



MAKING MY DIFFERENCE WITH GRADUATE EDUCATION: A LEARNER'S PERSPECTIVE



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ABOUT

Making My Difference with Graduate Education: A Learner's Perspective is meant to amplify a diverse range of student voices and deliver their unique stories to institutions of higher education. Our goal is to showcase the way learners think about and utilize support systems and resources through every step of their educational journeys, and help institutions further their understanding of how every learner's journey is inherently different.

By viewing these experiences through various lenses, including an anonymous open discussion forum and candid roundtable, this content series aims to chronicle real, lived experiences, stories, and life lessons from traditional, nontraditional and first-generation graduate student learners.

Through capturing these learner perspectives, we explore and unpack the idea of what it means to be successful - how these learners are benefitting their communities, what their learning backgrounds bring to higher education, why they desire to become agents of change and how they are using education as their glidepath to do so.

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“I went back to school following the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to change my career path. I am hoping that furthering my education will allow me to stray from the hospitality and entertainment industry into the corporate realm. The MBA at Rutgers has, thus far, given me an enormous amount of insight into real-world applications of finance, management, and analytics and though I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, I am not quite sure where the tunnel leads.”

Mark Slotoroff

MBA Student
Rutgers University – Camden



A portrait of Debdas Ghosh, a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored jacket. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a soft blue and green gradient.

MY UNIQUE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

Debdas Ghosh

**Big Data Engineer
Walmart Global Tech**

My story is one of determination. I set out to advance my education in a new country, and have since seen firsthand the ways that doing so can transform the trajectory of my life. My journey has not taken a traditional path, and in that simple way, it has made my journey unique. For this and many other reasons, I believe we deserve to be able to present our whole selves to our graduate programs, as well as our future employers and colleagues. I want others to know about and learn from my path, and most importantly, I want admissions decision-makers to realize that students are much more than data points – we all have distinct stories that can tell you more about our potential than any admissions criteria.

I had always dreamed of studying in the U.S. and that dream became a reality for me in 2019. When I first stepped foot in America to begin my master's program at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Computing and Information, up until that point, my entire learning journey took place in India. Though I was overwhelmed by the challenge before me, I was proud to have the opportunity step outside of my comfort zone to pursue the education and the career I desired.

For me, moving to the U.S. was equal parts exciting and unfamiliar. Many students who study abroad in America have a lifeline here– family, friends, colleagues. Things were different for me. I was the first person in my family to travel to the United States, let alone study here. I had no connection to anyone who was established in America to lean on. But what was most important to me was making my family proud. In those moments of fear and solitude, I wished my story could be told, because while I felt both proud and brave, I also wanted others to know that I was vulnerable.

This vulnerability led me to pursue assistance and resources from my peers and administrators. They helped me navigate all the challenges I was facing, from the logistics of moving to the other side of the world to connecting with others who could relate to my experience. My peers not only helped me find an apartment, but also shared advice on what most consider the most basic of tasks, such as operating my cell phone while in Pittsburgh, navigating around campus and utilizing public transportation. My admissions coordinator helped me find an on-campus, part-time job so I could support myself. Leaning on these individuals for advice big and small helped drive my success in graduate school.

While I was juggling intense academic work and trying to properly balance that with a part-time job, I also struggled with missing the people I was closest to, in the place where I was most comfortable. I learned to be transparent with my professors because my learning journey was deeply affected by my personal life. I want other students and institutions to know that with every unique learning journey comes a unique personal journey. Those two journeys together tell the story of a student.

In 2021, I graduated with my Master of Science in Information Systems degree with a focus on Computer Science and have since begun working for Walmart as a data engineer. While my graduate educational journey has come to an end, for now, I hope my story resonates with each student who is currently navigating through life and trying to meet their own academic and personal goals. Remember, we are more than data points or the information in our admissions applications. We all have our own story to tell.

LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

In higher education, we are keenly aware that each learner is on a one-of-a-kind journey. And the current educational landscape reflects, in many ways, the sheer number of divergent paths that these students may choose in pursuit of their individual goals. But often the access that each student has, or lack thereof, to resources and tools to help them on their journey is what sets them on their ultimate path.

