



It's Junior Year: Am I the Only One Who...? Things Juniors Imagine No One Else Is Thinking and Feeling (But Many Students Are!)

by Claire P. Shindler and Sheila M. Reindl

Copyright © 2011 (revised 2012, 2015) President and Fellows of Harvard College

The midpoint of college provides a good vantage point to look forward and backward. Juniors can find themselves experiencing a combination of regret, fear, excitement, anticipation, and confusion. It's a great time to think about one's goals, aspirations, and ways to make the most of the remaining time at Harvard.

Here are some frequently mentioned experiences that seem particularly salient for juniors, although of course they can also arise at other times in college:

1. **"I'm halfway through college, and I don't feel as if I've accomplished much."** You might feel that you haven't yet explored your academic discipline deeply enough, created the social life you expected, gotten as involved as you hoped in an extracurricular activity, or figured out your post-Harvard plan. You're thinking to yourself, "By now, I should have ____," or "These were supposed to be the best years of my life, but they don't feel like it."

Things to consider trying:

- ◆ Recognize that feelings of regret are common when reaching the midpoint of any experience. Knowing that these feelings are shared by others can ease the anxiety that there's something wrong with your perspective.
- ◆ Take note of all you have accomplished in your time at Harvard so you don't lose sight of your achievements, your learning, and your personal development.
- ◆ Take time to ask yourself what you would still like to learn and experience at Harvard. Make a list of what comes to mind. Make another list of possible first steps you could take to investigate those possibilities.
- ◆ Make time for a conversation with someone (e.g., a Bureau academic counselor, friend, or advisor) about those possibilities and about what occurs to you as you consider exploring them.
- ◆ Recognize that you do still have time left in college. Half gone means you still have half left.
- ◆ Also keep in mind that time and experience do not necessarily have a linear relationship. That is, it's not a given that you will have half of your richest Harvard experiences during your first two years here and half during your last two years. During your time so far, you might have laid a foundation for richness that will deepen dramatically at some point in time.
- ◆ Be kind to yourself about paths not taken. Tough choices are always a part of our life experience. We cannot commit deeply to all things. When we say "Yes" to something, we say "No" (or "Later" or "Only on limited terms") to much, much more.

2. **"I'm not sure I'm in the right concentration."** Juniors have been known to start their fall courses wondering if they chose the right concentration. You might feel it's too late to make a change or feel doomed to be uninspired for the next two years of course work.

Things to consider trying:

- ◆ Don't assume you can't make a change. Talk with your resident dean, concentration advisor, a tutor in your House, or other academic advisors. Collect information to help you make an informed decision.
- ◆ Make a list of what you like and dislike about your current concentration to help you clarify what's behind your uncertainty. Compile a list of the courses you would look forward to taking in your current concentration and ones you'd look forward to taking in a potentially new concentration. Notice what strikes you. You might find a way to take courses for your current concentration that would rekindle your interest, or you might clarify that the new concentration is more appealing.
- ◆ Resist feeling that you have messed up your whole academic life. Acknowledge all you've learned in your courses already and all you'll be learning in future courses, no matter the concentration you've chosen.

3. **“Do I really want to write a senior thesis?”** Whether you are required to write a thesis or are deciding to write an optional thesis, you might encounter challenging questions. Among the complicated sentiments are:
- ❖ experiencing the weight of your own or others’ expectations that you’d have an over-the-top brilliant idea
 - ❖ fearing that, without pursuing a thesis, you will diminish your future prospects
 - ❖ worrying that you’ll have regrets (whether you do a thesis or don’t do one)
 - ❖ wondering how you’ll make it all happen (find the topic, advisor, funding, stamina, creativity)

Things to consider trying:

- ◆ Consult current seniors to find out about their experiences and the way they approached these questions. Approach potential advisors to discuss ideas.
- ◆ Try to anticipate whether you’d feel engaged and interested in working on a single project for many months. To do so, generate potential ideas, try some preliminary research, examine your reactions to what you’ve found. Are you feeling excited and intrigued? Fearful? Bored?
- ◆ Think about the kind of senior year you hope to have and ways the thesis will help or hinder that experience.
- ◆ Know that you can’t make a perfect decision but that you can make a well-considered one.

4. **“I’m tired of my usual routine.”** After two years of courses, the same extracurricular activities, the same group of friends, you might feel tired of it all or feel like you need some kind of change. Change might not come easily. If you’ve been involved in an activity or team, you might be concerned about being seen as a quitter or being disloyal. The loss of that activity might also mean losing a long-standing part of your identity. But change can also generate new energy and interest.

Things to consider trying:

- ◆ Spend time sorting out which parts of your life are a source of discontent. You might be dissatisfied with one aspect or several. Gaining insight into the nature of your feelings will help guide you.
- ◆ Dream up a list of changes you wish you could make. Identify within that list some small changes. Or play with the possibility of a big change.
- ◆ If you’re concerned about the impact of your choices on others (e.g., your teammates or roommates), consider talking with ones you trust to sound them out. More often than not, fellow students are supportive of other students’ needs and choices; this can relieve your anxious feelings.
- ◆ Confront the fear of change. Often we’re more willing to deal with our present situation than with the uncertainty of the unknown. Recognizing that you’re afraid might help prevent staying with the status quo only out of fear.
- ◆ It’s also quite possible that after a period of consideration, you’ll discover that things are actually mostly going okay. You might identify just a couple of small adjustments that will be sufficient to make you feel happier.
- ◆ Making conscious choices can be empowering, even if the conscious choice is that everything is okay as is!

5. **“I’m worried that I’m not yet sure what comes after Harvard for me.”** During junior year “after Harvard” begins to feel more tangible. With this reality approaching, students might feel uncertain, sad, confused, scared, or excited. Many juniors are watching their senior friends go through recruiting, job searches, and applying for graduate school, law school, medical school, fellowships, etc. Just watching them can be anxiety-provoking for the bystanders.

Things to consider trying:

- ◆ Remind yourself that you are not yet a senior. Try to reassure yourself that you’ll figure things out.
- ◆ Find others to talk with – advisors, academic counselors, House tutors, friends, family.
- ◆ Dream about your future and contemplate the possibilities, while noting the natural feelings of trepidation and excitement that come with the unknown.

Bureau of Study Counsel academic counselors are available to consult with you about any of these topics or other things that might be on your mind. Call 617-495-2581 or stop by at 5 Linden Street to find a time to meet with someone.

October 2012, Summer 2015