

## **Your Academic Journey**

Edited by

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This issue of the Morning Watch called for papers that focused on the individual academic journeys of graduate students, faculty, and staff. The call asked authors to consider their prior knowledge and what they would have liked to have known prior to entering their studies or their position. We asked authors to provide a narrative of how they navigated their studies (students) or their current positions (faculty and staff), how they balanced family and friends while studying or navigating their positions, and lessons they learned that would help others in similar circumstances or positions.

Many of the submissions are narrative or autobiographical in nature. The submissions are organized chronically, with six papers focusing on graduate students, three papers from new faculty, and four papers from tenured professors and administrators. Themes from graduate students focused on struggles to succeed in high school, gaining entry to graduate programs, cultural adjustment and recommendations for helping graduate students succeed.

### **Reflections from Graduate Students**

Zanele Myles is a Master's of Education student who is studying the impact of self-advocacy instruction on elementary and secondary students. Zanele reminds readers that the school environment is not necessarily a safe place for diverse students, as students with learning disabilities may be perceived as being deficient amongst those in their school communities. Zanele notes that individuals with learning disabilities need to develop a 'voice' so that they can be heard when their learning needs are not being met. Students with learning disabilities need to learn the necessary skills to become their own self-advocates, and they need to learn techniques that will assist them when dealing with negative experiences associated with being labeled as having a learning disability. Zanele encourages the reader to remember that individuals can go a long way when they believe in themselves, have self-determination, and are willing to work hard.

Lisa Weber is a doctoral student who reminds the reader that teacher support can have a positive influence on a student's self-perceptions. Lisa highlights the importance of reminding students to focus on the process, which is often more important than the final product. While individuals

will be faced with challenges and obstacles that will try to impede their progress as an academic, the support that teachers provide can improve a student's feelings of academic efficacy and ability to master goals. Lisa reminds the reader that when someone cares about the progress you are making, and puts forth an effort to support you in your journey, there are very few obstacles that cannot be overcome.

Xiaolin Xu is a doctoral student who reports that for students to reach the summit of their research journey, they must be passionate, positive, and persevere. One's research journey may be a challenge; this is especially the case for international students who are faced with language and cultural differences. Xiaolin reminds the reader that one must pursue a research topic they are passionate about in order to be provided with the necessary motivation to sustain their journey. When faced with challenges along one's journey, one should be equipped with a positive state of mind, as focusing on one's strengths can support future goal attainment. The academic research journey can be both difficult and lonely; therefore, we remind students that you must draw upon your inner strength, as perseverance becomes a key factor for academic success.

Bahar Haghghat is a doctoral student who reminds the reader that doctoral research requires a completely different set of educational and psychological skills. Unfortunately, research has demonstrated that mental illness is on the rise among academics (Shaw, 2014). Bahar recommended that graduate students: 1) be aware of the negative impact of social isolation and expand their networks; 2) join a group – such as a book club, writing group, or research group; 3) avoid perfectionism; 4) take up a new hobby; 5) seek to be challenged; and 6) build strong relationships with supervisors and supervisory committees. Bahar provides specific recommendations and reminds graduate students to steer clear of perfectionism, which encourages one to set goals which are unrealistic and beyond reach, and can lead to anxiety, fear of criticism, fear of failure, and failure to produce anything at all.

Ahmad Khanlari is a doctoral student who reflects on his graduate studies and makes recommendations to support future graduate students. Ahmad recommends that graduate students be assigned a thesis supervisor upon commencing their studies. This can help students think about their research and become acquainted with program requirements. International students may experience challenges surrounding communication skills, and may benefit from sharing office space with other graduate students. Graduate students can also benefit from seminars or workshops on: writing and publishing academic papers; scholarships, awards, and grant proposal writing; and employment opportunities. In addition, graduate students can benefit from required courses designed to help graduate students become acculturated within academia. Ahmad suggests that it is important for graduate students to be involved in academia, through participation in research grants or in research groups and through work as teaching assistants. In addition, Ahmad recommends that graduate students devote at least an hour a day to academic writing.

Cheng Li is a doctoral student who suggested making teaching practice an integral part of Ph.D. programs in education based on her reflections on her first teaching experience as a graduate student in a Canadian university. Through the process of teaching a graduate course online, she developed a better understanding of herself as a teacher, enhanced her knowledge base in

teaching and learning, and more importantly, gained a sense of professional accomplishment which was distinguished from the her previous career and teaching experiences. When confronted with a limited academic job market, Ph.D. students have to rigorously prepare for their future careers. Students can be supported in preparing for their careers by having enhanced access to opportunities to be engaged in various professional activities and receiving supports and supervision in exercising the practical skills necessary to implement various teaching practices or other activities.

### **Connecting with the Research Literature**

In regards to graduate students, Rigg, Day and Adler (2013) noted that higher education institutions have a responsibility to work towards improving student self-efficacy and engagement in academia and to decrease the possibility of exhaustion and burnout in students. Rigg et al. suggested that institutions build supports through providing specific programs and supports from advisors. These authors suggest that advisors should take interest in their students in regards to their academic lives as well as their personal and professional lives. They also recommended that institutions take care in providing advisors and to provide alternative advisors when a student's advisor is unavailable.

