

ADVICE

Impostor Syndrome Is Definitely a Thing

Some ideas for teaching your graduate students how to avoid feeling as if they don't belong in academe



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By Rachel Herrmann | NOVEMBER 16, 2016

Dear Past Graduate-Student Me,
Last summer I wrote you a letter about all the things I wish you'd known when you started graduate school, but I made a huge omission: impostor syndrome. That dawned on me as I was talking to a new graduate student this fall who was describing

impostor syndrome without knowing what it was, or that many graduate students experience it. So I decided to write you another letter to tell you what impostor syndrome is, why it matters, and what you can do about it.

Impostor syndrome is the feeling that you don't belong — in graduate school or in your first academic or alt-ac job — and it's more common than you might think. It makes people believe that they aren't good enough, smart enough, or deserving enough.

You might have even Googled certain phrases — "I don't belong in graduate school," or "Should I drop out of graduate school?" or "Why does graduate school make people so unhappy?" — without realizing that you were suffering from impostor syndrome. I have included those specific questions here so that future graduate students who Google those phrases will have an easier time discovering that impostor syndrome is a thing. That discovery is particularly important for women, people of color, and first-generation college students because all of those groups are particularly prone to impostor syndrome.

I'm writing you this letter right now because it's that time of year when outbreaks of impostor syndrome strike hard. Maybe you've taken an exam or two, and maybe you have a paper due. I'm certain that you've sat in a seminar and experienced the urge to flee.

There are some good essays, which are applicable both to M.A. and Ph.D. students, on combating impostor syndrome. Here are some additional things you can do to fight it:

Be honest when you don't know things. I remember going home after one of my first graduate seminars to Google "postcolonialism" because I felt too stupid to admit that I didn't know what it was, and that, even after a week's worth of readings on the topic, I couldn't define it. Don't be like me. If you don't know or don't understand something, chances are that someone else in your class is confused, too. Try to avoid a seminar encounter in which you and the professor have an extended private conversation in front of everyone, but it's absolutely fine if your seminar contribution takes the form of a question rather than a comment.

Go to departmental events where people give papers. Doing that can be good for three reasons. First, one of the best ways to fight impostor syndrome is to fake a sense of belonging, and departmental talks let you see how academics present themselves. Observe the behaviors that seem well-received. Second, some of these talks are not that amazing, which can be reassuring. It reminds you that the bar for authoritative academic self-presentation can be lower than you think it is. Finally, you need to take a

break from thinking about your own reading, research, and writing every now and again. Going to a talk can be a good way to mandate that you spend time with your brain switched off from your own work.

Live a little. Participate in extracurricular activities, find hobbies, or get on Twitter. This advice falls under the "work-life balance" trope to which so many academics refer. It's important because it will allow you to build a support network where other graduate students can (and will) admit to experiencing impostor syndrome.

So, Past Me, those are some of the things I think graduate students can do to slay the Monster Impostor Syndrome. But after reflecting on my conversation with that new graduate student, I've also been thinking about the things that I can do to help graduate students fight that beast. Among them:

Demonstrate that it's OK to change your mind. Historians can, and do, go back to a piece of writing they've published, and then write a new article or book admitting that their thinking has changed — sometimes drastically. I suppose that scientists do the same. Keeping that option in mind can be comforting because it prevents you from holding onto a piece of work forever just because you worry that you will change your mind. At the same time, it's also crucial to remember that all of our writing and thinking are processes that take time. So, one of the things I try to do with graduate students is to make clear that taking the time to come up with ideas in the first place and then revisiting your past arguments are two different things.

Show them your work. I've talked with people on Twitter recently who have described giving multiple drafts of an article they wrote, plus readers' reports, an editor's comments, and the final draft of the article to their students. It makes transparent the amount of work necessary to produce an article, and reveals the sometimes mean comments that can make even seasoned academics feel like impostors. I had a history professor in graduate school who assigned a book and then told students to find one of

the author's articles and write an essay comparing the book with the article. That was a useful exercise in seeing how thinking evolves; it pulled back the curtain on academic productivity.

Raise the subject yourself. It's important, if you are teaching graduate students, to have a conversation at this point in the semester about impostor syndrome. Let them know what it is, that it exists, and that feeling this way is not limited to graduate students — that many academics continue to feel like impostors long after they earn their doctorates. Take some time to research the mental-health services available to graduate students at your university, and remind students that there is no shame in going to talk to someone if they are experiencing depression. At the end of the semester, or perhaps the year, remind graduate students how they felt at the start of their time in graduate school, and suggest that they try to have similar conversations about impostor syndrome with incoming graduate students.

Support your teaching assistants. There is something about a graduate student's first teaching experience that unleashes feelings of vulnerability because they are often so close in age to undergraduates. If you are lucky enough to have a teaching assistant, let your undergraduates know that your TA must examine any piece of work that students want regraded and has the authority (granted by you) to lower their grade as well as to raise it. You don't have to enforce that policy, and you can choose to examine a piece of work yourself if it seems necessary, but it is your job to publically support your TA in front of your undergraduates.

Model good academic behavior. It's imperative to be honest when you don't know the answer to a question or are unfamiliar with a topic. That sounds like a simple task, but I remember how revelatory it was when, as an advanced graduate student, I witnessed a professor early on in her career admit to not knowing something at a large public seminar, before posing her question to the seminar speaker. I was so glad she did because I, too, did not know what the speaker was talking about — and the professor's

question, framed in such a generous way, drew the speaker out. More important, though, it made me realize that pretending to know something sets a bad example for graduate students and can shut down learning instead of fostering it.

Support work-life balance. Do that by explicitly discussing ways students can read more strategically and cut down on inefficient reading time. Do it by adopting an email policy in which you do not respond to messages over the weekend, and encourage your TAs to use a similar policy with their students. Do it by talking about the ways you take time off from academe (that's why I deliberately post on Twitter about cooking or going on bike rides). In short, act in a way that shows students that people who relax and take time away from their research and writing are not impostors; they're humans.

I hope all of this makes sense, Past Graduate-Student Me, and that you do what you can to keep yourself from feeling like an impostor. That feeling may never go away, but maybe it will be helpful to know that so many of us feel it, too.

Chocolate, sunshine, and freshly baked bread, Future Me.

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