

Graduate Student Welcome

Welcome to Michigan!!!

This evening we are starting a new tradition in which several of the officials of the University welcome you as new graduate students and attempt to offer you some advice.

I suspect we are also starting a tradition in which our new graduate students have the wisdom to ignore this advice...

The Excitement of Graduate Study

Many of you making that exciting transition from undergraduate to graduate student...

Thinking back, almost 25 years ago when I make the same transition, I can recall many of my reactions at the time...

1. The very rapid sense of responsibility and control. Graduate students are expected to possess the intellectual maturity to determine their own course of study -- to set their own pace...
2. The intellectual excitement--of being able to dig in to a subject as deeply as you choose!
3. The quality of student colleagues...I make the transition from Yale to Caltech. When I left Yale, I felt that I was at the top...only to find at Caltech that students from renown institutions like Southern Louisiana State Teachers College were capable of blowing my socks off -- as were the Caltech freshmen in some of my classes. It was a humbling, tho important, experience...
4. The sense of collegiality with the faculty.
In a short time, many of you will have acquired knowledge in a narrow area that exceeds your faculty advisor. At this stage, the learning relationship passes from a parent/child to a peer-to-peer nature...and you enter the world of working with a faculty colleague.
5. Actually, this is probably the most exciting period in graduate education, since you are rapidly becoming a master in your chosen area of study... and indeed can draw on the reputation of the institution and your faculty colleagues...yet you are not subject to the other pressures of a faculty position -- e.g., pressure to achieve tenure.

Hence, as you take those first steps down the exciting trail of a college education, perhaps it is appropriate for the Provost of the University to pass along a few pearls of wisdom...

Actually, I would never dare give you any words of advice from my perspective as the University's supreme bureaucrat.

But, as a faculty member, I have spent almosts 20 years teaching and advising graduate students...and working side-by-side with them as valued colleagues.

1. Michigan is not a small liberal arts college...it is a great research university.
It is also a very large, complex, and exciting place.
Some parameters of the University

Parameters:

Enrollment: 35,000 (Ann Arbor) (47,000 total)

Faculty: 2,600 (14,000 employees)

Budget: \$1.3 billion
Academic Units
17 Schools and Colleges
Hundreds of research centers, institutes,
and other types of interdisciplinary
programs

Mission:

- i) Provides instruction, research, service
- ii) Spans all intellectual disciplines and professional areas
- iii) Attempts to conduct programs that rank among the nation's best in all areas (and succeeds...)

On this campus, we provide one of the most incredible intellectual smorgasbords in the world--a fascinating cornucopia of ideas supported by some of the finest facilities in the world -- one of the nation's great libraries, museums, laboratories, computers, concert halls, athletic facilities -- and even more important, one of the world's great faculties.

2. The role of graduate students

Graduate students play many roles in a research university:

students
teaching assistants
research assistants
faculty colleagues

You will soon be confronted with several of the age-old tensions which surround university faculty...

Perhaps the most important of these is the perceived tension between scholarship and teaching...

I suspect that all of you have confronted at times the competing demands posed by your teaching assignments and your thesis research.

Of course, as faculty members, you will also experience the same challenge between scholarship and teaching throughout your academic career.

All too often we are inclined to point at this tension between teaching and research as something unhealthy... as something detrimental to the quality of education...

However, let me suggest that it is instead, the very cornerstone of what makes education at a research university so very important...

For unlike small liberal arts colleges, a major research university like Michigan expects all of its faculty to be active scholars...and to bring that perspective formed from the continual struggle to extend mankind's knowledge into the classroom.

Indeed, I believe that the unique character of the education at this institution is due to the manner in which we strive to bring together talented undergraduates with active scholars...thereby exposing them to the excitement, challenge, and occasionally, the frustration of scholarly inquiry.

This is what makes Michigan...and Berkeley, and Stanford, and Harvard...such important institutions in our society...

And this is what makes your role as developing scholar-teachers so important.

3. From this perspective, it is critical that you recognize that you will probably be learning more OUTSIDE the classroom than in it. Through your independent study in the library or laboratory to be sure... This University is designed to provide a rich environment of intellectual experiences... Whether it be through the wealth of formal instruction we provide, or through the array of cultural, social, athletic activities. In fact, I suspect that most of you will end up learning more from your interaction with other students than you will from faculty! Take advantage of this environment... Get out and meet people and become involved!
4. Importance of diversity to this campus and your education UM has made a very deep commitment to the achievement of an environment which seeks, nourishes, and sustains racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity. We believe it essential to develop an environment of mutual understanding and sensitivity on this campus that not only tolerates diversity, but moreover seeks and embraces it as one of our most cherished characteristics. From the earliest moments in our long history, the UM has been known for a spirit of democracy and tolerance among its students and faculty. Almost a century ago, Harpers Weekly noted: "The most striking feature of the University of Michigan is the broad and liberal spirit in which it does its work." We believe that this commitment to diversity is key to the quality and distinction of this University--and to the quality of the education you will receive. For that reason, it is absolutely paramount that you demonstrate the sensitivity and tolerance toward others of differing races, cultures, and nationalities This will be an essential component of your education.
5. Finally, let me stress that your education at Michigan will not be a passive process...While it is true that we probably have more opportunities on this campus than any other university in the nation...it is also true that they will not be presented to you on a silver platter. We expect you to play an active role in your education! To explore, to discover, even to challenge yourself After all, life is one of those do-it-yourself experiences... We must understand the importance of deliberately leaving the fundamental freedom and responsibility of choice to the individual student. After all, this is part of their education. But, you should steer yourself with care, for as the saying goes... "At Michigan you will be given unusual freedom and responsibility... The freedom to do what you want... And the responsibility to choose the right things... Because, of course, that is what life is all about for someone of your ability. Michigan is an exciting, challenging...sometimes frustrating...but always rewarding place.

Let me wish you the best as you start the fascinating
and rewarding experience of graduate study at Michigan.
Once again, congratulations on your accomplishments...
and we wish you the best as you pursue your careers as
future members of the academy.