Higher education is seeing increased diversity in their student population, but institutional structures are often slow to provide supports for their diverse student population. In general, institutions of higher education are not changing to meet these diverse needs; rather they expand the numbers of students and use the same traditional approaches to education (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Moving into a post secondary environment is considered a major change or transition. This transition can be especially difficult for international students, for becoming "literate at university involves the process of socialization into cultural knowledge. However, rules and mores of that culture are rarely explicit, thus the process of socialization is largely unconscious" (p. 159).

Pidgeon and Andres (2005) studied the first year experiences of international and domestic students at four universities across Canada. The authors found that international students were more likely to develop relationships within their ethnic groups leaving less opportunity to interact with domestic students. International students reported that cross-cultural relationships were difficult due to language barriers surrounding English slang or Canadian culture, whereas relationships with their own culture provided students with a shared understanding. International students also reported physical adjustments, surrounding food and climate changes.

As a university that has embraced the increased presence of international students, it is important to understand how international students differ from students who are from Newfoundland or who are Canadian. Tseng and Newton (2002) interviewed two international students, one from Africa and one from Asia, about their experiences and perceptions of studying abroad. The article highlighted how these students coped with the transition to a new country by focusing on self-care (including physical well-being, self-examination and obtaining help from others). Through a grounded study analysis of the data, the authors provided the reader with the following themes and recommendations. "*Know self and others*" focused on understanding the differences between cultures, which is a "significant step toward making the adjustment to study

abroad life” (p. 595). “*Make friends and build friendships*” highlighted the need for international students to form friendships with both international and domestic students as a means of adjusting to life in their host country. “*Expand individual worldview*” was recommended as a way of understanding their host country and adjusting to studying abroad. “*Ask for help and handle problems*” was recommended as one of the best solutions for adjusting to studying abroad. “*Establish cultural and social contacts*” suggested that international students get to know their host country by getting involved with and participating in activities. International students were also recommended to “*Build relationships with advisors and instructors*”, become proficient in the English language, and use the tactic of letting go (p. 595).

### **Reflections from Faculty**

David Gill, Assistant Professor, Memorial University, brings the reader through critical periods in his own education. He supplements his article with collaborative evidence from his parents, former teachers and former colleagues. David guides the reader through his educational experience by discussing his early years and his sense of being confined while in school. He reported that, “I was stuck in school and there was no getting out despite how I felt”. David interviewed a teacher from his past and reflected on the impact this teacher had on his education. He also discussed his perceptions of small multi-grade schools, with the interview highlighting the need for staff to work together and provide a vision and culture of collaboration and helping. David then moves us to his years in his education program and the various influences, stating that the most meaningful aspects of his education were those that connected to his early education and experiences. David concludes by discussing his teaching and the lessons he learned while finding his way as a new teacher.

Dr. Sylvia Moore, Assistant Professor, Memorial University (Labrador Institute), discussed the challenges of being a new academic, in a new community, responsible for developing a new Inuit Bachelor of Education program. Sylvia began her article by reflecting on the questions from the interview for her current position. She highlights the difference between surface learning, as learning about something, and deep learning as learning “from” place and people. Sylvia highlighted the challenges of adjusting to academic life, learning the work, and learning about the workplace while being isolated from other education faculty. She also suggested there are challenges associated with balancing the personal and the professional expectations surrounding the position.

Dr. Heather McLeod, Associate Professor, Memorial University, uses poetic inquiry in her submission entitled “*Windows*”. The poem was inspired by her father who died 40 years ago, but left her with his own poetry and writing on philosophy. Through her father’s writing, Heather explores and reflects on her relationship with her father, and in the process of doing so, she is able to better understand and reflect on her family history.

Dr. Laurie Anne Hellsten and Dr. Lynn Lemisko are both Associate Professors at the University of Saskatchewan, and both chose to move into administrative roles early in their careers as academics. Laurie and Lynn outlined the history of change at the University of Saskatchewan as the institution moved from a teacher scholar facility to a research-intensive university. Their article outlined the history of the college, subsequent changes to their graduate and

undergraduate programs, and the skills and knowledge required of administrators. These authors also outline challenges they encountered, including workplace bullying, resistance to change, politics and not being able to move away from the “drama”, and faculty members getting their way because of lack of confrontation. In addition, they discussed challenges surrounding individuals not participating in the change processes involved in revising programs, and having those same individuals criticize the outcomes and undermine administration.

Dr. Ken Stevens, a recently retired Professor at Memorial University, reflected on the influences of his teachers in regards to his academic writing. He traces his confidence in writing to his elementary experiences, highlighting the importance of teachers and their impact on children. Ken discussed the perceptions and challenges of being an early academic, challenges surrounding the lack of confidence in teaching, and not knowing or even wanting to ask for help. He continued to discuss the lack of understanding surrounding being an academic; stating that it isn't all about teaching, but rather research, and writing for publication. Ken brings us on his journey of discovery and learning about teaching and research.

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