

## Student Panel – The Early Years of Grad School

### Farrah Chandler Jackson – Transition from Undergrad to Grad

- At the small school where she did undergrad, she was prepared but not exposed. Graduates of larger schools had courses that were not offered at her college.
- Graduate programs need to be receptive to students who might want to take lower level courses
- In admissions process, transcripts should be considered carefully. Officials need to ask themselves: What did the student's undergrad course cover? What was the content? How indebt was the study? What text book was used? – Look for gaps in the student's background.
- She came to grad school on a fellowship so she did not have to teach. Because of this, she missed bonding opportunities that other students had when they took a 3 day workshop on teaching skills. On the other hand, the positive thing was that she did not have the extra pressure of teaching during her first year.
- EDGE was invaluable – taught her value of group work. At first, she was not invited to study groups. She had to have the courage to invite herself. Her recommendation to professors is to create a structured study group session. This would relieve the pressure of first years to have to try a way to fit into a study group.
- Farrah volunteered a lot around the campus. This helped her to fit into the culture of the university.
- She was lucky to have an older graduate student as her mentor. She suggests to professors that they pair an older graduate student with a first year for mentoring.

### Chelsea Walton – Dealing with Fellow Graduate Students

- Chelsea was paired with a finishing graduate student. Student told her that some of her fellow students would come from schools such as Oxford and Harvard, then “there would be the rest of us”. This prepared her so that she was not intimidated by those students who came from exceptional academic backgrounds.
- Chelsea relayed a story about a buddy she made in her first year who would ask other students for help solving problems, but who would never approach Chelsea. She finally gathered the courage to confront him about why he did not respect her academic ability.
- Having a mentor helped give her confidence. When other students saw how much interest this professor showed in her, they took notice and developed respect for her.

### Alejandra Alvarado – Preliminary Exams: Sink or Swim

- Alejandra wanted to switch from applied to pure math as an undergrad. Because of this it took her an extra year to complete studies. Plus she had additional responsibility of being a single mom.
- Students need to share their career aspirations with their teachers so teachers can best advise them and understand what they are trying to accomplish. Teachers need to listen to their students.
- Alejandra thought she was ready for pure math. Advisor told her she needed a bridge course. She didn't listen. Consequently, she did not do well. That summer she realized she needed help and applied to and was accepted to EDGE after her 1<sup>st</sup> year of graduates school.

- EDGE taught her the value of networking.
- Had mixed success on her qualifying exams. Realized school was not a good fit. Instead of giving up, she found another program which best fit her needs. Was able to transfer (from one state school to another) and some of her courses and qualifiers transferred with her. Her advice to students: it's OK to transfer. Don't regard it as a failure.

Hannah Bennett – Starting Research: “How Do I Choose An Advisor? How do I get a thesis problem? Find an Advisor?”

- At U of Chicago, all students on a fellowship for first year. This takes away pressure of studying and teaching. All first years take same 9 classes.
- The expectation from the school is that students will rely on each other. Everyone is expected to succeed. Consequently, a strong network is developed among graduate students.
- At U of Chicago, there are no qualifiers.
- Upper year students do a good job looking after the first years.
- Some graduate students try to create programs for other grads. This gives them opportunity to work on research and to develop presentation skills.
- 1<sup>st</sup> year students are given an office. All share same office. All of this created a good environment for 1<sup>st</sup> year. Her crises came in 2<sup>nd</sup> year. 1<sup>st</sup> year she had been prepared by older students for the struggle ahead. Thought that things would be easier 2<sup>nd</sup> year.
- Older students have luncheon for new students. Give them assistance in choosing advisors.

Urica Wilson – Teaching in Graduate School

- Spent a lot of time in graduate school trying to determine if her negative experiences were because of her gender, race or both.
- 1<sup>st</sup> year, a professor asked her to make copies. She was only female student of color and was mistaken for secretary. Made her feel that she was being placed in a box. Started to believe it herself.
- Of all her responsibilities as a 1<sup>st</sup> year, most were easily measurable (grades, etc.). Teaching was the one thing that was not measurable until the end of the semester.
- With no instruction on how to teach, she made mistakes. Found it especially hard to grade. Students who were not satisfied with her grading structure would take complaints to her superiors. She was consequently assigned more advisors to “watch” her.
- Mistake she made was paying more attention to the negative comments on her evaluations than on the positive ones.
- Felt students never saw her as an authority figure.
- Authorities always supported students in case of disagreement.
- Felt that other graduate students were not having the same struggles so she did not want to talk to any of them about her problems. Finally she decided to take responsibility to talk to others and get feedback she needed. She was relieved to find that other students shared some of her experiences with teaching and the administration. It was not just her.

Q&A

What was key to attracting panel to the programs they chose?

- Received a personal phone call from a professor who spent time with her during visitation weekend. She was able to share her professional goals with this person who introduced her to people who could help her.
- Recruitment weekend. Met two other minorities already in the program and connected with them.
- Was advised about a professor who was doing a particular type of research that she was interested in.
- Even though there were not women on faculty, felt a strong sense of community among other women students, although they were few in number.

What made them decide to pursue math?

- A mentor who taught her the basics and built her confidence.
- Someone identified her as a person interested in math. This person guided her through, telling her what to do during the summer, what courses to take, where to apply.

