



This month we run a condensed post from the AMS e-Mentoring Network Blog <https://blogs.ams.org/mathmentoringnetwork>.

## Reflections of a First-Year Postdoc

*by Luis Sordo Vieira*



**Luis Sordo Vieira, postdoc at UConn Health, and his dog Ivy.**

I am Luis Sordo Vieira, a Latino postdoc at UConn Health Center for Quantitative Medicine using mathematics for my profession. Below is my best friend and wife, Sarah Sordo Vieira, MA in mathematics too. She went to grad school and decided that a PhD was not for her, and she is my favorite mathematician.

Before I forget how difficult grad school is (very difficult), let me share some of the most important lessons that I have encountered in my career so far.

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### **Almost everything that you succeed at looks easy in retrospect.**

Of course, this does not mean that it was. I got so angry when I would hear situations such as:

1. Graduate student John tells undergraduate Stacey “Undergraduate is nothing compared to graduate school.”
2. Post-quals grad student Donald tells the first-year terrorized student Marcos that writing a thesis is much harder than quals.
3. Early faculty Michelle trying to get tenure tells poor graduate student Robert that graduate school is some of the most fun years of your academic career, and nothing compared to the difficulties of pre-tenure.



**My best friend and wife Sarah Sordo Vieira is my favorite mathematician.**

# THE GRADUATE STUDENT SECTION

These insensitive comments are more harmful than helpful. They degrade the difficulties of others and enable the sense of not belonging. These comments are extremely harmful to underrepresented groups. We all have our own struggles.

## We are defined by our failures as academics just as much by our success.

This year, I heard from a status quo successful and well-established professor that scientists endure more failures than enjoy success. I wish I would have heard this earlier in grad school! A CV is a cleaned-up version of someone's academic career. It only shows success. Keep that in mind when you decide it is a good idea to compare yourself to others (it never is).

## Take your mental and physical health seriously in graduate school and academia.

The impression I got early from my undergraduate years and early graduate school is that a lot of graduate school is about suffering and we seem to be OK with this as a community. This is so wrong, and if you don't believe me, read *this article*<sup>1</sup> on the mental toll grad-school takes on students. This is a very serious issue and not something to just say, "It's normal in grad school." NO. It is not normal to be depressed or feel severe anxiety. Keep a check on your mental health. Have fun in graduate school! Keep a hobby and don't let your personal life fall behind. If you need it, go to the counseling center. Seeking help when you need it is a strength, not a weakness. Never, ever hide your wonderful personality to try to fit in. It is not worth it.

## Find a mentor. Be a mentor.

I was privileged to have a good academic advisor, mentor and friend, David B. Leep. Maybe your academic advisor is not a mentor. I was very lucky to find several people outside of my institution that I could always go to for advice, such as my good friend, theorem-proving machine, and fellow dog-lover Pamela Harris.<sup>2</sup> She is an incredible mathematician that takes no nonsense from me. More impressive than her stellar CV is her willingness to stand up for what is right, regardless of how uncomfortable it might



**My good friend Pamela E. Harris lets me know when I say something insensitive.**

<sup>1</sup>"Paying Graduate School's Mental Toll" by Carrie Arnold, *Science* (Feb. 4, 2014), [www.sciencemag.org/careers/2014/02/paying-graduate-schools-mental-toll](http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2014/02/paying-graduate-schools-mental-toll)

<sup>2</sup>See the article on Harris in this issue, page 1025.

be. That includes when I say something insensitive or stupid, as we all do.

Mentors might even lead you into a whole different field from your focus in graduate school. For me, that was



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my other local mentor at the University of Kentucky, where I earned my PhD. David Murrugarra somehow convinced me that biology is super-cool and mathematical. He is a good friend of mine, and I still come often to him for advice on navigating academic nonsense, such as reviews that make no sense, the ten million journals out there, and the grant-writing landscape. He also gives me

good advice on good Peruvian food and where I can get a good Pisco Sour.

Pay it back. Find an undergrad in your institution and tell them your experiences. I bet you have plenty of things to contribute.

## A plea to the academic community.

My last point is that we please reconsider what a successful mathematician is. Coming into grad school for a PhD, realizing it's not for you, and leaving with a master's degree is **not** a failure. Finishing an REU and realizing research is terrible and you never want to do it again is **not** a failure. Let us redefine a mathematician to encompass our fellow academes in math ed. Math ed is just as important for the math community as number theory. Stop using terms such as number-crunchers for scientists and industry workers applying mathematics. Let us stop considering mathematics as the ultimate science. Let us celebrate diversity in mathematics.

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