In early 2022, we conducted an anonymous, open-ended discussion with dozens of domestic and international graduate students representing a wide range of demographics, degree levels, and disciplines. The candid information they shared has helped us to better understand their pathways to and through education, and how, from their perspective, institutions can better support them throughout their educational career and beyond. Overwhelmingly, these students told us that being able to represent their true, authentic selves to graduate schools was, above all else, the most important missing piece to their educational puzzle. Here they share, in their own words, how they feel institutions can create more inclusive and diverse graduate education experiences.

WHAT DO LEARNERS NEED?



HOW ARE LEARNERS LOOKING TO MAKE AN IMPACT?



HOW HAVE LEARNERS BEEN IMPACTED?



WHAT DO LEARNERS NEED?

What is the role of a company like ETS in addressing the unique needs of students?
What, if anything, would you like to see ETS do to address the needs of the students at multiple points in their educational journeys?



As a graduate student, what would you need to become the most successful version of yourself?



WHAT DO LEARNERS NEED?

Pretend for a moment that you've been asked to brainstorm your ideal product, tool, or service that, if it existed, would make the graduate journey easier for you. How would it work? What specific problem would it solve?

Research & Databases

" I'd like a tool which can access your past co curricular activities, your academics, your interest of major and your SOP to give a score which can determine if you are able to go into a specific college or not with a 70-75 percent accuracy. I feel it will simplify the students doubt of which schools to target. "

" There are tons of resources already for students to use to get ready for exams and prepare application materials and stuff. I feel like a tool that will be useful to many students which is not available very easily now, is a dataset of students of different countries with their backgrounds and maybe their CV, SOP, etc. and where they got accepted. Something that could be verified and prevents false information. Basically students can check out people with close backgrounds to them and see where they got accepted and try to understand in a more tangible way what they chances are and what areas they need to improve. I would try to tackle the uncertainty of the whole apply journey both emotionally and functionally! "

" The ideal product would be an advanced evaluation for better alignment to potential degree programs. Instead of testing for a specific score, this assessment would measure different strengths and weaknesses, interests in different areas, and psychological aspects. Additionally, I would make a service that allows professors with research openings to reach out to candidates with evaluation scores similar to what would be optimal for a given program. "

WHAT DO LEARNERS NEED?

Program & Career Planning

"The service that would have helped me the most is probably just some sort of counselor that could have talked me through the steps of how to pick a worthwhile graduate program, then walk me through the steps of how to apply."

"I would hope there is a tool to help me prepare well for the job seeking and interview. If I want to find an internship in this summer, the planner will evaluate my knowledge level and give me a detailed plan."

Application Assistance

"I would like for there to be a way to give applicants a better understanding of how competitive the graduate schools that they are applying to actually are. For example, it would be nice for applicants to know how many spots a graduate school has to offer, or to know certain criteria it typically requires to get accepted."

"I would describe a tool that would help people prepare for the graduate school admissions process of test preparation and submitting an application with suggested timelines and milestones. This would help with organization of the various parts of the process to make the transition as successful as possible for the start of the graduate school journey."

WHAT DO LEARNERS NEED?

Mentorship

It might be good to see how other students went through their graduate programs, such as how they overcome their language barriers, how they find their job after the programs and how they find useful and necessary study resources. If I can ask and find some information in one platform like Piazza, it would be helpful for graduate students.

I think it would be helpful to have a designed point of contact or mentor, perhaps a senior, who would guide you all along the way. Of course no one's journey is exactly the same, but having someone who went through similar problems in the past helps.



HOW ARE LEARNERS LOOKING TO MAKE AN IMPACT?

What kind of unique impact do you hope to make because of your graduate school experience?

