

This is making learning audible a podcast where we talk about the methods and processes of learning and thriving at Princeton.

In our premiere episode we ask students what they want to accomplish over winter break. We host a student discussion with tips, strategies, and experiences and we will hear from our resident expert Nic Voge.

You know I actually do have homework. You have to come back for exams and they often don't understand the dimensions and demands of Princeton work. Something I would say as a piece of advice is to appeal to your family and friends for help.

Let's head over to Frist Campus Center to talk to some students.

*What do you want to get done over break?*

-I want to figure out how to complete some of the work I want to get done for school while also be able to enjoy Christmas with my family.

-I want to study all of my notes from the semester like to finish and edit my JP.

*What do you want to get done over break?*

-My JP. Rest. Sleep. Relax. I would very much like to relax. And to get some work done.

*What do you want to get done over break?*

-I want to get my writing seminar paper finished. I want to study for interviews and catch up on some schoolwork.

*So what do you want to get done over break?*

-Have outlines for my essays. Trying not to worry about school too much. I want to catch up on my readings for my classes.

*What do you want to get done over break?*

-So, I have to do a research project for my Italian class, so I have to write an eight page paper and I will have a problem set for my math class so I will just do those two things and that's it.

*That's it?*

- That's it. I will just relax. I'm back home in Rome, so I don't want to do too much.

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Participants: Geneva Stein, Clayton Otter, Elise Freeman, Patrick Dinh, Nic Voge

Geneva Stein: Hi welcome to making learning audible I'm your host Geneva Stein assistant director at the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning. Today we're going to talk about how to find balance during your winter break and I'm here with 3 McGraw learning consultants and they're going to introduce themselves to you.

Clayton: I'm Clayton. I'm a senior in the MOL department.

Elise: Hi my name is Elise. I'm a junior in the French Department. '

Patrick: My name is Patrick and I'm a senior in the Spanish department.

Geneva Stein: Great so, what are you guys looking forward to over break?

Elise: Time. Time that I can feel free to structure in whatever way that I want. I feel like I certainly do have some responsibilities that I would like to tend to and of course can get to that later but to have like 3 weeks of just segmented free time for me to figure out how I actually want to approach my work is a real.... just a great thing.

Clayton: I'm most looking forward to getting off campus for an extended period of time it's been a whirlwind of a semester the stress has just been building up in building up and it's definitely going to be a time for me to recharge that I'm looking forward to.

Geneva Stein: So, you're looking more for stress relief, more for unscheduled time that you can schedule to have control over.

Patrick: And I think it's also a great thing to have all your friends and family who may be doing their own thing across the country back in one place generally to reconnect with them for a good amount of time.

Geneva Stein: Elise, you want to schedule your free time. How have you made that work in the past?

Elise: So, winter break is sort of like an interesting time because usually at Princeton I'm usually a huge planner. I like to list absolutely everything that I do and check things off. But over winter break, I guess this is my break mode of planning. I'm following my own intuition so I'll kind of feel out like this is what is pressing me the most or like this is what I can do when I get back on campus and not worry about too much and then schedule time according to that. A lot of scheduling is not necessarily too active, if that makes any sense. I was just talking about this during training with Nic, I'll often just think about things in the back of my mind and then schedule time to think about things later, like over reading period. Just so I have a good starting point for when I get back.

Geneva Stein: Do you prioritize?

Elise: Yes. I like to prioritize sort of based on that intuition. So I'll kind of sort through the assignments that I have and there's always one that's at the forefront that's going to be I know the most stressful or the most difficult and that's the one I will kind of try to think through the most over break so that when I get back for reading period, I'll have a solid place to start.

Clayton: And also it seems like Elise is prioritizing. Setting the fundamentals for her papers when she gets back because I know papers that I had over reading period. Even though I might not be physically working on them I'm thinking of them as Elise is so that when you get back the first day of reading period, you're not overwhelmed not knowing where to start I think that becomes a problem when you have four 10 page papers to write in a week long period. If you don't have your ideas so at least you can immediately get going once you get back to campus. I think that can be a problem.

Geneva Stein: So, that's really interesting because you said before that you don't do work over break but now you're talking about maybe you're thinking about work can you kind of expand on the time you actually do spend on work even if it's not physically typing?

Clayton: So, I am a Molecular biologist. I'm usually not one with a huge Dean's date. But when I have had papers in the past the time I would... my goal over winter break would be to come back with a set topic that I'm happy with and then I'm ready to research as soon as I return to campus. Which might just be an hour 3 times over break think... the first hour thinking about everything you've learned in the class and what part of it you might want to explore more. A couple days later think more specifically for an answer to the prompts that you were given and then at the end of break settling on that topic that you're really excited about. Just so that you're not wasting time once you get back which I think a lot of people do here.

