



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

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Senior year has a bittersweet quality that naturally comes with the prospect of approaching an end to one stage of life and anticipating the beginning of a new one. Seniors can find themselves feeling anxious about the past, the future, and the present as they reflect on their time at Harvard and plan for the next stage of their life while still striving to get the most from their final year in college.

Here are some experiences that seniors frequently describe:

1. **“Everyone seems to know what they’re doing next year. I’m still not sure, and I’m worried.”** As friends finalize their post-Harvard plans, if you’re still exploring what you want to do, you might feel concerned that you haven’t figured it all out. You might even feel pressure to make a decision just so you’ll know.

*Things to consider trying:*

- ◆ Acknowledge that it is difficult and uncomfortable to face uncertainty. But know that feeling unsure, unsettled, and even utterly lost are natural, expected experiences when one is facing a transition.
- ◆ Regard your anxiety as a sign of your caring.
- ◆ Remind yourself that you are engaged in an important stage of discovery and that discovering your next steps might take more time than you anticipate.
- ◆ Remind yourself that everyone is on their own path, including you. Though your friends might have settled their plans for next year, you’ll find your own way in your own time.
- ◆ Continue to explore your options through writing down choices, talking with people such as a career counselor at Office of Career Services, an academic counselor at the Bureau of Study Counsel, a friend, or an advisor/mentor.

2. **“Compared to my friends, I don’t feel like I’ve accomplished a lot.”** Looking around Harvard, it’s easy to fall into comparing yourself with others. Since Harvard students typically have résumé-worthy achievements, these comparisons might sometimes leave you with a feeling that you’re deficient and might lead you to minimize your own accomplishments.

*Things to consider trying:*

- ◆ Reframe your comparison in a way that casts you in a favorable light. For instance, try saying to yourself: “My friends have done \_\_\_\_\_, yet I’ve done \_\_\_\_\_. That meant a lot to me and is something of which I’m proud and which will benefit me in securing a position for next year.”
- ◆ Give yourself due credit for intangible achievements. Résumé items are easy to list and somehow feel more real. It can be harder to recognize and credit yourself for other achievements related to your personal development such as learning how to live a balanced life, taking care of yourself physically and emotionally, being good at connecting with others, dreaming big dreams. Allow that indeed these are achievements and that they will enrich your life in immeasurable ways as well as provide you with the strength of character to pursue your ambitions.
- ◆ Consult with staff at OCS about your résumé to make sure that you’ve highlighted all of your experiences.

3. **“I regret....”** Approaching the end of a stage in our lives often produces regrets. Regrets, by definition, leave a feeling that we should have done something a different way. You might have

regrets about paths not taken, time you feel you should have spent differently, opportunities you didn't pursue.

***Things to consider trying:***

- ◆ Assure yourself that it's natural to have regrets. At the same time, rather than dwelling on the regrets, you might use them as learning experiences. Try to put your regrets in context. Remind yourself that, in hindsight, it's easy to judge your decisions. Instead, try to put yourself back in the time when you were in the midst of making a choice; try to remember what you knew and didn't know then.
- ◆ Be kind to your past self, who probably did the best he/she could at the time, all things considered.
- ◆ Appreciate your present self for whatever you have learned from your past self.
- ◆ Remember that it's impossible to follow every opportunity in life. In reflecting on your decisions, see which opportunities you still wish you could pursue. Though you might not have a chance to explore a particular path during your time at Harvard, note for yourself what it is that feels compelling about it and keep it in mind for a future endeavor.

4. **“I'm feeling overwhelmed by recruiting!”** Though on-campus recruiting is a useful opportunity to meet a lot of different employers in a convenient way, the process can also be intense and overwhelming. Many students say they feel challenged to maintain their equilibrium and focus during this process.

