

UC Irvine

Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8ph785nw>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 14(1)

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Publication Date

2026-09-24

DOI

10.5070/D5.69427

Peer reviewed

Grad school: a survival guide

Thinking about an MFA? Here's why puppy yoga, drag queens, and your best friends may become an integral part of the process

by Ramin Zamani

I never thought I would go to graduate school. I knew it was something very hard that someone chooses to do, because I have seen someone close to me go through their master's program. I never envied them, and at some point, I knew I didn't want to make that choice. But—all of a sudden, you look around one day and you realize you have changed. The losses I experienced at twenty-four cleared the path for a new chapter. I was a new version of me, and this version came with an open door I refused to close. The result? I have been studying in an MFA program at UC Irvine for a year now, with one more to go.

I can now confirm that grad school is in fact not an easy feat, and I make sure to let my professors know often. One of them always replies to me with, "If it's not hard, you're not doing it right," or something like that. I can't remember the exact quote because I am always super stressed out with a million other things on my mind when she says it.

Grad school has a way of sneaking up on you and stealing your peace. It is relentless. The demands of late-night studying, rehearsals for concerts, teaching, and external jobs easily become overwhelming. According to one study about the challenges students face in graduate school (Kramer et al.), motivation to complete their studies is often difficult, but implementing effective strategies can mitigate obstacles. Graduate school requires a survival strategy. To survive your master's program while remaining firmly rooted, students must lean on their circle, fuel their body, and anchor their mind. I chose to interview my fellow graduate students because I wanted their most honest and firsthand perspectives. So in this essay, I will use my cohort in UCI's MFA Dance program as my guides in talking about the ways grad students stay calm during the storm that is graduate school.

Surviving a master's program starts with recognizing that you cannot go through this journey alone. Taking time to visit my best friend in between quarters has kept me rooted within myself. My best friend just recently moved to New York, and since she is like the other half of my brain, we make it a point to schedule time with each other, no matter how far away we are. She highlights the best parts of me and reminds me who I am whenever I'm feeling lost. Knowing I get to visit with her after every quarter has helped me push through some really tough weeks! Pilates enthusiast, Kaylee Kollins, seems to share this sentiment. She says, "something that keeps me grounded/rooted is friend time on the weekends because school is already so stressful during the week, so I like to be around the people I love on the weekends to help me wind down."

Cierra Torres, who is researching queer visibility in dance, talks about how, "...family dinners with my cohort, checking in throughout the week, or just spending quality time together..." reminds them that they "...have a strong support system outside of school." They believe that "making time to rest and connect with the people I care about helps me feel balanced and

reminds me that grad school is only one part of my life, not my entire identity.” Sabrina Huang, who entered grad school fresh off her undergraduate program, explains that she has “... a good support system. Luckily, I have my two best friends and my partner who I go to often to rant and release anything that may be on my mind from school.” When you lean on your circle, you create a safety net that keeps you from feeling isolated during tough grad school times.

While academic demands often tempt students to neglect their physical health, true academic stamina requires that you intentionally fuel your body. Sabrina Huang enjoys time at puppy yoga saying, “I try my best to go at least once a month because it keeps me grounded and cheers me up. Whenever I am around dogs, especially puppies, my mood instantly improves.” Personally, I have never been to puppy yoga, but if you know me, you know I love my yoga practice. I try to practice yoga at least 5 times a week. It truly keeps me sane during the craziness of grad school.

Cierra Torres says, “I do Pilates regularly both in and out of school, because it helps me center my mind body connection and reconnect after spending so much time studying or being on my feet.” Kaylee Kollins enjoys her time at the gym and says, “This usually starts my mornings and oftentimes sets me up for the day.” On the contrary, sometimes tending to your physical body could mean doing nothing with it. Alexis Morris, who is researching ADHD within dance, says for them, “I have one day that I’m allowed to not be productive or do anything, which I use as a recharge day.” In the end, treating your body well gives you the physical strength you need to handle a heavy workload.

Along with physical health, you also need clear ways to check in on your mental health and anchor your mind. During my very first quarter of my MFA program, I randomly started a routine that stuck: cooking a nice meal at home while watching YouTube videos of my favorite drag queens. Wearing noise canceling headphones to block out the world makes the experience even better. It provides a much-needed mental break from my school work and creates a comforting space where I feel I can completely unwind. These drag queen YouTubers have made me feel at home watching their videos and hearing their voices, which is funny to say out loud but is definitely true for me.

Alexis Morris shares that they enjoy making jewelry, crocheting, and drawing in their sketchbook and that “...doing artistic things that are not the art form that I am studying are helpful. It helps me to regulate my nervous system for sure.” Sabrina Huang pushes the importance of regularly “...reminding myself of ‘my why’ of being here and what my end goals are for myself.” Cierra Torres likes to journal, saying that it “...has also been important for me because it gives me space to reflect on my thoughts, emotions, and goals without feeling overwhelmed.” By pausing to take care of your mind, you ensure that getting your degree does not ruin your mental well-being.

Graduate school can be less about the end goal and more about the journey, and there are tools to help you through. Keeping in contact with your personal community, taking care of your physical body, and checking in on your internal self are three practices these master’s students have in common and are what ultimately keep them afloat. Yes, graduate school is hard, I think it always will be, and that is okay, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe for now that light is not the degree itself but the puppies waiting for you at puppy yoga, the drag queens on

YouTube, or the family dinner at the end of the week. Sometimes survival is taking things one day, week, hour, or even minute at a time. No matter what, it is going to be okay.



Ramin Zamani is a lifelong dancer and a second year Dance graduate student at University of California, Irvine. Their current thesis research investigates how professional and collegiate Muslim dancers navigate their religious and artistic worlds. Ramin balances their studies with yoga, travel, and a love for continuous learning. Outside of dance, they enjoy spending time with friends, cooking, and training their newly rescued dog.

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