Geneva Stein: So, Patrick. You mentioned it's a priority for you and I think probably for a lot of people to be engaged with their family or friends who might be around. How do you both do things that you need to for your academic work and I don't want to say 'deal with' but kind of deal with other people schedules because it's not just you that you're talking about in that scenario..

Patrick: Right. So, Like Elise, I'm generally a planner during the semester and I actually do take that with me back home during my breaks as well so in addition to planning out things that I need to do for my classes, whether that be studying for an exam or writing a paper, that also does mean scheduling time to spend with other people and it does come in handy when everybody has different schedules just to compare availabilities with people that you need to meet me or want to meet and to set aside time to do that during the break because I guess at least for me if I don't do that I end up going through the whole break without seeing people that I would want to see and perhaps not even accomplishing the time that I would have liked to relax or like to hang out with my friends or my family that I had planned on doing before.

Geneva Stein: Yeah, I think that is really important because there are academic priorities and there are other priorities for what you want to get done over the break. Have you evolved from your first year in how you balance the work, Elise and Patrick?

Patrick: I guess at least for me, when I was first starting out it was kind of an attempt to do both at once trying to relax all of my break and also get a large portion of my work done trying to do both almost at the same time and then what ended up happening is that when I would go out to hang out with my friends for example maybe they wanted to go get brunch or go to the movies or something, I'd be thinking about my work while I was hanging out with them and it ended up being really taxing. And then I'd come home and I realized that I was really tired or that I had spent too much time I was with my friends and it was not enough time to do my work so in essence by the time break was over I felt more tired than when I had first started and also I felt more behind on my work than I had intended.

Geneva Stein: So, has scheduling helped you?

Patrick: Certainly, just realizing that you do need time to relax on your break is something that I realized you can't realistically spend the whole break just working. A lot of people would feel very tired at the end, burnt out, stressed, but at the same time I mean if you are the type of person who does enjoy planning things out or scheduling things then the break is a great time to do that as long as you're mindful of that at the beginning.

Geneva Stein: Yeah and giving yourself permission to schedule time to relax. So you're not procrastinating basically, so you're not feeling the stress of procrastination. What about you Elise, how have you evolved since your first year?

Elise: Yeah my second winter break was a lot better than my first year one because my freshman year I had set the bar too high like I thought I would catch up on everything and have my papers almost finished and that during reading period I would be just editing and I would be studying for my final exams as well and I ended up just overwhelming myself and then doing nothing and then coming back reading period and then having to schedule time to do the passive work of brainstorming and also making sure that all of that was fruitful so that everything was turned in on time. For my sophomore winter break, I learned from that and all I wanted was just a good place to start when I got back. I did not put a lot of pressure on myself. I let all the work that I had to do be kind of passive and if something came to mind that I really liked I would jot it down and get back to it so yeah I definitely like lowered the bar in terms of the amount of physical pages that had to get done and I just let myself kind of build naturally

Geneva Stein: So more realistic expectations.

Elise: Absolutely

Geneva Stein: We're hoping to give first years a little bit of a view into your experiences so that they don't run into the same challenges. So Clayton what about you, how did you kind of evolve to restricting your academic work to just thinking and doing the thought work.

Clayton: I think that I realized how valuable reading period is. It is like 10 full days back at school where everyone is being productive. I've always found that I'm never as productive at home even though I say I will be even as when I am here in the library at Princeton. So freshman year I thought that I needed to do a lot, similar to Patrick and Elise, I thought I needed to do a lot and then I came back to Princeton and had these 10 days and was perfectly fine. I could have taken the stress out of my winter break a lot more so then in future semesters I've just realized that the work can happen during reading period as long as you capitalize on reading period.

Geneva Stein: You guys have described your evolution on this. So what challenges do you have now? What do you anticipate being challenging even with the methods that you figured out like what could you think about now to help you have a more fulfilling break?

Elise: So this particular break, can't be as passive as my last one because I have independent work due before reading period. It's like the Monday that reading period starts and I am also going abroad. So this time I actually have to have the physical representation of all of my work finished so I found that I've been doing a lot of the passive thinking now so that when I get to winter break and I have to do that physical productivity that I know where I'm starting. I'm also kind of just like putting myself or letting myself get really excited about it so that when I finally start working, I can be like I've been waiting to do this even if that's me tricking myself, I'm not sure.

