

A graduate student's guide to vacation

In graduate school, your supervisor does not take roll or stamp your time card. You have a lot of freedom to work or take time off. You won't be able to work every day because you will have unavoidable commitments like weddings and family illnesses. You may also deserve some R&R or have an opportunity for the trip of a lifetime. How much vacation can you afford to take? Students commonly choose from two models.

The undergrad model. Initially, some graduate students adopt the familiar undergraduate vacation model. Succinctly, the undergraduate model is: if I don't have class tomorrow, I am on vacation. There are four great undergraduate holidays: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter and Summer. That's summer plus a whole month of vacation from lectures and exams. In some cases, graduate school looks like undergraduate life. There are classes to take and seminars to go to and perhaps a TA-ship, all of which run on the academic calendar. But none of these things actually count toward what you are in graduate school to accomplish. In reality, time off of the academic calendar is when a graduate student can dedicate fully to their own research. Don't wait a few years to figure this out.

The career model. Your friends with careers start with a week's vacation after a full year of service. After that, additional vacation days pile on at the rate of a couple days per year's service. Your self-employed friends are not granted vacation. They have to tradeoff income for time off. I suggest you use a modified career model for the self employed. Consider that you are trading off progress on your dissertation for time off. This means the time you spend in school is not the proper currency to earn time off. It is your rate of accomplishment that counts. Decide what pace you want to set for progress on your dissertation. If you are ahead of schedule, reward yourself with some time off. If not, don't. When you have to take time off for personal reasons, be productive. With a laptop and an internet connection, you can get an amazing amount of work done in airports, or sitting in a hospital waiting room. Finally, if you have earned some time off, make it count, and do something special.

Happy Holidays,
Kevin Lafferty