A Tale of Graduate School: Part 1—
Being a Graduate Student
Dawn Ferris

Graduate school is not easy, but then
no one ever said it was. It should
challenge a person in several different
ways and teach many things aside from
the advanced coursework and learning
within a research project. A graduate
degree should also help you learn about
yourself, including how to think critically,
deal with success and failure, handle criti-
cism, work under pressure, and stand up
for your work. In the sense of moving for-
ward in a career, I could argue that this is
even more important than the technical
knowledge and experience you receive in
graduate school.

In preparing for this article, I reflected on
both my experiences as a graduate stu-
dent and as a faculty member advising
graduate students. I think, sometimes,
students don't recognize that their pro-
fessor went through the same things
that they are currently going through
and think that we have lost our perspec-
tive (or our minds—I'm not sure). While
I cannot speak to all circumstances, I
believe many of us have tried to remem-
ber our experiences in graduate school in
dealing with our students.

As a new school year begins, I thought
I would try to share some insights from
both sides. In this issue, I will talk about
the student side of the graduate school
experience, and in the next issue, I will
talk about the faculty side. Not every-
one will agree with me, and if you
don't, I would invite you to share your
thoughts and ideas for inclusion in a future Tales from the Pits article (dferris@sciencesocieties.org). I open this invitation
to everyone; faculty and students as
well as employers who have their tales to
tell regarding what they look for when
hiring their employees.

There's one important point that I would
like to make before going much further
since I will cite the hard work associ-
ated with graduate school along with the
numerous positives: Graduate school has
to be the right decision for you. You have
to want to do it, and you have to make
the commitment to it, or it won't work out.
I was the first person in my entire family
to attend college and earn a bachelor's
degree, so moving on to a master's and
then to the Ph.D. was, I think, proof to
them that I was pretty much crazy. Being
blue collar, they couldn't understand why
I didn't get a “real” job after four years
of school and start paying off my stu-
dent loans like everyone else, so I didn't
exactly have a cheering section where my
family was concerned. In the end, gradu-
ate school was exactly the right decision
for me, and while I lost some things, I
 gained more than I ever thought I would.

Grad school comes with long hours of
hard work both in coursework to keep
your GPA high and in getting research
done that doesn't always go the way you
would like. Depending on what your
research project entails, you may be
on the road for days/weeks on end (not
always a bad thing) or you could be in
the lab all hours of the day and night.
I have experienced both. I remember
working on my master's degree in soil
physics at the University of Minnesota.
The program is located in the basement
of Borlaug Hall, so I never got to see day

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