

Starting Strong: Strategies to Make the Successful Transition to Graduate School

January 29, 2026



Meeting Logistics

- The meeting will be recorded and the recording and slides will be available to NNE students and coordinators.
- Submit questions for the panelists in the Q&A feature of your Zoom toolbar. We will answer questions at the end of the presentations.
- Plan for the day:
 - Learning goals and presenter introductions – Matthew Linton
 - Presentations – Raquel Arouca and Miriam Okine Davies
 - Moderated Q&A – All

Learning Goals

- Major differences between undergraduate and graduate education.
- The role of the advisor and how it differs from other mentors.
- How to identify campus resources to help with your transition to graduate school.
- Know what questions to ask graduate faculty, programs, and current students.
- Feel prepared to navigate graduate program expectations.
- How to advocate for yourself in graduate school.

Presenters



Raquel Arouca
Assistant Dean for Graduate Recruitment
and Engagement
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Miriam Okine Davies
Assistant Dean, Graduate Student Affairs
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Howard University

Transition to Grad School 101

Dr. Raquel A. Arouca

Assistant Dean for Graduate Recruitment and Engagement

Associate Teaching Professor

Mizzou Graduate School

My Context - University of Missouri | Mizzou



146 Graduate Programs |
5,200 + Graduate Students
| 82% PhD Students
Funded



Mid-size College Town |
129K People



Professional Development
programming through the
Graduate School



Graduate Career Coaches



External Grants, Awards,
and Fellowships support



Engagement support
programs for transition to
grad school and peer
mentoring

Top 3 Tips



ALIGN EXPECTATIONS



IDENTIFY RESOURCES
FOR SUCCESS



BE PROACTIVE

Align Expectations

Mentor versus Advisor

- Mentor
 - a more senior individual who provides career and psychosocial support to a junior member of a given organization.
- Advisor
 - Sometimes referred to as an academic advisor, is a professional and institutionally-driven relationship. Supports students in their quest to complete academic tasks and get necessary permissions.

Align Expectations



Identify the kind of mentoring you are in



Use mentoring compacts



Identify your own needs (e.g., IDP)

Resources for Success

Resources to have



Graduate Student Handbook



Program-level and Graduate School-level policies and procedures



Degree requirements

Non-academic resources

Financial Success

Writing Centers

Learning Centers

Disability Centers

Community resources

Be Proactive

Oxford Learner Dictionary

controlling a situation by making things happen rather than waiting for things to happen and then reacting to them

Top 4 Tips



Consumer vs Producer of knowledge



Propose solutions



Take notes to provide summaries and next steps



Plan your semester



The Graduate
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Making the Transition to Graduate School: What to Expect & Strategies for Success

Miriam Okine Davies

Assistant Dean, Graduate School Office of Student Affairs

The Graduate School at Howard University

- **Top-Ranked Academics** - Choose from more than 120 concentrations across disciplines at the master's, doctoral, and dual degree levels or enroll in a Graduate Certificate program
- **On the Leading Edge of Research** -National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and National Science Foundation (NSF) funded research
- **Professional Development Opportunities** – Grant writing, career development, teaching development, networking opportunities
- **Quality Faculty & Research Impact** – Access to internationally-recognized faculty leading innovative research efforts that cross disciplinary boundaries
- **Prime location** – Located in the nation's capital Washington, D.C., the center of policymaking in the country
- **Strong Alumni Network**



Masters, Ph.D., or a Gap Year?

