During my time in graduate school, I have had the opportunity to be part of three different lab groups at two universities. While I will not claim to be an expert at networking, I’ve had a lot of success connecting with fellow graduate students and post-docs in my lab groups, which has greatly enhanced my academic experience and pushed me to become a better researcher. All labs look different, but regardless of the demographics, labmates are full of knowledge and typically willing to discuss research concepts, professional development, and how to obtain work–life balance. Academic advisers may encourage different levels of interaction among graduate students, but it is possible to form meaningful connections with other students regardless of adviser interaction. Some labmates will become close friends, but all of them will remain valued colleagues throughout your career. Here are three tips for graduate students seeking to build professional relationships within their labs.

Help without Asking for Anything in Return

While it never seems like we have enough time to do our own work, always make an effort to help labmates with fieldwork when possible. This past year, as I was running around the prairie helping a labmate catch grasshoppers, it occurred to me that I was actually learning a lot about experimental design and sampling protocol by helping out with a project that wasn’t my own. Many of my labmates have traditional field-based ecology projects, very different from my controlled greenhouse work, and by assisting them in the field, I am adding experiences to my repertoire that may be useful in my future career. There are many opportunities to learn new techniques and concepts by participating in someone’s research project.

Take Advantage of Time in Shared Spaces

Most graduate students spend ample amounts of time with their labmates in the lab, field, or car, but because we are all a little introverted, it is easy to keep to ourselves listening to podcasts, audiobooks, or music from our phones. While that time to ourselves is very important, it is also valuable to spend time talking with labmates when you are sharing spaces. Try to take 10 minutes when you get to the lab to ask your colleagues how they are doing and what they are working on. Listen. Ask questions. These moments are great opportunities to find out how your projects may overlap and get advice on procedures and sampling techniques. I have learned so much by talking with the students who have been in my lab longer than I have, and I try to spend time teaching techniques to younger students, even when I have not been instructed to do so by my advisers. In addition, some of the best ideas for manuscripts and analysis approaches have come from spending time driving to field sites with my colleagues. Don’t be afraid to take advantage of the times you spend in shared spaces.

Schedule Regular Coffee and Lunch Breaks

Two or three times each week I take a break to get coffee with two post-docs and another graduate student in one of my labs. Sometimes we vent about our busy schedules and workloads, but more often, we end up discussing our research and getting ideas from one another about how to approach difficulties we are facing with a lab procedure, statistical code, or scientific concept. Not only does this time help me work through my own problems, but it forces me to develop further scientific thought on other research projects as well. It is easy to be anti-social in graduate school and use your work as an excuse to prevent spending time with colleagues, but my adviser once told me, “You have to eat, regardless of how busy you are.” Don’t hesitate to take a break every now and then to connect with people in your lab and talk about your research or life in general.

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