Graduate Division Reorients Students on the Road to the PhD

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PhD students tell us that the first two years of graduate school generally go well. It's familiar territory to them—they take classes, do lab rotations, and work on projects under supervision. They regularly turn in assignments and get feedback from instructors, develop their thesis proposals, and prepare for their qualifying exams.

As students enter their third year, though, a fundamental shift occurs. Suddenly, "school" doesn't look like it once did at all. They've cleared the concrete hurdle of passing quals, and now they are in charge of their own schedules. Rather than feeling relief, some students suffer a crisis of confidence.

This November, the Graduate Division took action to address the potential post-quals slump by hosting a "Third-Year Reorientation," held in the Fisher banquet room at the Mission Bay Conference Center. The event was meant to help students reconnect with fellow students who started at the same time; to offer advice from more senior students and postdocs who have faced the same challenges; to encourage them to take advantage of campus resources; and to remind them that their physical and mental well-being must be a priority.

"Yes, you're scientists, but you are so much more," said Graduate Division Dean Elizabeth Watkins in her welcome to the 99 students, who had just finished chatting over breakfast. "You have hobbies and relationships that are important to you. Give yourself permission to include these things in your lives and, please, take care of your whole self."

The half-day event featured a panel of four individuals who have successfully navigated the 3rd-year hurdle themselves, followed by small-group, facilitated discussions over lunch. The
panelists were: Aaron Hardin, a postdoc in bioengineering; Bettie Osuna, graduate student in the Tetrad program; Lianne Pope, graduate student in chemistry and chemical biology; and Caroline Tai, graduate student in epidemiology and translational science.

Here’s a small sample of the important advice offered by the panelists:

- Take the initiative to get the mentoring you need from your PI. Schedule regular meetings, if you can.
- Give your mentor something to react to, like a list of career goals, a timeline for publishing, or career exploration activities you want to take part in.
- When your mentor is busy, seek out help and advice from others: your thesis committee, postdocs, more senior students, the Graduate Division, even your undergraduate adviser.
- Make sure the people on your thesis committee are in your corner: people who are excited about your research and who care about you and your future, people who will have your back.
- Take the time to explore career options. UCSF’s Office of Career and Professional Development and the MIND Program can help immensely.
- Take advantage of Student Health and Counseling Services (SHCS), which has a new full-time director of student mental health. SHCS health care providers are very familiar with graduate student issues and concerns. They offer one-on-one counseling, as well as helpful workshops.
- Work hard, but take care of yourself and give yourself time to recharge. Graduate school is a marathon, not a sprint.

The Graduate Division’s Third-Year Reorientation was followed by reorientations held by each individual graduate program in the basic sciences. This event will be held every year going forward to help students successfully navigate the challenges of this pivotal point in their academic careers.