Master's Program	Doctoral Program	Gap Year
Gain advanced skills / credentials	Produce original research	Clarify goals and gain experience
Shorter-term (1-2 years)	Longer-term (4-7 years)	Flexible (6–24 months)
Structured; course milestones	Self-directed; research-driven	Self-directed
Often partially or fully self-funded	Often funded (stipend + tuition)	Save up funds for school
Applied or limited research	Research is central	Optional or exploratory
Professional or transitional roles	Academic, research, or specialized roles	Career testing or preparation
Short-term career goals	Strong commitment to research inquiry	Need clarity or experience
Informal mentorship	Mentorship is central and long-term	Informal mentorship



The Transition to Graduate School

Shift In:

Scholarly Identity

Expectations

Ownership



Why This Transition Feels Different

Shift	First-Year Reality	Later-Stage Reality	Transition
Breadth → Depth	Immersed in advanced coursework / reading volume increases	Working within a narrow subfield/depth of expertise	“I feel like this topic is becoming my identity.”
Learning → Producing	Writing seminar papers/ research synthesis and critique	Publishing, presenting, and defending novel ideas	“I want my ideas to be original.”
Structure → Self-Direction	Course syllabi provides some guidance	Self-directed learning and ownership	“Am I doing enough to make progress?”
Grades → Progress	Seminars or courses still graded/ peer-to-peer feedback key	Evaluation tied to milestones, Advisor- and project-dependent	“Am I still on track to get this done?”
Faculty Mentor Role	Learning faculty and program expectations	Navigating power dynamics and partnership with faculty	“I need clarity and mentorship.”
Assignments → Contributions	Interpreting open-ended prompts in assignments	Defining the questions yourself	“There’s no template for how I approach this.”
Single Role → Multiple Roles	Balancing coursework, assistantships, and service	Research, teaching, and service consume time	“This feels like multiple full-time jobs.”
Feedback Style	Conceptual feedback	High-stakes feedback & critique sought out by student	“This feedback is really shaping how I think”

7 Strategies for Graduate Student Success

 Design Your System

 Create a Flexible Plan

 Invest in Your Development

 Build a Network of Support

 Practice Self-Advocacy

 Identify & Access Resources

 Prioritize Self-Care



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Design Your System



Design Your System: Get Organized

Own Your Time

- Put everything onto one scheduling system (digital calendar or planner) – classes, work shifts, and deadlines
- Identify your most productive hours in the day (your *productive zone*)
- Block out a reoccurring focus window for each week and protect this time
- Write out your top priorities for each day of the week

Streamline Your Work

- Choose a note-taking and file storage system (RefWorks, OneNote, Zotero, Mendeley)
- Break large projects into smaller tasks
- Organize files in one cloud location (Google Drive, OneDrive, or Dropbox)
- Keep a research diary
- Organize your email inbox (i.e., labels and weekly cleanup)

Organize Your Life

- Find 2-3 reliable study spaces on or off campus
- Identify obligations or personal commitments outside of class
- Define what balance means for you
- Communicate boundaries early and clearly (you can't be everything to everyone)
- Build in a daily reset
- Schedule non-negotiables (i.e., sleep, childcare, exercise)