Patrick: I think bouncing off Elise's ideas. I guess every winter break could be different just being flexible with your expectations of what needs to get done. Some winter breaks might have a lot of Deans date assignments perhaps and then you might have to work a little bit more proactively to get those papers done just to get those papers done at the same time. If you have a lot of finals perhaps then perhaps you can backload that work and you might want to think

about what to study during reading period. If you have any independent project, thesis, independent work you have to be more structured about the time during winter break. Being flexible with it and taking time to figure out what you want to get out of winter break whether that be recharging, you might have had a really difficult semester and you just need time off and then that could be the best thing for your work and for your personal health as well I think just knowing what you want out of the break and then taking the steps to ensure that could be applied to all situations.

Geneva Stein: Yeah, so can you speak to the recharging piece a little more? What is the importance of that, looking forward to finals and spring semester? The particular Princeton calendar why might it be really important for somebody to recharge?

Clayton: I think that most of our peers at other schools are in a different mind place where there semester is literally over and when we leave for winter break it seems like the semester is over but when we come back we have 3 more weeks of the most intense part of the semester left so in order to I think that if I continue to work how I work at school through winter break in order to optimally prepare myself for finals period and reading week I would very quickly burn out. There is only so long that I can be on my a game working to the best of my ability and if I don't let myself take a step back and take time to myself and realize why I like learning and why I enjoy my life, it could burn me out.

Elise: Yeah I one hundred percent agree with Clayton's burnout concerns because for a couple reasons. Because spring semester is so continuous and there are not a lot of breaks so if you keep working year-round the same way that you're working when school's in session there's just I don't know how sustainable that is. I don't see that happening. And also I think it's important to prioritize self-care and getting time for yourself over winter break so that not that it should always be a means to an end but so that when you come back for reading period you do feel good and can thus produce better work rather than you being burnt out from 3 weeks of non stop scheduled work.

Geneva Stein: What do you do, Elise to recharge?

Elise: Honestly like a lot of nothing. I have a lot of alone time, I listen to podcasts, I like to read, I watch YouTube and talk to my friends that I haven't talked to you for 3 months.

Geneva Stein: What about you Patrick?

Patrick: I like to go to the gym sometimes I don't get enough time to do that during the year but during the break there is plenty of time.

Geneva Stein: Clayton, what do you like to do to recharge?

Clayton: Yeah, the gym is big. I have two little sisters so I like catching up with them. I like to catch up on all my Netflix shows.

Geneva Stein: Anyone like to cook? I like to cook. I'm just saying. If I have a whole day, I could just like cook for three hours and it is incredibly relaxing.

Elise: I always say I'm going to make something. I just never do. Maybe this time.

Patrick: It's just relaxing when you don't have time to cook proper meals during the semester. At least that is the case with me.

Geneva Stein: Great, so what is some last pieces of advice besides what you've already Illustrated that you would like Princeton students to know?

Clayton: Don't think that everyone around you is working over winter break. They're not. I personally do almost nothing over break when I can. You should realistically plan out when you're deadlines are when your finals are once you come back and if you know you have time to do everything you have over reading period then there is no reason to work over break that's my philosophy at least but if you have independent work deadline the Monday we get back obviously that's not the case. So, keep your deadlines in mind but I think just think about it before you go home and figure out how your break is going to be.

Elise: Over winter break, just follow your intuition. If you feel you need to work on something and you know it's going to be too difficult to work on over reading period. And you just want to get your foot in the door, absolutely do that. But in following your intuition make sure you're not putting too much pressure on yourself just go slow, prioritize as you wish, and don't set the bar too high.

Patrick: Just do as much work as you feel like you can and want to, You should feel comfortable like whether you do work or not. Be confident what you choose to do and I really think it should be a time for you to not feel so stressed.

Clayton: sorry one more thing. From some recent learning consultations I have worked with students who have been very stressed out about how they've done on midterms and particular in orgo exams recently. So the advice that we came to together was that your finals are a completely different game than any exam you have during the semester like you have all this time to prepare you have winter break to prepare if you need it so just don't let the tone of how this semester went dictate things. Like don't tell yourself that you can't do better in the future and use winter break if you need it.

Geneva Stein: Any suggestions on how many books to bring home?

Patrick: Realistically, none. I have had a lot of textbooks over the course of my Princeton career. At the beginning I would read them and now I realized everything you need comes from the lectures and online so over the years I've progressively brought less and less textbooks home. And if it's sitting there on your desk at home it stresses you out. Whatever is in there you can take a quick look when you get back onto campus or maybe just you don't need it at all.

