

Some Advice for Surviving Your First Year in a Doctoral Program



Graduate School of Education Diploma Ceremony. Photo by Bruce Gilbert. Flickr Forhdhamalumni. CC BY-NC-ND

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By Irma J. Diaz-Martin, Tanya Erazo. Introduction by Sujey Vega

Many doctoral students are nearing the end of the Fall semester or quarter in their programs and for those in their first year this often means having the reality check that this graduate school is a whole different ball game with a whole new set of rules. By now you should be thinking through your final research paper for seminar, sifting through external readings, developing your thesis, and outlining your paper. If you haven't started, get going. November has begun and here comes that week long event of drafting, eating, revising, eating, and revising we call Thanksgiving (uh, yes, in grad school we work through holidays).

The end of my first semester in a doctoral program was a terrifying experience. I feared my papers weren't good enough, my arguments were weak, and my true role as a charlatan would be revealed. I can thankfully say that I survived that first semester, and am motivated to help current students to develop strategies for avoiding or managing those fears. I've asked individuals from the Facebook group, Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees, to provide some words of wisdom. Though I completed my doctoral degree 7 years ago, I continue to appreciate their notifications on my feed because they are incredibly supportive and a wonderful resources for those entering, surviving, and completing their doctoral degree. Here, they offer you, incredibly talented yet possibly anxious reader, some friendly advice on what they wish they had known their first year.

Researching With an Open Mind

By Irma J. Diaz-Martin

Obtaining my doctoral degree is making my long life dream reality, as it is a way of showing my family how much I appreciate all of their hard work, struggles, and sacrifices they made for me. My

childhood memories are filled with the image of my parents working in the back-breaking agricultural field of the hot New Mexico scorching sun, earning an honest day of work. It is a way of leading by example as I encourage all Latinas to succeed and continue working towards their degree of choice. Pursuing an advanced study now enables me to encourage others through mentorship and giving back by having the ability to stand in front of a classroom and teach others how to succeed. Lastly, it is the ability to fulfill my belief in being a lifelong learner as I seek to continue finding solutions in making the workplace a more productive and employee friendly environment for my brothers and sisters serving in law enforcement through research.

I am the first in my family to graduate from college, and now the first doctora. Failure was not an option and I made it. So what advice to do I have for my hermanas who are in the battlefield trenches of a doctoral program right now? I followed some very simple and practical advice from professors who were willing to share their knowledge and keys to success. They were as follows:

- Start your first year with the intent of reading and studying widely in your chosen fields. This will lead you to identify your topics of interest, and, eventually, your dissertation topic. Keep track of your readings, take notes, identify experts in the field, first sources, and themes.
- Read, read, and read while keeping all citations in a program such as EndNote or RefWorks to manage your bibliographies, citations, and references.
- Always read and research with an open mind. Seek to explore your interests in your chosen field of study, with the purpose of identifying what is known while also attempting to identify areas of your study which have been unexplored. Think about how your contribution of knowledge will expand your field of study. Approaching seminar papers in this manner will open up your horizons by helping you identify your topics of interest and unexplored research for the formulation of your research questions.
- Use technology to your advantage. You can use your phone and tablet to make notes when you wake up in the middle of the night with ideas for your projects and/or dissertation. Jot your ideas down so you remember them the next day. If you don't have anything technological at hand, use a pen and note pad!

Follow all of the above from the start and you will have some material to build on when you get to later stages of doctoral program. Lastly, don't forget to take care of yourself and loved ones while you completing your program as it becomes all consuming. *Y recuerda, todo es posible con ganas y determinacion!*

Financing and Community

By Tanya Erazo

This is getting harder and harder to procure, but do not pay for a doctoral degree. They should pay you — tuition and a stipend. There are so few of us Latinas getting these degrees and we had to overcome a lot of things to garner admittance into doctoral programs. So, we should be taken care of when we arrive. Also, find students like you. My friends who are first-gen and/or doctoral students of color and I are a collaborative community. We share reading materials, scholarship opportunities, etc. with one another. Overall, stay close to your community — whether that be family, friends (in your field and outside of your field). Call them, visit them, live with them, whatever! You will need their support.

Lastly, find mentors who understand you. Reach out to a successful Latino, Person of Color, LGBTQ+ student or professional in your field who can guide you. Listen to their advice, but ultimately make up your own mind. I will never forget the Latinos who were straight up strangers who have helped me out. I am lucky that I am not shy because I would just send emails to people telling them I'd read their work or knew them through such and such conference, and ask them "Can we talk?" During one of these meetings, a Latino Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost of a university graciously took the time to help me conceptualize a potential dissertation idea before I was even admitted to a doctoral program. I will never forget what he told me. After I thanked him profusely for his time, he said something to the effect of, "We don't have many Latinos in academia to mentor us." He urged me "When you get in a position to do so, I just ask that you help another Latino or Latina." We should all aspire to do this. We didn't get here alone; it's a community effort. Let's not forget that when it's time to help the next student.

Sujej Vega is on the Editorial Group for *Mujeres Talk* and is an Assistant Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Arizona State University. **Dr. Diaz-Martin** recently graduated from Brandman University, part of the Chapman University System, with her Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership (Ed.D.). Her research interests are law enforcement culture, generational cohorts, and organizational leadership. She currently serves as a Board of Director for the California Association of Criminal Investigators (CACI), which represents over 500 members. Dr. Diaz-Martin is pursuing her passion in adult education as an adjunct professor and certified instructor for police academies in the State of California. She is a member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (BPOE), the Rotary Club, and United Way Women's Leadership Council. **Tanya Erazo**, MA, CASAC-T, is a doctoral student in clinical psychology at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center. She is in her second year and currently balancing research, coursework, clinical work, and teaching responsibilities

This entry was posted in [Graduate School](#), [higher education](#) and tagged [Irma J. Diaz-Martin](#) on [November 24, 2015](#) by [mujerestalk](#).