Organize Your Budget: Direct vs. Indirect Costs

Your Cost of Attendance Budget

Direct Costs

- Tuition
- Fees
- On-Campus Housing

Indirect Costs

- Books and supplies
- Transportation
- Personal expenses

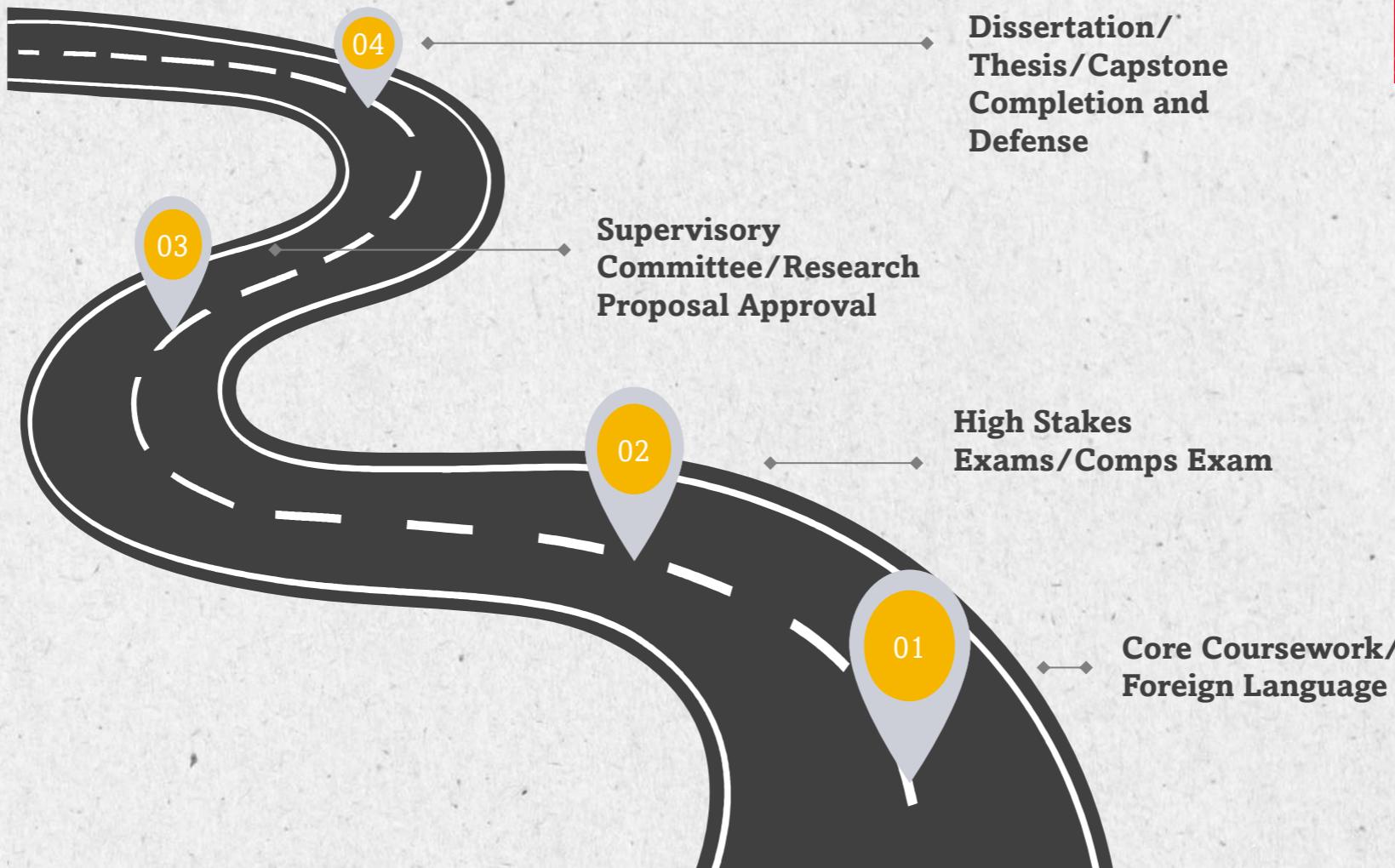


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Create a Flexible Plan

Review Expectations Early



Expect pivots /changes in research direction:

- New data emerges
- Research scope and timeline/feasibility
- Methodological constraints
- Field shifts /funding limitations
- Advisor or committee input
- New skills gained
- Research ethics/compliance

Create a Mentoring Plan

- Don't wait for faculty to come find you.
Advisors expect initiative: Carve out regular check in meeting with your advisor or mentor.
- Have a clear purpose for each meeting and come prepared with an agenda:
 - Progress/challenges and potential solutions
 - Develop shared/aligned expectations
 - Ask questions and advance ideas
 - Action items
 - Listen actively and be open to feedback
- Each semester outline your goals and expected milestones
- Ask what conferences you could attend/what fellowship opportunities you should apply for
- Ask what departmental talks, working seminars, and workshops you should attend





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Invest in Your Development



Choose Opportunities Strategically

Research Opportunities

- Faculty-led research projects
- Research assistantships (RAs)
- Conference papers, posters, and presentations
- Journal article submissions (solo or co-authored)
- Grant-funded research (internal or external)

