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Beyond Checking Boxes

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I'll openly admit it: I am guilty of being a box checker. I've often looked at my degree progress as a series of boxes that need to be checked in order to get me from where I am to where I want to be. That's not an entirely bad thing, as when you're working toward a goal you certainly need to [chart your course](#) ^[2]. Sometimes, however, looking at your graduate program as a series of boxes to be checked can keep you from experiencing the rich peripheral benefits of the experience. I've been guilty of the "just get it done" attitude, and sometimes,

especially when a class is particularly challenging, the pursuit of “getting it done” can seem like the guiding light that allows you to endure the semester. But graduate school is more than just a series of boxes to be checked. The skills you learn in graduate school should be akin to the kind of critical thinking that will help you solve problems in your organization and contribute to addressing issues in the world that affect us all. The skills you learn in graduate school [3] are purposely designed to make you think outside the box and beyond your comfort zone. If you just check the boxes, you’re going through your program with blinders on.

I’ve really been thinking about this lately. I pride myself on being very organized [4]. I review my spreadsheet multiple times a semester to plan the upcoming semesters’ courses and track my progress. I’m constantly forecasting how much time things will take and what they will cost. Not a bad habit -- but I want to go beyond checking boxes. Call it my new year’s resolution if you will, but I’m starting to think about graduate school as my sandbox. Remember being a kid and playing in the sand? For children, sand play serves as a place to learn skills for life! These skills include things like problem solving, social skills and language [5]. As graduate students, we are in a sandbox of sorts. We can try things here, be creative and learn about how to develop collaboration and communication skills. It’s a place to learn while we grow before we complete our degrees and step out into the next phase of our professional lives. Your time spent as a student is a time to take advantage of all the learning opportunities that you can. I get it -- many of us are on serious time constraints due to family or work obligations [6]. But to only check the boxes may mean you are ultimately cheating yourself out of some rich experiences that you can solely get in the sandbox.

I’m pretty busy grad student myself [7], but here are some ways that I intend to go beyond checking boxes this year.

Work and plan ahead. Plan, plan, plan. At the beginning of the year for the past couple of years, I’ve invested in a large wall calendar that allows me to see all 12 upcoming months. This way, I have a pretty good idea of what’s coming at me. I can make long- and short-term plans. Then, I keep one central e-calendar so that I don’t overbook myself [8]. Additionally, when a new

semester starts, I use [Trello](#) ^[9] with a week-by-week snapshot so that I can know at any time (thanks to the app) when something is due. Once you're organized, start looking at upcoming conferences and things you would like or need to do. If you're looking ahead, you can make time to work in activities that enrich your time in grad school.

Look (harder) for opportunities to be engaged. If you're a grad student who, like me, is [balancing work, family and school](#) ^[10], you've got plenty of excuses and valid reasons to miss out on those "extra" things like brown bag lunches, research discussions and guest speakers. I've made the excuse more times than I'd like to admit that I'm too busy or I'm not on campus that day. Quit selling yourself your own bull. Look harder. I've recently discovered that many presentations from notable guest speakers to my college are offered via web platforms like Zoom. This works because I don't need to be on campus to experience the content. Sometimes talks and webinars are recorded, so I've started listening to them on my commute. I've discovered some fantastic stuff lately just by looking for the opportunity, not the excuse.

Open your mouth. A baby bird in the nest gets fed when it opens its mouth. You, my friend, are like that little bird. You need to be fed all of the great stuff you can while you're in the nest. Nourish your grad student self with opportunities. How? [Open your mouth and ask](#) ^[11]. Don't be afraid. I recently expressed my frustration and confusion about finding publication opportunities. Suddenly, just by opening my mouth about it, I found several opportunities that I had not even considered. If you need something, ask for it! Talking to people -- your mentor, your adviser, your professional network -- is a great way to get help. I think that you'll find an incredible network of people in your field and in your profession who want to give back. Many of them have experienced exactly what you're going through, and they can help you obtain what you need.

I've decided that I'm not going to go through my program just checking boxes. As difficult as things may be at times, as grad students we should embrace the experience of being a student and take every opportunity to develop ourselves as scholars, professionals and leaders. Step inside the sandbox and play around.

What other ideas do you have for going beyond checking boxes?

[Image by [tookapic](#) ^[12] from [Pixabay](#). ^[13]]

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