***Things to consider trying:***

- ◆ Sometimes it's helpful to have a neutral observer listen to you. So, as always, remember to use the Harvard resources to consult about your experiences including the staff of OCS, academic counselors at the BSC, and your advising mentors. (Some students say that during recruiting it can be tricky to confide in friends because it invites comparisons between people about how they are doing.)
- ◆ Remember that recruiting is not the only way to find opportunities. Students can explore options outside of this process including through the Harvard alumni network and via standard job searches.
- ◆ Though you might feel pressure to secure a job, try to keep yourself involved in the process by thinking about the interviews as a way for *you* to interview the interviewer to find out more about whether the organization is a good fit for you.
- ◆ Radical as this suggestion might be, try to have fun during the interviews. If you're relaxed and enjoying yourself, you'll be more yourself and interview more effectively.
- ◆ Take care of yourself through sleeping, eating well, exercising, and other activities that relax and energize you.

5. **“I'm not interested in the typical paths (i-banking, consulting, medicine, law, Teach for America). I also want to find something that really matters to me. How do I even find out about other paths and how do I feel good about it when I compare myself to others here?”** If you talk with people who are doing work they love about how they came to be doing it – and that in itself is worth your while, whether in informational interviews or in informal conversation – you might meet a few people who had a strong sense of a calling or a right path while they were in college or even before. But they will be the exceptions. Most people who find a path they love recount stories with false starts, changes of plan, meandering paths, and serendipity.

***Things to consider trying:***

- ◆ Rather than focusing on finding what is ultimately right for you, focus on taking the first next step for you.
- ◆ As a starting point, listen to yourself. Ask yourself what leaves you feeling enlivened, what leaves you with a deep and resonant sense of “Yes.” What is an unbidden caring or interest of yours that seems to insist on finding expression in your life? (This caring or interest might have been evident in some form since you were very young; it might keep declaring itself in one form and another.) What are you consistently drawn toward? Pay attention even to seemingly small, everyday instances in which you experience a sense of feeling alive or a sense that you are doing exactly what you want to be doing in that moment.

- ◆ Ask family members, resident deans, resident tutors, faculty, and others who seem to you to be doing what they love how they came to be doing that. Listen not only to the “what” but the “how,” including how they approached their journey of finding a path that spoke to them in some core way.
- ◆ Listen to or read commencement speeches in which speakers recount their own path (e.g., the graduation speech Steve Jobs gave at Stanford in 2005 or the Class Day speech Conan O’Brien ’85 gave at Harvard in 2000). (Both of these are available on the Success-Failure Project page of the Bureau of Study Counsel’s website – [www.bsc.harvard.edu](http://www.bsc.harvard.edu).)
- ◆ Ask people who know you best what they secretly or not-so-secretly think could be a possible path for you. Regard whatever they say not as defining paths but as data and possibilities.
- ◆ Keep a list of possibilities, in particular, a list of what comes to mind as ways to complete the sentence stem “I wish I could get a paid internship/apprenticeship/job in which I could . . . .”
- ◆ While it’s hard in an environment like Harvard to resist the temptation to compare yourself with others, remember that, as they say in some twelve-step groups, we tend to compare our insides with other people’s outsides. When we compare our internal clutter with others’ apparent clarity, our deep self-doubt with others’ surface certainty, we are setting ourselves up to feel bad.
- ◆ As corny as it sounds, remember that your job in this life is to be you, not someone else. Don’t abandon yourself by trying to be someone else.

6. **“I’m slogging my way through my thesis. My friends who aren’t writing a thesis are having so much fun in their senior year. And, many of them have had time to plan, interview, find funding for next year. I want to ditch the whole thing.”** Your senior thesis project intersects your life of learning at a particular point in time. That point might or might not be a point where your interest, motivation, and access to data optimally converge to form a wondrous thesis project – or even any thesis project. At the same time, such a harmonic convergence is not necessary for you to write a thesis, and it’s not necessary for a thesis to be grand. There are many different senior thesis experiences, and you will need to consider whether the one you’re having is, all things considered, worth it to you.