Teaching Opportunities

- Teaching assistantships (TAs) or guest lecturing
- Leading discussion sections or labs
- Teaching workshops or bootcamps to undergrads
- Pedagogy or teaching certificate programs
- Mentoring undergraduate researchers or students

Leadership Opportunities

- Graduate student government and councils, affinity groups
- Departmental or university committees
- Peer mentor or orientation leader roles
- Editorial boards for student journals
- Community engagement or program/initiative development

Professional Opportunities

- Internship placements (industry, nonprofit, government)
- Summer institutes and programs
- Skills development/data analysis training workshops
- Career development workshops and networking events
- Professional association membership and honor societies

Graduate School Sources of Funding



Grants & Fellowships

Competitive institutional grants and travel funds. External grants from government agencies (NSF, NIH, DoD, EPA, Fulbright, HHMI)

Professional Associations

Grants from professional associations, corporations and NGOs (AAUW, APA, AHA, KPMG, WB)

Graduate Assistantships

Graduate research or graduate teaching assistantships with departments or research centers

Student Loans

Funds borrowed to cover educational expenses, including tuition, fees, and living expenses

Campus Employment

Student worker positions on campus (i.e., Resident Assistant, Tour Guide)



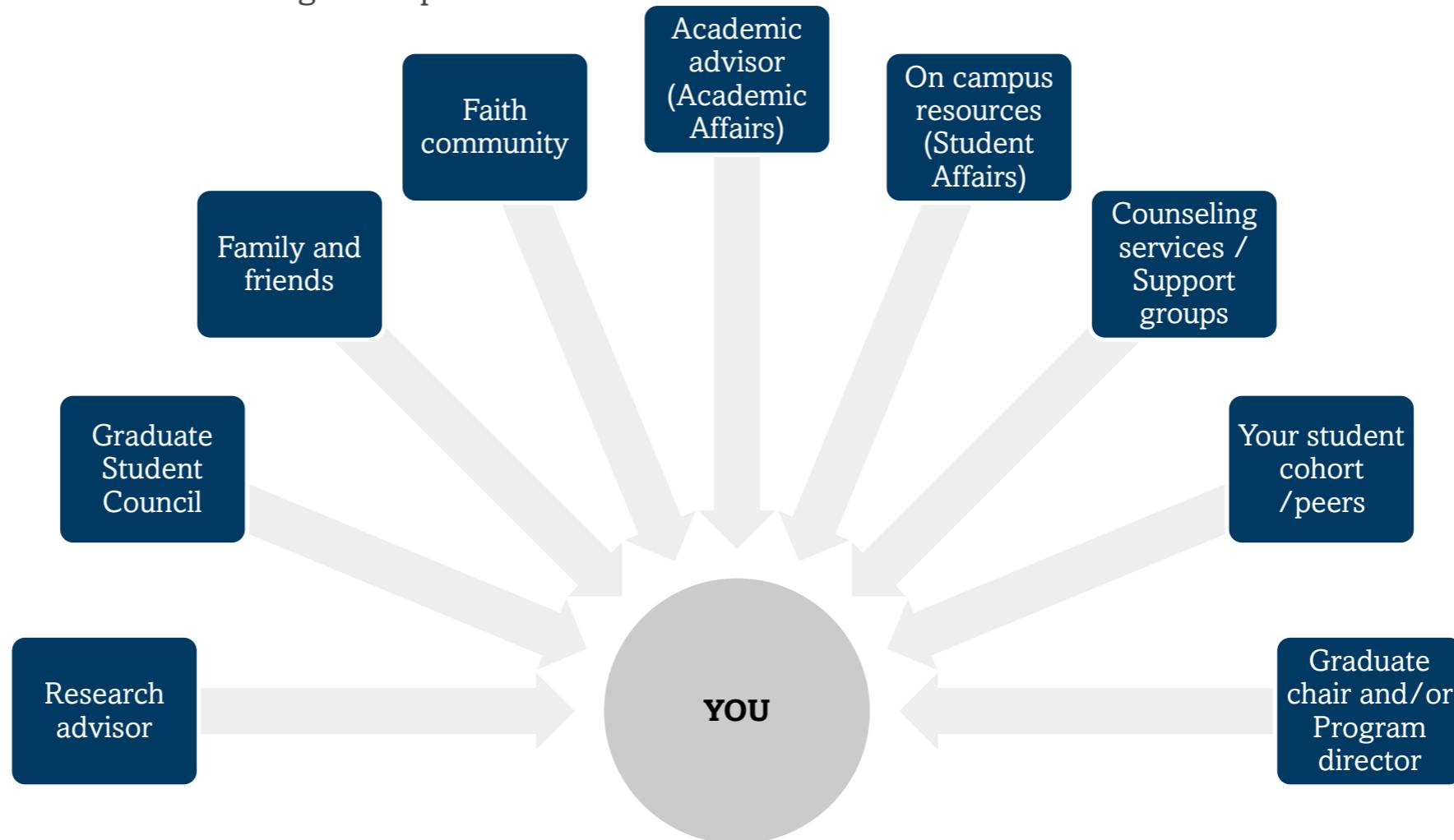
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Build a Network of Support