Innovation & Advancements

" I hope I can extensively add to the literature on socioeconomic issues, colorism, relationships, and different issues, including colorism that uniquely plague Black women. Graduate school is simultaneously aiding me with the knowledge needed to inform the general population regarding these issues so I would like to bring more awareness by being socially active. "

" I want to have an impact on my field of research. The grad schools enable me to be part of a highly motivated and hardworking research team which is well funded. "

Societal Impact

" Law is likely among the least diverse professional fields; simply my presence and work throughout graduate school I hope will empower me to inspire other minority backgrounds into entering the legal field. Graduate schools, like undergraduate schools, are quite committed to DEI initiatives these days. "

" When I got accepted to the school I did, I was told by one of the professors that I am the first transgender Ph.D student they've had in the program in recent years. I think that succeeding in this program will help other LGBT+ and especially trans people who want to be mathematicians see that they can do it too if they drown out the noise and work for it. "

HOW ARE LEARNERS LOOKING TO MAKE AN IMPACT?

What would you like to take away from your graduate school experience?

Career Opportunities

" I need a well-rounded education to succeed in my goal. This means comprehensive knowledge as well as lab and professional experience. With this background, I will be able to apply for my PhD and carry these skills throughout my biomedical career as I research autoimmune disorders. "

" I would like to achieve a fulfilling job that helps me give back in a way that molds with my skills, work style, and desires. I have no illusions that a job can be fully fulfilling, but I would like to feel good about what I do. "

Skill Development

" I want to learn to think in complex ways. Also develop expertise in some data analysis techniques and understand brain pathology as a multivariate phenomenon. The most important thing I hope to achieve is to help others ask more questions, based on what I contribute. "

" I would like to feel like I learned more about my field, grew as a scholar, and published new/informative/thought provoking research. I would also like to feel competent and confident enough in my field to be able to educate others. "

HOW ARE LEARNERS LOOKING TO MAKE AN IMPACT?

Network & Relationships

I hope that I finish grad school with a network of peers and mentors who I have meaningful professional relationships with.

As always, I want to come out a more well-rounded person. I want to make some lifelong connections and I want to be able to spread the knowledge that I obtain.



HOW HAVE LEARNERS BEEN IMPACTED?

What has been your biggest personal challenge or difficulty in your graduate journey? How were you able to overcome it (if at all)? How do you feel about this?



What resources have been helpful to you during your graduate journey? At what point in the journey were they helpful, and how? How is this different (or similar) from the experiences of other students in your opinion?

Online Websites & Technology

For me, the online meeting apps (Like Zoom) are really helpful during my graduate school journey. Since people can't have meetings or conversations in person, these apps help us keep in touch. Via these efficient tools, most communications and research activities are back to normal.

Leveraging social software like GroupMe, Microsoft teams, and one note have been great keep things organized and shareable. Keeping track of notes, projects, and assignments ahead of deadlines was key to the usage. Plus, I was always able to quickly ask questions and advise from peers.

HOW HAVE LEARNERS BEEN IMPACTED?

Workshops & Discussions

I feel that the Writing center services offered on a lot of campuses throughout USA is a great tool for international students like myself who are new and adjusting to the writing style in this country. From my personal experience, I learnt a lot about how my professors wanted the assignments, the research papers, project submissions, etc. through the Writing center resources offered at my university.

I attended some information session which were delivered by the schools, they gave some detailed information about the programs and useful websites that I can get more information.

