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Experiencing Graduate School

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Senior Project: Experiencing Graduate School

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Senior Project: Experiencing Graduate School

As I was about to conclude my undergraduate studies at the University of Tennessee, I found myself pondering what it was that I wanted to do as a college graduate. Am I ready to go out and make my way in the working world? Do I feel I have benefited from my undergraduate years? Do I want to go to graduate school? If so, where do I want to go and what area would I study? My advisor, Dr. John Haas, knew I was looking for a topic for my honors project and, sensing my uncertainty about my future plans, suggested I take his graduate class in Interpersonal Communication along with my final undergraduate class, Communication Studies 499, this summer. There were several reasons why this seemed like a good idea. Two of the best things about this experience was that I could experience a taste of courses at the graduate level, and I could compare and contrast it to my undergraduate communication classes.

I attended the graduate course, Interpersonal Communication, every Tuesday and Thursday from 5:00pm until 6:30pm. The class was during the first session of summer courses, so understandably I was unable to fully immerse myself in the graduate student experience. However, I did have the opportunity to experience something I am interested in for my future before making such a big life decision. Through this experience I was able to learn a lot about what is required at the graduate level, and I was also able to reflect on my recent undergraduate course in Interpersonal Communication in order to compare and contrast the two.

Both undergraduate and graduate level courses in Interpersonal Communication at the University of Tennessee were well-taught and enjoyable. One of the best things about these classes was that students interacted with one another for the entire class period, which

made it a more dynamic setting for learning. I have realized that with this comfort level students are more willing to express their thoughts on the subject matter and to participate in class discussions.

Another similarity between the undergraduate and graduate level that I came to realize through this experience is that graduate students live lives similar to undergraduate students. Some of them live in dorms and student apartments, they go to sporting events as students of the University of Tennessee, and they have a lot of the same professors that undergraduate students have. Just being able to see these similarities first-hand helped me focus in on how graduate school is similar to the experience I have had as an undergraduate student studying communication.

Although there were several similarities that I could identify through my experience between undergraduate and graduate level courses, there were also many significant differences.

I must say that I saw many more contrasts between my undergraduate level courses and this graduate level course. For instance, graduate students are held to a higher level of commitment to their studies than are undergraduate students. Clearly, expectations are much higher in graduate school. We were required to read much more material to prepare for class than I was used to in my undergraduate communication courses. I was reading close to 100 pages, if not more, for each class meeting in order to be able to contribute to the discussions.

Another difference between undergraduate courses and graduate courses is the relationship between the professor and the students. I realize that every professor has his/her own preferences, but Dr. Haas pretty much insisted that his students (in the graduate course)

call him by his first name, John. The graduate students obeyed this request and seemed to be very comfortable addressing him by his first name. This took a lot of getting use to since I am so familiar with addressing my professors in a more formal manner. In undergraduate classes it is rare for someone to feel comfortable enough calling their professor by his/her first name, but the informality in the graduate course did make the group feel equal even with the presence of the professor. I am aware, by talking with other people who are professors and graduate students that this is not true in other departments, but from my experience I thought it was interesting how informal the relationship can be between professor and student. In this class, I felt as though it made the students more comfortable speaking up and expressing their thoughts because our group was so small and Dr. Haas seemed as though he were “one of us”.

Something that I really was able to learn and gain from this experience is that if a person decides to go to graduate school he/she needs to be passionate about the education that he/she is pursuing. Graduate school requires dedication that is much more intense than undergraduate level courses. There are several more readings to do, much more class participation is expected of the students, there are frequent presentations and leadings of class discussions, and there are projects expected of the students that require a lot of time and effort. I have learned that one has to find a school where he/she feels comfortable and feels that he/she will succeed in his/her endeavors. Graduate school is an intense program with several rewards for those who succeed in the program.

I was unsure about graduate school at the beginning of this project, but now I am sure that someday I will obtain a graduate degree. Participating and seeing how graduate classes are conducted first-hand was an excellent experience for me. Not only did I learn

more about interpersonal communication, I learned how to communicate my ideas, thoughts, and beliefs about the material with my classmates. I made friends, we all supported one another, and we tried to help one another out during discussions to make each other feel at ease. From these friendships I was also able to learn about what life for a graduate student is like outside of the classroom.