Build Your Network of Support, Start Early

- No single person meets every need
- Invest in relationships early
- Normalize asking for help



Difference a Mentor Network Makes: Research Says

1

- Enhanced research identity, sense of belonging and self-efficacy (Palepu et al, 1998; Garman et al, 2001; Paglis et al, 2006)

2

- Persistence (Gloria et al, 2001; Solorzano 1993; McGee and Keller, 2007; Sambunjak et al, 2010; Williams et al, 2015)

3

- Research productivity (Steiner and Lanphear, 2002; 2007; Wingard et al, 2004)

4

- Higher career satisfaction (Schapira et al, 1992; Beech et al, 2013)



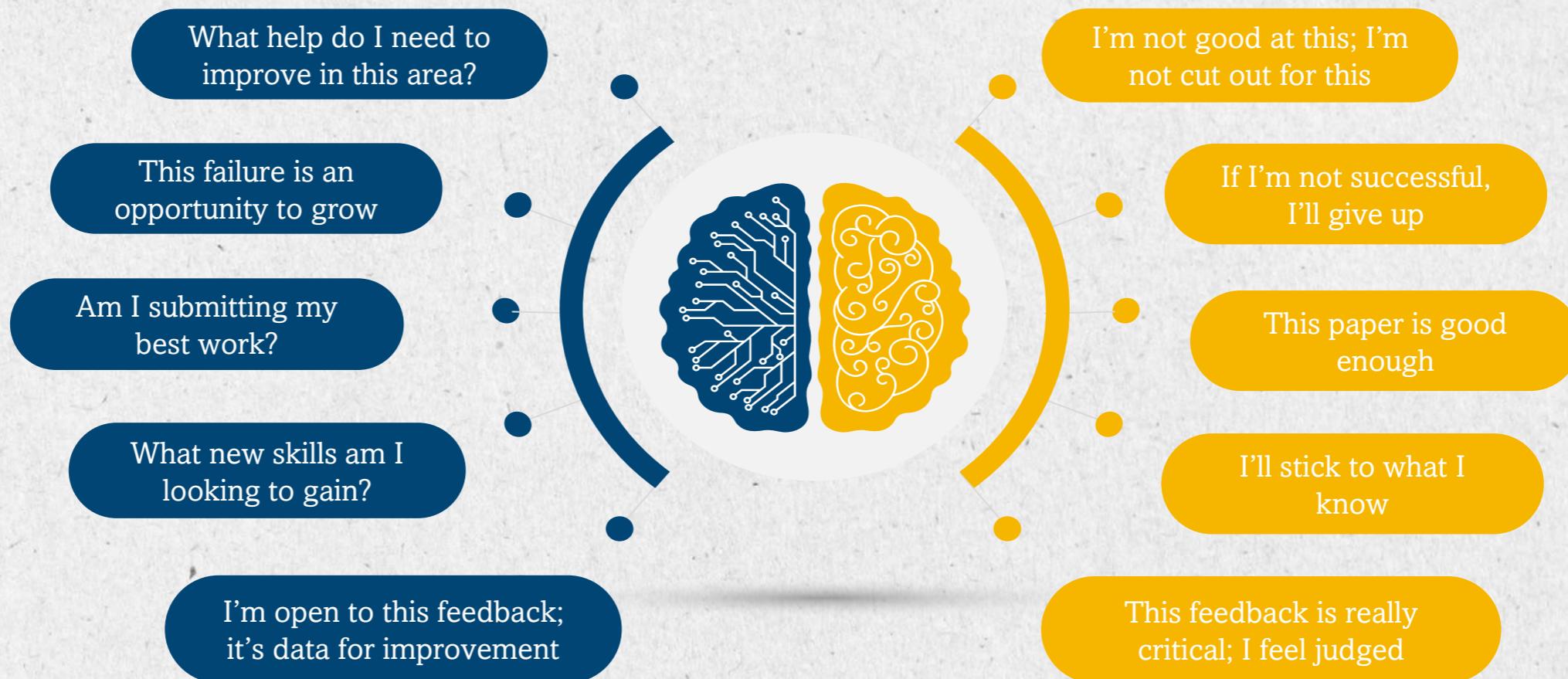
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Practice Self-Advocacy