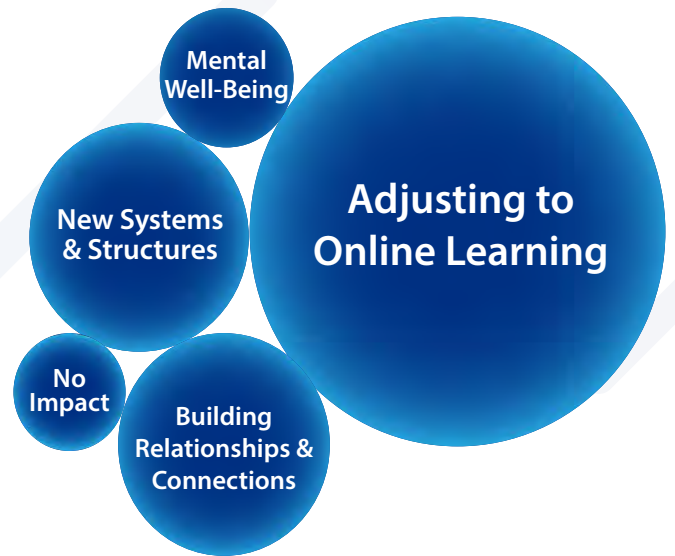
Relationships & Connections

During the application process, reaching out to professors, grad students, and post docs in a variety of institutions was helpful to me. I could ask them questions about academia, careers, grad life, advice for applications, etc. I also practiced talking about my research with them, and it was a good way to improve at networking.

The only resources that have been helpful have been the other students in my cohort. They know a lot more about academic than I do. Like I said I'm a first gen student, so I have no idea how to navigate any of this and still kind of don't. So us having a group chat is super helpful, we remind each other of deadlines and share books and tips.

HOW HAVE LEARNERS BEEN IMPACTED?

How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted your graduate school journey, if at all? What are the differences between your academic life pre-pandemic and now?



What have you learned about yourself as a student or learner during the pandemic?

Learning Abilities & Styles

As a student during the pandemic I feel the same, but I am more focused when studying, I find ways to be more effective, it has even helped me with connecting with my peers more as some people may be nervous to converse with others during face-to-face instruction.

I have learned that no matter how difficult the times might get, there is always scope for growth and improvement and that the show must go on.



LEARNER ROUNDTABLE

In this recorded roundtable we hear from five graduate students from across the United States, who explore and uncover with one another what learning has allowed them to do and how it has shaped who they are today. Through this discussion they reveal the parts of the educational system that have presented barriers for them over the course of their personal learning journeys and offer solutions to help break down those barriers and encourage more inclusive education.





Amber Williams
Counseling Psychology
Ph.D. Candidate
Howard University



Alyssa Lawson
Psychological and Brain
Sciences Ph.D. Candidate
University of California - Santa
Barbara



Yiqin Pan
Educational Psychology
Ph.D. Candidate
University of Wisconsin



Xiaomeng Ma
Linguistics
Ph.D. Candidate
The City University of New York



Elham Nikbakht
Educational Psychology
Ph.D. Candidate
Texas A&M University

Q1

As a learner, what barriers to education have you encountered throughout your educational journey? Were these barriers encountered during the admissions process or at other points in time? What steps did you take to overcome those barriers?

A major barrier in my learning and educational career has really been at the points where I've been applying for universities and each step forward. I haven't had a lot of support in knowing exactly what the application material should look like or what... When I was applying for my first graduate program, I had no idea what a CV or a personal statement was supposed to look like. And I didn't have a lot of support in high school or college.

Luckily once I hit my first master's program, I did get support. But in the first few steps, I didn't have support on what are these supposed to look like? And my parents weren't really able to help me. I didn't have very many resources in my schools that could help me directly. And so that was definitely a barrier to trying to get to a university and move forward in university to work on it. I'd basically just had to talk with other people that were going through the process, or that had recently gone through the process if I could access them. And I just tried my best.



I think the greatest barrier for me is I don't know which place fits me best. It's like, there are so many professors, so many programs, I don't know their expectation. So I don't... Even if my background, my education background fits those positions well, those programs well, but I don't know what exactly they're going to do. So I don't know which one to choose. So I just blindly apply for almost all the programs I can apply for. Then choose one a little bit blindly. Yeah. I just feel, oh, this advisor, this professor, they did something similar in the past. So I choose him as my advisor, but what exactly I'm going to do? I was not clear. So at that moment I cannot spend a lot of time hesitating, like which program I'm going to go. Yeah. So that's a barrier for me.

Q2

In your opinion, what are the biggest barriers that individuals that come from underrepresented backgrounds face within the education system?

To me, in my opinion, some of the biggest barriers that underserved populations encounter on their way into higher education, or education in general, are a lack of resources, both environmental and financial. Right? If you think about when I was taking the GRE, I mentioned having private tutoring, right?