Once again, I am glad to have had this experience at the end of my undergraduate career as it has opened my eyes to further education beyond the undergraduate degree. Once I have some idea of what I would like to passionately learn more about I will start searching for a graduate program that fits my needs, and has an environment where I will be able to succeed.

Katey's Graduate School Journal

June 7, 2007

Today's class was my first time stepping into a graduate level course. It was very different from all other classes I have had at UT. Since it is a graduate course, the students are more diverse in age. There were only six of us today in class which was quite a shock from the large classes I am used to as an undergraduate student.

Dr. Haas was also a lot more laid back in this class than in other classes I have had him as a professor for. The format of the class was more of a discussion rather than a lecture. Dr. Haas even noted that the grad students do not raise their hands to speak, rather they just say whatever they are thinking whenever they are thinking it.

I also feel like I am behind because these students have taken other graduate level courses. They are used to the long readings and the class format whereas I am being thrown into this new environment with no idea what to think. This will definitely be an eye-opening experience for me.

June 12, 2007

Today Megan taught our class. She did a really good job and brought home-made banana nut bread for us. She handled being the first presenter very well and was at ease leading our class discussion for the day. I was highly impressed with her capabilities.

Dr. Haas also told us that a difference between undergraduate and graduate school is that in graduate school students call him John instead of addressing him in a more formal manner as Dr. Haas. This is also something very different than what I have known, especially from him, and it will take some getting used to.

I offered insight and an example during Megan's presentation today, and Dr. Haas told me (after class was over) how glad he was that I made a contribution to the class discussion. I am usually a quiet student and I was glad to hear that my efforts were recognized.

June 14, 2007

Today's class was cancelled due to two class members having family emergencies.

June 19, 2007

Today's class session was set to go from 5:00pm-7:30pm which is a rather long time for me to sit and pay attention. It was not bad, though, as we covered interesting topics. I was also reminded that I have the privilege of leading our class's discussion next Tuesday with Dr. Haas. I am not too worried because the class is small and the group is an intimate bunch. I just hope I do not seem stupid and young to the graduate students.

I also slipped up and answered a question incorrectly when Dr. Haas put me on the spot and asked a question from a previous class that I knew the answer to. I will never forget that Darwin was one of the world's first social scientists....

June 21, 2007 – The End of Class

I enjoyed all that I learned. The journal quickly ended because all of my experiences were equivalent during these last few weeks. I felt as though I got more out of the course by fully submerging myself in it rather than thinking of what it was that I was going to write in the journal.

I do remember leading the class discussion one day with Dr. Haas which was a big accomplishment for me. I presented my interpretation of the reading material to my classmates, encouraged interaction throughout the discussion, and asked questions to prompt intellectual exchanges between the students.

Looking back, I enjoyed the knowledge that I was acquiring, and I am glad that I was able to have the viewpoint as an undergraduate student to see what graduate school in the College of Communication and Information is like at the University of Tennessee. I am grateful to have had this beneficial learning experience.

* Handout for the class discussion I ~~led~~ led on June 26th.

Chapter 16:

An Ecological Systems Perspective On Workplace Relationships

- **Conceptualizing Relationships**

- **Relationship Dimensions**

- Status
- Intimacy
- Choice

- **Ecological Systems Theory:** human development results from the dynamic interaction of the environment and the developing person. Four discussed in this chapter: microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and exosystem.

A) **The Microsystem:** the organizational member and his/her various relationships with other individuals.

- **Equivalent Status Relationships**

- **Different Status Relationships**

- **Developing and Maintaining Supervisory Relationships**

- **Maintaining Relational Control and Harmony**

- **Maintaining Distance**

- Expressing detachment

- Avoiding involvement

- Showing antagonism

- **Maintaining Dominance**

- **Resistance in Supervisory Relationships**

B) **The Mesosystem:** the interrelations among various microsystems.

- **Equivalent Status Relationships**

- **Different Status Relationships**

C) **The Macrosystem:** does not represent the immediate context in which a workplace relationship exists, but does impinge upon that relationship.

- **Equivalent Status Relationships**

- **Different Status Relationships**

D) **The Exosystem:** represents the over-arching cultural belief system, forms of knowledge, and social, technological, and political ideologies that manifest themselves in the other subsystems.

- **Equivalent Status Relationships**

- **Different Status Relationships**

- **Summary and Future Directions**

- **Microsystem Bias**

- **Intralevel Bias**

- **Unidirectional Influence Bias**

Additional Readings:

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