What is it like to get a Graduate Degree while Working Full Time?

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Warning One

• This is not official policy.
• These are my personal opinions.
Warning Two

• **Know the rules.**
• Always read your guidebook and make sure to follow the rules.
• Anything in a guidebook or told to you by an advisor will always supersede whatever is written here (or anywhere, really).
• Rules and their interpretations change.
Warning Three

- People will attempt to talk you out of doing this.

- If at all possible,
  ... you should let them.
  ...although it is totally worth it.
Outline

• My Story

• Options for Graduate School and UW Staff

• Balance
My Story

• Admitted as a special student, took two CS (Computer Sciences) classes (2 semesters)
• Admitted as a Graduate student, took six more CS courses (6 semesters)
• Got Masters Degree

• At this point, thought “that wasn’t so hard”.
  • Or, I needed my head examined further...
My Story, continued.

• I continued on.
• PhD Minor (SLIS, now iSchool): 3 courses/3 semesters
• Qualifying exam (covering two binders of research papers plus all the grad level database courses): 4 hours
• Bonus: got an overload and taught the Undergraduate Database class
  • A challenge time-wise.
My Story, even more

• Prelim *(convinced three professors that my work was viable)*

• Now I’m ABD.

• Remaining: Dissertation *(and Final Oral Defense – convince five professors that what I did was worth a PhD)*
  • Fun fact: a PhD is a pass-fail degree

6/1/2018

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Computer Science options

• Professional Masters
  • Terminal MS program. 2 Years, 30 credits. (often taught at Epic/evenings)
  • Geared towards working “Adult” students.
  • Had this been offered, I probably would have ended up here.
    • (although my Advisor was a driver behind this program, so I was asked to provide insight on how to structure the program)
Computer Science options, continued

- Graduate Program
  - Traditional MS/PhD program.
  - MS: 30 credits, 24 credits coursework, 8 credits research
  - PhD:
    - PhD Minor (3 graduate-level credits in some other department)
    - Qualifying Exam (4 hour written exam)
    - Prelim Exam (what you plan to study)
    - Final Oral Defense (what you found)
Money

• The UW does not pay for degree programs (or grant tuition remission) for staff.
  • Most everywhere else does.

• Workaround – if your supervisor has training money and is willing to go to bat for you: “Continuing education”
  • The UW will pay for individual courses if that specific course, on its own, will enhance your job skills.
    • Ironically “computer security” was the course I got the most grief over.
  • Note: CS now requires “research” credits for the traditional Masters Degree, which I do not think I could have gotten reimbursed for.
Money, continued

• To reduce cost, and/or to give graduate school a test drive, consider taking credits as a “special student”:  
  • Easy to become a special student.  
  • Lower cost/credit than graduate status.  
  • Unfortunately, register last (so hard to get in popular courses)  
  • Key feature: Can transfer a certain number of special student courses into graduate school  
    • When I took it, it was max 6 credits / 2 courses into CS (which I did)  
    • Make sure you verify this with your desired department’s guidebook/rules before enrolling!
Money, final thought

• Nonresident tuition is vastly more expensive than resident tuition.
  • 3 credits resident: $2,279.58/semester (plus seg fees)
  • 3 credits nonresident: $4,778.37/semester (plus seg fees)

• You can convert to a resident!
  • If you came here for your school, and are considered nonresident, typically to acquire resident status you must be not enrolled for courses for an entire school year.
  • Work for one year in Wisconsin and then resume schooling at a vastly reduced rate.
  • Again, make sure to work with the appropriate office (registrar) to verify that you are meeting whatever current requirements they have.
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Balance: two halfs...
...becomes three halves
...but...how?

- Graduate school is a balancing act between:
  - Obligations
  - Time
  - Opportunities
  - Rules
Obligations

• Your supervisor will have to be awesome and very forgiving
• If applicable: Your partner/family will have to be awesome and very forgiving
• If PhD: your advisor will have to be awesome and very forgiving
• And so forth...

• Ultimately each of these groups are going to be relied upon for flexibility. That is not always easy.
Time

• Very close scheduling of time
  • Including sleep
    • If you get any
  • You still need to work your standard amount of hours
    • Thankfully I was granted flexibility as to when I worked my hours

• You will be scheduling three halves of your time.
Obligations are not easy

• Your life will go from making sure everything gets done...
  • What might go wrong if I let a ball drop?
• ...to a constant state of triage.
  • Which one of the balls that has gone to a full stop on the floor do I pick up next?
Rules

• You absolutely must read the guidebook.

• For example: In pre-dissertator status in CS you will require approval per-semester to be a part load student in order to take one class a semester.
  • That’s still per-semester even if the advisor in the fall says “you are good for the year”.
  • My experience: my request was new and novel to each faculty advisor I had.

• Careful management of both the Graduate coordinator (staff) and the Graduate Advising Committee Chair (faculty) will be essential.
If I can do it, you can too!

- This is not for everyone.
- Try it out as a special student.
- It is very hard.
- It is very rewarding.
- Know and follow the rules, even though they vary.