Everyone is not able to afford that. In addition to that, I took two of the \$600 prep courses, right? So that's \$1,200. In addition to the application fees, you have to pay for your transcripts. You might have to have private tutoring. And those things are so expensive it might completely deter somebody from an underserved population from even trying. So I think that is the biggest barrier in general, to keep people from pursuing a higher education.



I think one of the barriers they're facing is it's very hard to find someone with similar background to talk about their pressure. For example, if you are from a LGBTQ group and you enter some doctoral program, it's hard to find someone, study the same major, also have similar LGBTQ background. So for those people in that group, they are facing different pressure as like no other students. For other students, they don't need to face some pressure from the family about marriage or something, but LGBTQ people, maybe they have to face this kind of pressure and also the pressure from their academic work simultaneously. So it's very important for them to find someone to talk about their experience, to share their pressure, to share their challenge and the difficulties their meeting. But if you are a PhD student, it's very hard to find someone that has the same background as you, or someone senior, or someone who already experienced this kind of thing.

I feel like a lot of universities don't try to reevaluate their programs. And even when they do, I think that there is a failure to address the source of the issue. And that's coming from the fact that oftentimes students aren't asked, "what is the barrier? Why did you struggle? Or why are you struggling?" And especially for students that maybe drop out of college or don't pursue higher education, they're not being asked what was the barrier? And so the universities don't recognize or don't try to gather the information about why someone actually decided not to continue or decided they couldn't continue, then how can they really assess what is going to be the best to help get rid of the barriers? I think that there's a big source of knowledge and that's something that could really help that universities are not tapping into here.



Q3

Are there any solutions that you believe have not been implemented by institutions, but should be, to solve the barriers many students encounter?



To be honest, I don't have a very clear answer to this question because I kind of don't know what kind of responsibility the institutions have to deal with barriers for students. For example, I am a foreign student, so English is not my first language. I need some help in academic writing or oral English. And yes, the university it has the writing center also offers some English second language courses, but actually that's not enough for me. I don't think I got enough help from those centers. So I don't know, they've already tried their best.

Universities, they have a lot of resources that they can take advantage, like course understanding at college level, it's important. But universities provide us with so many trainings and we have so many training that we need to attend or workshops, like professional development and these days virtual professional development or mentoring. But when you attend them, at the end, you think, "Okay, what are the gains from these trainings or workshop?" Can you apply it in your real life or in real situation or authentic situation, but I don't believe... I was kind of unsuccessful for applying those trainings.



And there sounds like there's an easy fix to that, right? If you survey the students afterwards, you can get a wealth of data that can inform that again, evaluation that can inform practices going forward.



Q4

Were there any resources, individuals or other support systems that aided in overcoming any barriers you faced? How did they help or support you?



The people that I've met along the way have been the people that have gotten me to where I am today. Like I mentioned before, my master's advisor was especially helpful going from undergrad into a master's program. I was very lost and really struggled, trying to figure out how to be a grad student. And she really took me under her wing and modeled how to accomplish what I wanted to accomplish. And now in my PhD program, my advisor is my biggest supporter. And he fights against some of the departmental pressures that probably would crush me if he wasn't there. So it's really the people that have seen the spark in me, as Amber explained, that have really got me to where I am. And without them, I definitely would not be here. And again, I'm also very, very thankful for them.

Yeah. I think for me, the biggest support come from my peers. I made a lot of friends in my program in my whole way into graduate school and we just hang out. We just talk to each other. We just rant about life, rant about research, rant about studies. And of course we are not able to offer each other any solution to your current problem, unlike advisor or other people who's in power. But by listening to each other by offering suggestions, like, "Why don't you talk to him? Why don't you talk to her?" Like, "Yeah, I know your advisor doesn't really like your idea, but I think you have a good idea, so why don't you reorganize and present it to him or her again," and et cetera. And so by talking to each other and telling each other, and also being the biggest fan to each other really gave me a lot of support





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