11th September 2022

Working-Life First Draft: Recipe Testing

The recipe for any good quality pie crust includes flour (*all-purpose*), sugar (*white, granulated*), salt (*iodized*), and butter (*chilled*). The recipe for a good graduate student includes some mixture of hard-work (*lost-sleep*), passion (*burnout*), commitment (*confusion*), caffeine (*coffee*), and usually, *sacrifice*. From my experience, the taste of being a graduate student doesn’t go down quite as easily as a flaky pie crust with a favorite fruit filling.

I think I love to bake for a lot of the same reasons that I am drawn to research work. Both processes begin with a research question. What do I want to bake? How will I make it? Has someone else successfully made it before and published their recipe? Then I move on to sorting out my materials and methods. What ingredients will I need? What recipe will I use? Will I adjust any of the recipe to meet my needs better? Reviewing results is obviously the fun part. Moving into discussion and further questions, what could I change about my recipe next time I bake this treat to make the result better? Coming to the end of my first year of graduate school, I realized the recipe I had been using for graduate school, the one in which I sacrificed so many things I enjoyed to become a “better” student, actually made me worse.

Academic institutions value graduate students based on what the student can produce to benefit the institution. The pressure to achieve “success” from this lens can be insurmountable. For me, *days* out in the field collecting samples have turned into *months*. A day in the lab isn’t measured in hours but in tasks to be completed, if the sun sets before I leave then so be it. Classes should not be my priority since my primary purpose of being here is research, but I also can’t perform poorly in those classes, or I’ll lose my funding. I’m working hard, long hours, but someone else is working harder, longer hours. It’s an impossible cycle of feeling that doing “enough” requires going above and beyond.

This past winter the lack of work-life balance I had adopted fully took over my life. The context of my research required many weeks of spending long hours collecting samples in the field. With all my energy being dedicated to field work, I had left no space left in my life for classes, studying, social engagements, or any other parts of my regular routine for most of the winter semester. The work I had come to graduate school for, that I was passionate about, had become the center of life and I resented it. To “succeed” and be “valuable” as a graduate student, it becomes second nature to prioritize hard-work and commitment to a research project or question over everything else. Sacrifice is an undeniable piece of this mindset. I sacrifice financial stability, social time, rest, and time to pursue hobbies that feed my soul (and others like baking that feed my belly as well). I’m a researcher, but that is only a part of my identity.

Sacrificing all the things, people, and hobbies that make me happy and relaxed was not the key to a successful research project, nor a successful life. In the same way you can’t skimp on the rising time for a sourdough loaf if you expect an airy and crisp result, I couldn’t abandon the things I do to care for myself and expect to still be fully present and product oriented in my research.

I think I’m drawn to research for a lot of the same reasons I love to bake. When things don’t work out the way you planned, you can turn back to your recipe (*your methodology*). What do I need more of, less of? Is there something I should add or take away? My recipe is still being altered, sometimes I must add more research, other times more baking and sleeping. But, the outcome is only getter better with higher quality, diverse ingredients. The recipe for a good graduate student includes some mixture of hard-work, passion (for work, learning, hobbies, friends, and rest), commitment (*to making graduate school positive for YOU*), caffeine (*coffee, still*), and always, *growth*.