

Finding Balance: The Hidden Gift of Being Thrown Off-Course

By Bridget Graff, PT, DPT, LAT, ATC

Congratulations to Bridget Graff, PT, DPT, LAT, ATC, a finalist in the annual physical therapy student essay contest co-sponsored by the ACAPT Consortium for the Humanities, Ethics, and Professionalism (CHEP) and JHR. Dr. Graff recently completed her DPT degree at Marquette University and is a physical therapist in Phoenix, Arizona. This writing competition is designed to encourage deep thinking by students about the role and value of humanities, ethics, and professionalism in academic training and professional life. The fifth in an annual series, the CHEP-JHR essay contest offers a creative opportunity to ignite critical reflection in PT students across the nation, to support holistic approaches to patient care. This year's essay prompt was, "The pandemic highlighted a critical need to reimagine education in physical therapy, as programs had to quickly pivot to adopt virtual learning environments. Standing on the edges of the crisis, we are emerging forever changed individually, institutionally, and professionally. As you consider the challenges and benefits of remote learning from a student perspective, how has this unique experience impacted your image of yourself as a physical therapy professional? Using details and analysis from a specific experience, explain how your idea of physical therapy education, training and practice have changed."

In April 2020, I was in the car with my mom when the notifications started rolling in on my phone. My mom asked what it was, but before I could respond I was sobbing. I had been learning online for a little over a month. I wasn't adjusting well, and I was having the hardest time of my college career. All the messages on my phone were from classmates telling me that the upcoming summer courses would be virtual as well. That day and those emotions felt like I was breaking, but it ended up being a turning point in my physical therapy education.

After receiving the news that more virtual learning was ahead, I was forced to reflect on what it had been like thus far. The overpowering thought was that I was doing worse in school. I forced myself to move past that thought to realize that I had lost my passion to participate. I was fighting myself to pull up virtual classes and be attentive. When there wasn't class time scheduled, I would shut down. I had stopped exercising and doing the things I enjoyed.

During this time, I was blaming these emotions on being mentally under-stimulated. Before virtual learning, I had participated in the culture of graduate school that idolizes busy schedules, long nights at the

library, and students pushing themselves to their limits. I was a semester deep into my graduate program, and I had already racked up leadership positions, participated in multiple clubs, and had a campus job. When virtual learning started, all of that stopped. My self-worth could no longer be placed on fitting the mold of a busy student maintaining good grades.

REIMAGINING REALITY

At that point, I had to reimagine what the rest of my education would be like, now that returning to my crowded schedule was not an option. I started off valuing high grades and high participation as a student. In this new, constrained world of learning, I began to change my focus. I began to place more value on understanding concepts. While my energy to study was depleted by participating in virtual learning, I became strategic about where I used that energy.

For example, I made a concerted effort to break down massive virtual lectures into simple concepts that made more sense to me. I decided that if I had the energy to get into the details, I would, but if I didn't have the energy, I wouldn't push past that block. In some of my courses, my grades skyrocketed. In other courses, it did not make an impact on paper, but my knowledge stayed with me far past the exam. I was spending less time studying—and doing just as well, if not better, as a student.

A DETERMINED FREEDOM

For the first time in my entire college career, I had free time that wasn't dominated by mental fatigue. I started using this free time to do things I actually enjoyed, with the intention of relishing them instead of checking

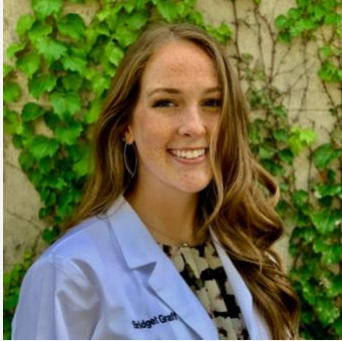
them off an overcrowded to-do list. I picked up new skills. I got better at cooking, began knitting and painting, and developed a more well-rounded yoga routine. I eventually began drawing connections between the knowledge gained outside of school and what I was learning in school. This newfound reality actually expanded on my understanding of concepts from school. For example, more frequent participation in yoga has extended my understanding of our core, and of breathing cycles, and has given me the language to communicate these concepts to a patient. Free time gave me the ability to be a more well-rounded person and clinician.

FINDING NEW PATHS FORWARD

I shifted the focus of some of my free time to gaining new knowledge within the niches of physical therapy that interested me. I started interacting with evidence on a more regular basis; I was working through thought processes of how to integrate evidence within my own skillset. These topics that I was passionate about transferred to a great deal of my coursework. My grades and understanding of class material improved again, because I allowed myself to also do the things I enjoyed.

This process was not as simple as it may sound, and although I am now on my final clinical experience, the process is nowhere near over. The balancing act of doing what must be done in school or a job and prioritizing myself is one that will never end. However, virtual learning forced me into a situation where I got the chance to realign my values. I am now able to continue my balancing act with clearly-defined priorities that are flexible to change.

About the Author



Bridget Graff PT, DPT, LAT, ATC is a physical therapist in Phoenix, Arizona. She graduated from Marquette University with her doctorate degree in physical therapy and bachelor's degree in athletic training. Marquette University prioritized the ignatian value of "cura personalis", or care for the whole person. Bridget carries this value through her clinical practice as caring for the patient as a person, and not just an injury.