counseling
- [University Counseling Services](#) provides free and confidential mental health services, including brief individual and couples counseling, group counseling and workshops, and crisis intervention
- [The Oasis Wellness Center](#) is a welcoming destination where CSUN students can find serenity and relaxation, providing services like nutrition counseling, meditation, massages, acupuncture, nap pods and workshops focused on wellness and managing stress.
- [Student Recreation Center \(SRC\)](#) for exercise and leisure activities and programs that promote wellness

Financial Resources

- [Financial Aid and Scholarship](#) offers aid for applications
- [CSUN Saves](#) is a program that promotes the financial health of members of the CSUN community, providing support to pay off debts and saving to reach financial goals
- [MataCare Emergency Grant](#) grants available to help students facing unanticipated urgent financial needs. These are not loans, and do not have to be repaid
- [Financial Literacy Resources](#) are additional community resources to help navigate finances

Clubs, Campus Facilities & Community Resources

- [Career Center](#) career exploration and advisement along with job-search strategies to students, providing guidance on choosing a major and advice on how to make decisions, set goals and plan
- [Clubs and Organizations Program](#) guides students to resources and fosters a community.
- [University Student Union \(USU\)](#) works to expand the college experience through various programs, services, employment, and involvement opportunities. They offer a number of services including lactation space, veterans' resources, and more.
- [Associated Students \(AS\)](#) provides programs and services designed to enhance and create a spirited learning-focused campus environment.
- [Matador Involvement Center \(MIC\)](#) provides information about ways to get involved on campus and meet others with similar interests
- [Women's Research and Resource Center](#) provides access to resources and additional information
- [Veterans Resource Center](#) is committed to providing resources and support for Veterans as they transition into life at CSUN.
- [Pride Center](#) supports lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) students, faculty and staff through programming and educational outreach to improve the campus climate for LGBTQIA+ individuals

as well as advocate for the respect and safety of all members of the campus community

Peer Education & Mentoring Resources

- [CSUN Mentorship Program](#) is a peer mentoring program that promotes student success at CSUN by connecting students to resources/services and helping them to get engaged through campus involvement
- [The Blues Project](#) is a peer education volunteer program to promote awareness and education about depression and suicide prevention
- [Joint Advocates on Disordered Eating \(JADE\)](#) is a peer education program dedicated to the awareness around body image and to the prevention of eating disorders
- [Project D.A.T.E.](#) is a peer education, date or acquaintance rape prevention program sponsored by University Counseling Services and Strength United.
- [MenCARE \(Creating Attitudes for Rape-Free Environments\)](#) is a campus-wide prevention program to end sexual violence through education, cultural change, and leadership development with a centerpiece of peer education.

Additional Resources

- [CSUN with a HEART](#) provides valuable information that will connect you to various resources regarding the basic needs of students in the CSUN campus community
- [CSUN Food Pantry](#) is a program that provides food and toiletries for CSUN students in need
- [Office of Equity and Diversity](#) supporting CSUN's commitment to maintaining an environment where no member of the campus community is subjected to any form of prohibited discrimination in any University program or activity.
- [DACA Resources](#) provides information and resources at both the CSUN and the CSU levels.