Growth vs. Fixed Mindset (Dr. Carol Dweck, 2015)

- Self-advocacy is a skill you learn
- Begins with a growth mindset essential for success
- Growth mindset model pioneered by Carol Dweck (2015)



Resolving Conflict /Addressing Issues Early

- SBAR was originally developed by the **U.S. Navy**, later adopted by healthcare industry
- SBAR is an easy-to-remember method for framing conversation around shared goals, progress and clarity to address conflict

S
B
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Identify & Access Resources



Situation	Primary Resource
Unclear expectations, milestones, or progress	Academic advisor / Program director
Questions about deadlines, forms, or policies	Graduate program staff / coordinator
Struggling with writing or structure	Writing Center
Trouble finding sources, data, or methods	Subject librarian / Research support
Teaching or classroom challenges	Teaching & Learning Center / Course supervisor
Stress, anxiety, burnout	Counseling / Mental Health Services
Disability or health-related learning barriers	Disability / Accessibility Services
Financial emergency or hardship	Financial Aid / Student Accounts/ Bursar



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Prioritize Self-Care

8 Dimensions of Wellness* (Dr. Peggy Swarbrick, 2012)

Physical

- Keep a water bottle and healthy snacks where you study
- Keep one “reset” ritual (short walk or run) between tasks