***Things to consider trying:***

- ◆ Think of your thesis in relational terms. In an intimate relationship of any depth and duration, there is bound to be some disappointment and conflict. Those do not necessarily indicate that the relationship must end; sometimes working through a conflict or misunderstanding can lead to greater intimacy.
- ◆ Let yourself recall what initially drew you to your thesis. Early on, what left you smitten with your topic and excited to spend time with your research?
- ◆ Make a date with your thesis. Sit down with your thesis and a cup of coffee or tea and freewrite about meaningful experiences you have had with your thesis. Also freewrite about where the disappointment or doubt or discouragement began to creep in. Freewrite about what might help at this point. You could, if you’re feeling playful, freewrite in the form of two letters, one from you to your thesis (“Dear Thesis...”), the other from your thesis, writing a response back to you. (Or, your thesis could write first, and you could then respond to it.)
- ◆ Consider “couples counseling” with your thesis in the form of consultation with an academic counselor at the Bureau of Study Counsel.
- ◆ Remember that not every thesis needs to be or can be a prize-winning thesis; you might find the experience of researching and writing a thesis to be worth your while even if it is not an ideal process and/or even if you do not write an outstanding thesis.
- ◆ Some relationships, much as we try to salvage them, reach their natural and necessary end or morph into a new form. We might decide that the relationship we’re in is not good for us. We might acknowledge that we are trying to force something that isn’t working, or that we have had a change of heart. Sometimes we decide to be “just friends,” without the level of exclusivity and commitment we previously had. When a significant relationship ends, we need to grieve. Letting go, missing what we miss, mending, making sense of what happened – as trite as it sounds, these things take time. But in time we are able to lend our energy, time, talent, and care to other endeavors, other “loves” of one sort or another. It’s okay – and, in many circumstances, honorable and wise – to decide not to write (or continue writing) a

thesis – unless you are in a concentration where you must write a thesis. Even then, it is often possible to transfer into another concentration (this is something to discuss with your departmental advisor(s)).

7. **“College was supposed to be the best time in my life. I was supposed to make lifelong friends or find my life partner. Things haven’t worked out that way.”** The storylines of finding lifelong friends and a life partner in college are certainly appealing. But they are not the only storylines out there. Many people with good friendships and deep and abiding partnerships have other storylines. Many of us make some of our best friends and find our true love after college

*Things to consider trying:*

- ◆ As you move through life, where appropriate, ask people you know how they met. It’s helpful to collect an assortment of real-world love stories and accounts of friendships.
- ◆ Acknowledge that while we have influence over what happens to us, we don’t have ultimate control, especially in the realm of relationships where other people’s lives and desires and experiences are involved. When we go through life with a strong sense of how life ought to go or of the milestones we ought to achieve and what timetable we ought to achieve them on, we set ourselves up for disappointment.
- ◆ Remind yourself that you don’t know what the future holds. Just as finding a calling or a right path in life involves some measure of serendipity, so does finding a true friend or a life partner. Learn to acknowledge your preference for what you wish would happen while also accepting what actually unfolds. Sometimes the universe surprises us; we discover wonderful people and experiences that we couldn’t have come upon by our design and force of will.
- ◆ Remember that even if you are leaving college without a best friend or a solid group of friends, you can claim what you have learned about who you are as a friend and what you value in friendship. While, admittedly, it might be challenging after college to meet the sheer number of people your own age whom you could meet in a residential college setting, your self-knowledge about who you are and what matters to you in relationships can leave you less interested in quantity of connection because you are more discerning about what you are seeking in relationships.

8. **“It’s going to be so hard not to see my friends all the time. I know we’ll stay in touch but I’m sad that things will change.”** Saying farewell to friends is indeed one of the hardest parts of graduating. In this global era, after graduation, people scatter to all parts of the world.

*Things to consider trying:*

- ◆ During college, people have a unique chance to spend a lot of time living with a community of friends. Simply acknowledging the sadness is a way to honor the closeness you’ve all had and respect the difficulty of the impending separation. While accepting and noting the sadness, try to resist having the anticipation of the farewells overtake the last months you’ll all have together.
- ◆ Though the distance presents challenges for maintaining closeness, it also presents opportunities for visiting far-flung friends in interesting places. As best you can, make some future plans with friends for in-person encounters in the following year so that you’ll look forward to those moments.

9. **“I’m thinking a lot about who I was when I first came to Harvard and who I’ve become. It’s pretty amazing! I’m grateful for these four years and how I’ve grown into who I am. I might not know all the answers, but I feel okay with that.”** This approach allows you to acknowledge the ways you’ve grown and changed while being open to what the future might hold for you.

*Things to consider trying:*

- ◆ Celebrate your personal and intellectual achievements and development!

*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.*

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