Elise: Yeah I have never had the textbook problem. I have always just had the e-reserves or articles online that I can just easily go on blackboard.

Clayton: But if you need to say study for orgo over break, it's okay to bring home a textbook. Maybe don't bring all 6 back with you just again think about it before you go home

Geneva Stein: thank you Elise, Clayton, and Patrick for talking to me today about this.

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Geneva Stein: I'm here with our senior associate director at the McGraw Center Nick Voge. He has run the workshop for many years on how to best use your time over winter break and so Nick we are just wondering what advice do you have given your experience with students here many years of experience?

Nic Voge: So I think the starting point is thinking about what I have seen how students approach break. So sometimes we get really idealistic and we want to get everything done that we have on our list and that is kind of unrealistic and overly idealistic or ambitious and then sometimes people think well it's my break I don't want to do any work or they may want to do some work but find themselves not doing any at all. So I think coming in with realistic expectations. My workshop is always frames as finding balance that recognizing from the start that there are things you want to do with your family and friends and those are high important. Our relationships are what keep us human and sustained. Many of us are here in college because of those relationships it is important to nurture them and nourish them. Break is a good time to sleep and catch up and exercise. Those are important things. But it may not be the perfect time to establish a brand new diet and exercise schedule. I've tried that it doesn't really work, so having realistic expectations but approaching with balance so health, family and friends, some time devoted to academics. For most people that's a useful thing and then maybe some of the things you need to do as well like internships or GRE prep or what have you and so being realistic about some of the things. Maybe identify fewer rather than more priorities I would say as things that I have learned from students who have done it well.

Geneva Stein: In our previous conversation about this, you talked a little bit about this idea of a future self and how you can use an idea of your future self to inform what you're currently planning. So can you relate that too break and what that means for students?

Nic Voge: Yeah, so one-way to use the idea of a future self and you can look this up there is research on it. Think about it concretely. Imagine yourself walking back onto campus, so you got your roller bag behind you or your duffle bag your parents are dropping you off, you know, you are walking up the stairway across campus to your room like what do you want to feel like? What do you want to be thinking in that moment? Okay I got this thing done but I am also feeling relaxed. You are feeling like you are glad you connected with your uncle or grandparents are that friend of yours but try to think about concretely what is that future self, what do you want that experience to be like and with that vision and picture in mind to use that to help you make decisions over the weeks between now and then. It's not to say that the future self should be perfect it should be a realistic future self. It is a way to make real the counter balances or some important considerations when you are making decisions, so it feels like I can do all those things well maybe you cant? Of course I can binge watch Netflix which sounds like fun and maybe you can but have some realistic way of considering what the outcomes of your choices are and that's just a way to do that to make it real by having a picture and image and thinking through that and then working backwards from there.

Geneva Stein: So I know you are taking a short break over the holidays, how do you picture yourself coming back from that break?

Nic Voge: really good question. It is a tool I would like to try to use more now so it definitely makes me more realistic. So the picture I have to come back energized and feeling good physically especially that is the main thing I envision. I think that will help me not to eat too many pieces of pie, but more than that just like not to have too many expectations about getting work done because that probably won't be conducive to feeling rested and recuperated.

Geneva Stein: So is there any other advice that you think is really important to share with Princeton students about how to achieve balance over break, how to feel balance.

Nic Voge: Yeah, I think one thing that I am struck by and what makes me sad is that I think Princeton students when they have a lot to do over break, they feel like they have to give short shrift to their family and their friends and that always worries me. As Princeton students we get nourished by our relationships and if we have to choose between being a good student or friend or brother then that's a problem. We shouldn't be putting students in those positions. One way to address that is certainly to devote time to be intentional about cultivating those relationships and getting your needs met in those. Another way is to appeal to people and say you do have homework. A lot of times they do not understand that you got to come back for exams they often don't understand the dimensions and demands of Princeton work and what these big 15 page papers are like and you have them for 3 classes. A piece of advice is to appeal to friends and family for help. I would say I want to spend time with you, you're important to me, hearing that is as much as important as spending the time. Can we carve out maybe a little less time than I would have liked but that would allow me to meet my other obligations and then ask them to help you to do that. They want your success but they also want your time, but they also want your success. So if you can make it explicit the demands your balancing and then ask for yourself and they will say oh yeah and then you will both be more creative to coming to a solution or a compromise that allows you to do both and if its only you trying to figure that out then it is harder. You're trying to make everybody happy but if you can tell them then you together can figure out how to make yourselves happy.

Geneva Stein: Well thank you Nic. Thanks for talking to us today.