Reflections on Graduate Student Life

For this issue of the Princeton Alumni Weekly, one of six that goes to all graduate alumni, I thought you might enjoy hearing from two of our current graduate students, Dylon Robbins in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Cultures and Shin-Ti Lin in the Department of Molecular Biology. As you will see, both have made the most of their time at Princeton. — S.M.T.

DYLON ROBBINS

First impressions are rarely right. My initial campus visit came on Valentine’s Day five years ago amid bitter winds and snow crunching under foot. It appeared that February, not April, was the cruelest month, for the joy of being interviewed by members of a department that I held in very high regard was somehow muffled by a campus architecture transformed by cold into an array of harsh lines, sharp angles, and hues of gray interrupted only by the occasional skeletal shadow of a tree. I remember looking down at my salt-stained shoes and wondering if, in fact, Princeton was the right place for me. Certainly, the prospects of an incomparable intellectual engagement were to prevail, but I was accustomed to sunshine and conversations at outdoor cafes; I had developed a fetish-like appreciation for the effects of humidity and high temperatures on old books; and I had come to feel that so much depended on the hospitable curves of the rusty mansard roofs next to the green palm trees that I could find in Galveston, Havana, or Rio de Janeiro. During that first visit, so much about the University seemed out of step with where I was from and what I was interested in.

I was soon to be seduced, however, by Princeton’s intensity and bright clip. The overwhelming density and variety of intellectually significant events on campus found me struggling to decide what not to do next. In my first years as a graduate student, beyond fulfilling the demands of my coursework, I played in different jazz ensembles, attended countless talks throughout the humanities, participated in discussion groups, and became acquainted with some of the many interesting and unique people that make up Princeton’s warm and vibrant intellectual community. Amid the many choices of seminars, guest speakers, and symposia, I began to sense that one of the ironic challenges of being a doctoral student at Princeton (at least in the humanities) was finding those free moments of silence that I needed to develop my own interests more fully.

Fortunately, my own interests found an outlet in my department and the Graduate School’s support of graduate student initiatives. In Princeton’s Program in Latin American Studies, I found myself among faculty that actively sought to collaborate with graduate students in developing and organizing workshops and symposia. It was in this context and with this support that I was able to co-organize a film festival of contemporary Latin American short films as well as a symposium on music and politics in Latin America and the Caribbean. It was also with this support that I was able to carry out research abroad and collaborate with colleagues on similar projects in Brazil, Cuba, and at other North American universities. And, finally, it was with this support that I was able to secure the Quin Morton Teaching Fellowship to design and teach a freshman writing seminar on film and radicalism in the 1960s for the Princeton Writing Program, in addition to the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship to carry out research at the Cinemateca Brasileira and the Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros at the Universidade de São Paulo in Brazil.

I also could not foresee that I would eventually benefit from the University’s family-focused initiatives. Princeton’s extensive support in addition to my own department’s exceptional efforts in accommodating graduate students with children has been invaluable in seeing to it that both my wife’s and my own intellectual endeavors are not at odds with having two children. Now Princeton has become quite a different place since I first visited. Through the course of several springs, I have come to eagerly await the green of the sycamore and maple leaves against the weathered slate roofs, or to emerge from a stimulating talk or day in the library to join my son for a scoop of chocolate on a cone and watch him transformed (with a smile) into the true emperor of ice cream.

Dylon Robbins is from Houston, Texas. He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with B.A.s in physics and Spanish and from Rice University with an M.A. in Spanish. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Spanish and Portuguese and is presently carrying out research as a Fulbright-Hays Fellow at the Cinemateca Brasileira and the Universidade de São Paulo in São Paulo, Brazil. His research interests include Caribbean and Brazilian culture, African Diasporas in the Americas, intellectual and cultural history, media, and radicalism.

Dylon Robbins, standing in front of the Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros at the Universidade de São Paulo in Brazil, where he is conducting research for his dissertation.
SHIN-YI LIN

Since I started my Ph.D. in molecular biology and neuroscience, I’ve developed many of the technical and professional skills that are important to being a good scientist: I’ve run countless experiments, read hundreds of papers, attended 10 conferences, and precepted three courses. But developing these skills isn’t all there is to graduate school. They only hint at the deeper intellectual transformation.

In my opinion, this transformation has as much to do with leadership as it does with scholarship. While we begin our graduate careers as students in the traditional sense—with professors providing guidance and requirements providing guideposts—we leave as independent scholars, pursuing our intellectual interests based on our own professional and personal priorities. As we take on this greater responsibility for our academic direction, we are simultaneously challenged to become leaders in the broader academic community.

I see daily demonstrations of leadership in academia—researchers who become giants in their fields, professors who direct their research groups, teachers who engage their students in class discussion, and administrators who run committee meetings. These forms of leadership are more modest than, for example, Barack Obama becoming president, but I’ve come to appreciate their significance.

Each student develops these leadership skills in their own way. I’ve gathered these skills from experiences that didn’t fall within the normal set of requirements for the graduate degree and that came from opportunities I hadn’t planned to take advantage of. As a first-year student, I was asked to represent our department in the Graduate Student Government (GSG). Although I had never been active in student leadership before, I gave it a try.

I ended up becoming very active in the GSG, eventually serving as its chair for three years. I was inspired by and sought to learn from the example of the student leaders who had worked so tirelessly before me. When I became chair, I struggled with my responsibilities as a representative of the graduate student body and the leader of the GSG organization. I discovered how it is just as important for a leader to know when to listen as it is to know when to speak up. I learned to consider and articulate student opinions that differ from my own, and I saw that effective working relationships rely on trust, respectful communication, and the willingness to both provide and receive criticism.

It was through the GSG that I learned about a new idea to organize a completely different kind of research conference. With a handful of other graduate students, I organized the first Princeton Research Symposium (PRS) in 2004. Unlike other conferences, the PRS highlights research from all disciplines. Because the presentations are by necessity and design geared toward non-specialists, the PRS attracts a broad audience—from sociologists to mathematicians; from high school students to businesspeople. It’s been exciting to direct the growth of the PRS over these years. And I continue to be motivated by the enthusiasm I’ve seen from the general public and campus community to learn more about the diverse research happening here.

Through the PRS, I’ve also witnessed the power of clear and concise communication. Learning to communicate to the public is not part of our formal training; instead, we are asked to become aware of the conventions of our disciplines, use technical terms appropriately, and learn to interact with scholars within our fields. While it’s true that this disciplinary knowledge is essential for scholarship, I’ve come to see how speaking effectively about complex research without those disciplinary crutches is also a sign of mastery of a field.

I originally treated my participation in the GSG and with the PRS as simply extracurricular activities. But with hindsight, I can see how these experiences have contributed to my scholarly pursuits. I’ve been steadily applying the lessons learned—about how to promote healthy debate, about the importance of acknowledging people’s contributions to a project, and about the power of effective communication—when working in lab, discussing science with colleagues, and presenting my research. In the end, these experiences will be just as memorable as the scientific discoveries I’ve made and will have contributed just as much to my successes as a graduate student.

Shin-Yi Lin grew up in Irvine, California, and graduated from Amherst College in 2000 with an A.B. in biology and English. She is a Ph.D. candidate in molecular biology, working with Professor Rebecca Burdine on the development of the nervous system and left-right patterning in the early vertebrate embryo, as reflected in the asymmetric placement of organs. She is married to Matt Weber, a Ph.D. candidate in psychology.