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I'm Still Standing: Five Strategies to Survive Going Back to School

Janice Hawkins

Old Dominion University, jhawkins@odu.edu

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[Google Reader, rest in peace](#)

[I'm still standing!](#)

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I'm still standing!

Five strategies to survive going back to school.

By [Janice Hawkins](#)



Making the decision to return to school for a PhD was difficult for me. I feared the unknown but inescapable lifestyle adjustments. I'm resistant to change. When facing life's cold waters, I wade, rather than plunge. There's no wading into a PhD program. In spite of my cautious nature, I took the plunge.

Two years after "taking the plunge," I'm happy to report that I'm successfully navigating the waters. For those of you who are considering continuing your education, I offer five strategies for surviving, possibly even enjoying, a return to school.

Make it personal. When compiling my list of pros and cons, I had no trouble listing the professional reasons for going back to school, but in the end, I knew that committing to such a demanding and lengthy goal had to be for more than professional reasons. For me, climbing the career ladder is not enough of a motivating factor.

When I'm up late at night or giving up a weekend to complete an assignment, I remember my reasons for starting this journey. The desire to learn is a driving force for me, but I could happily spend that time learning to knit or mastering a foreign language, so there has to be more to it. My bucket list includes working as a nurse on all **seven continents**. With a PhD, I'm building the credentials to teach at a foreign college. I think this is in my future. Or, I may use the flexibility I gain to teach more online courses, enabling me to serve on short-term medical mission trips around the world. My bucket list motivates me.

Something's gotta give. Before starting the program, I took an inventory of my time. I deliberately gave up my soccer-mom duties, my position on the board of the local Parent-Teacher Association, and participation on a busy committee at work. My husband willingly assumed some of my traditional chores, and we hire out a few others. My fourth child, the only one at home, has her driver's license. Even though we share a car, this has reduced my time on the road. My university has reduced my workload while I'm in school. Every little bit helps. In spite of all of this, there are times that I simply cannot get everything done. We eat out a lot more than I planned. My closets are disorganized. I've missed quite a few days at the gym. I've learned to live with this.

Decide a dissertation topic early. This was advice I received from former PhD students and, so far, I've taken it to heart. While it's still early in the process for me to conduct my dissertation research, I've tried to focus my assignments on my overall topic. I've completed an ethics paper on short-term medical missions trips, a literature review on best practices of such trips, and a mini research proposal on their cultural competency outcomes. While these topics are of personal interest to me (another piece of advice I took to heart), I'm gathering knowledge and information that will contribute to my dissertation topic.

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With each course, I'm becoming more familiar with the literature and current research. This strategy has already paid dividends in building my cumulative knowledge and saving me time in gathering related articles. I suppose it's akin to declaring your undergraduate major early. Freshmen who declare their majors have a better chance of graduating in four years.

Turn your everyday practice into scholarly activity. I learned this valuable lesson from Kathleen Heinrich, PhD, RN, when I attended her workshop on the subject. Observing that most of us have difficulty making time for scholarly activity, she encouraged us to make the most of what we already do. This message, reinforced over the three years Heinrich has served as a consultant to our faculty group, inspired me to create a scholarly trajectory of things that are already a part of my everyday practice.

In my personal life, I make time for medical mission trips. In my professional life, I turned that into a formal study abroad. Not surprisingly, this has become my scholarly focus. Now that my everyday practice includes PhD coursework, I approach each assignment in the course as a potential manuscript. As I'm reading and writing for school, I note which journals publish on the topic and begin to consider how my assignments might be revised for publication. My ethics paper was recently accepted for publication and I have one manuscript under review.

Finally, strive for imperfection. I may need to use my mom voice here: "Do as I say, not as I do." This is perhaps the hardest strategy for me to adopt. I'm embarrassed to tell you how much time I've spent toiling over simple discussion-board posts. When we're required to respond to three discussion-board prompts to earn our participation points, I usually respond to four or five for good measure. I tend to work ahead of schedule when possible. I have less due-date anxiety this way and fewer assignment emergencies.

This approach results in less negative impact on my family, but it also seems to give me too much time to edit and revise, edit and revise. Of course, editing and revising improve the quality of my final submissions but, occasionally, I need to hit the Submit button a little sooner. I suspect that most students striving for a PhD suffer from overachiever syndrome. I encourage all of you to submit quality work you're proud to own but, every now and then, consider giving yourself a break. *RNL*

Janice Hawkins, MSN, RN, is a lecturer at Old Dominion University School of Nursing in Norfolk, Virginia, USA. Master adviser certified, she also serves as the school's chief academic adviser.

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Thank you!, 6/27/2013
by: smmciane@gmail.com

Rating: 1

What an encouraging - and real! - post. I wish I had had some of this advice before I started my PhD. (I, also, lived to tell about it ... graduating on my 62nd birthday.) I wish you the best, but from your very thoughtful approach I doubt that you will be anything less than successful!

(**Delete**)

Thank you, 7/3/2013
by: jhawkins@odu.edu

Rating: 5

Thank you for your kind words. I'm overwhelmed this week with PhD coursework. Seeing this article "in print" and your complimentary remarks are inspiring to me. Thanks!

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