Social

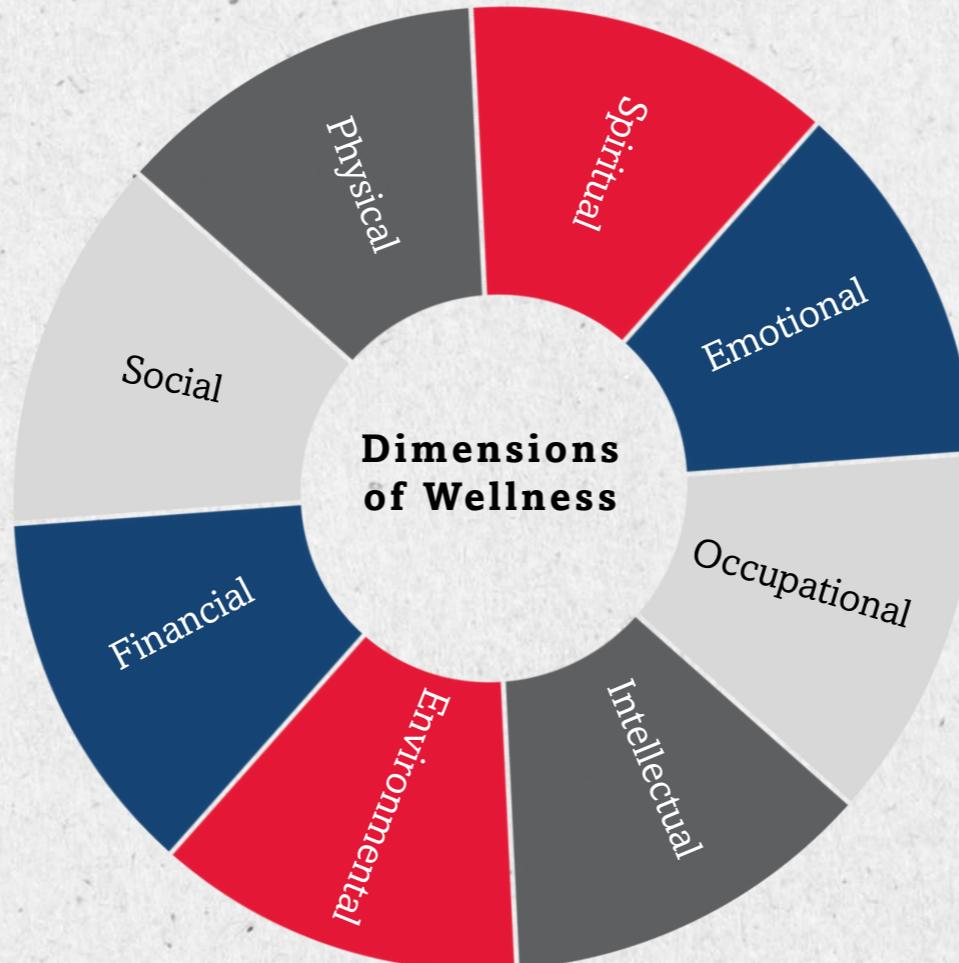
- Schedule one standing check-in (weekly call, coffee)
- Choose people who don’t need you to perform

Financial

- Track expenses weekly with a budget tracker
- Ask about emergency, travel, or hardship funds as needed

Environmental

- Declutter your immediate workspace and living space
- Adjust lighting, sound, and seating for comfort



*Image source: @womenpunch via Canva

Spiritual

- Identify one practice that reminds you of why you’re here
- Use reflection, mindfulness, prayer, journaling, or stillness

Emotional

- Do a 2-minute daily check-in: What’s no longer manageable?
- Name emotions and focus on things you can control

Occupational (Academic)

- Define work start/stop times when possible
- Clarify expectations early to prevent overextension

Intellectual

- Read something outside of your research area weekly
- Keep a “questions” list and a research diary

Staying Connected: Accountability Partners

INWARD



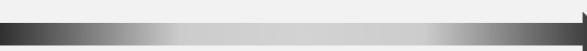
OUTWARD

Tunnel Vision



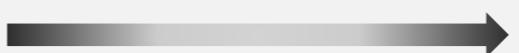
Awareness

Silos



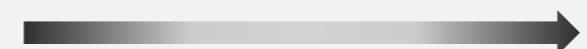
Collaboration

Stagnation



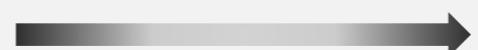
Innovation

Blame



Accountability

Low Morale



Engagement



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The Waiting Game: I've Applied, Now What?



While You Wait

- **Keep building skills** (take one short course, continue writing, present your research at a conference, or publish)
- **Get a sense of the program's culture** (attend a virtual event, read faculty research papers, contact current graduate students and ask questions about student life, housing, tips for navigating the program)
- **Prepare your budget** (list funding questions, cost of attendance, identify backup options)
- **Protect your focus** (set a check-in time to read onboarding emails and key information before the start of your first semester, i.e., policies, course syllabi)
- **Connect with incoming cohort** (join chat groups and attend planned admitted student days and events)
- **Continue to make a good impression** (every interaction with the program faculty, staff, and students is critical; make it count)

Questions?



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Questions?

Submit questions in the Q&A feature
on your Zoom toolbar.

Thank you for participating!

The webinar recording and slides will be made available to all NNE students and coordinators