How did relationships with female faculty help?

- The female professor at her school was not particularly interested in women's issues. Sometimes females totally buy into the prevailing culture. You might find that some of the best mentors can be male faculty.
- Actually got along better with the men on the faculty. Male faculty from other countries respected her more as an African American woman and respected her talent more.
- Thinks having other female faculty makes a difference because you are more likely to be treated with respect. Male students should have female role models in math to help eventually change the culture.

Student Panel – The Later Years

Valerie Nelson – Having a Life – “Friends and Family”

- Works, has a child and attends school
- Has had to balance motherhood, work, long distance relationship. This is her second time in graduate school.
- Second time in grad school she was more focused and her goals were clear; she knew what she wanted.
- Advice – Give equal priority to self, child and school. Don't allow one to complete with the other. Be realistic about routine you need to establish
- Be honest with family, friends and advisor. Sometimes you can feel like a slave to the advisor because you want to be taken seriously and he holds the key to your success.
- Reward yourself after personal victories big or small.
- Include family and friends in the process. Use family as audience as your practice presentations. When she taught school, she would give multiple choice test and allow daughter to grade them.
- Remember, there is a finish line.
- Forgive yourself over and over.

- Know when you need to restart. It's OK to do so.

Suzanne Galayda – Activism at the Graduate Level – “Power to the People”

- Atmosphere at her school was competitive. You were expected to go it alone.
- She needed community – learned this at EDGE
- On first day of class, she decided there was a need for study groups so she organized them. Believes you have to be a co-creator of your culture. You learn and grow based on how you interact with others.
- Started graduate student seminars. Canvassed the group to determine interest. Faculty liked the idea but was not interested in organizing. Seminars are for and about students. No faculty allowed. All speakers were students.
- Has experienced two instances of sexual harassment on campus by male students. Both times, issue was addressed. When asked faculty for a workshop on sexual harassment, there was no support.
- She has learned that the more she does, the more faculty is receptive to her ideas.
- Advice to students – find something that you are comfortable with and passionate about and go for it.
- Advice to faculty – be open to ideas that students bring to you.

Luis Medina – Professional Development: “Am I Ready for Life after Grad School?”

- Initially wanted to return to Puerto Rico to teach after grad school. Faculty challenged that. Asked if he wanted to work in academia or industry? He took advantage of the opportunity to work in industry. After this experience, he decided that he liked academia.
- Had to ask himself what were his strengths. Decided he loves research. Wanted a position where he could do research and teach.
- Started giving talks and publishing results.
- Participated in internships, conferences, workshops to keep learning after graduation.
- Networking was very important. Talked to colleagues of his advisors'. Let them know what he was doing and what he liked. Went to conferences to meet people.
- Advisor advised him about the weaknesses in his writing. Decided to write more to practice this skill. Advice: listen to feedback and heed it.

Farrah Chandler – Finding the First Position – “Postdoc, Tenure-Track or Industry?”

- Worked at a 2 year college before her current 4 yr. school
- Was taken back by interviewer at first school who asked how much of her research she did herself
- Had to do a mock teaching during the interview process. Was challenged on a specific topic. She knew she was right, so she respectfully disagreed with the professor. Found out later that this faculty always challenged women and minorities. Chose not to go to work at this institution because of the faculties' attitude of accepting this person's behavior.
- Advised administrators to be careful when hiring women and minorities. If you know that the environment will not be supportive and the entire department has not bought into diversity, you can receive backlash. People on first job thought she was hired to meet a quota. Did not accept the university's initiative to build a diverse environment.

- Always negotiate salary. Ask for summer support. People thought she was being paid more because she was a minority, but she was paid more because she had negotiated her salary and was paid for the value she brought to the university. Learned how to negotiate at EDGE.
- Before accepting offer, make sure you will have support. The university needs to have a clearly stated mission of what it is about.

## Q&A

What are some of the best practices for graduate students that were helpful in your success?

- Participation in EDGE or some bridge program
- Mentoring. Need someone to boost confidence and who believes in you.
- Schools should share information on what they are doing with others. Information about programs can be obtained by going on Focus or EDGE websites, Notices, AWM newsletter

What will be your passion as future faculty to insure students are well received?

- MESH – high school program. Wants to make math and science “sexy” again.
- Expose the culture. When you see negative behavior among departments and faculty, make it more transparent.
- Target, in admissions, good students who are struggling in life or in school and mentor them. Everyone does not come from ideal backgrounds or circumstances.

How would you change the culture of the math graduate study?

- More hands-on mentoring. Let students know that the expectation is graduation.
- Meet students where they are. Offer bridge courses. Do more investigation in admissions to understand the new student’s transcript. Find out what their undergraduate courses really entail.
- Mentoring - Early intervention in the graduate student’s life. Don’t wait until after quals. Know that everyone does not have to follow the accepted time line for studying and graduation. There are other ways to accomplish the mission.
- Teach students better study techniques. Not simply how to solve problems.
- Have an open forum for various issues. Create environment for sharing solutions to problems.
- Inform students about math programs or RAUs. Mentoring. Keep offering advice, but don’t be offended if the advice is not always followed. Ultimately student has to know what she needs and wants.