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Nicole Wills

University of Central Florida, nwills@ucf.edu

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I'm About to Graduate – But I'll Never Stop Learning

By Nicole Wills
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(Photo by Khadesha Galloway at Unsplash)

I have been a student as long as I can remember. My earliest memories are being with my childhood friends in our kindergarten classroom.

Many of the most defining experiences of my adolescence took place at school, and if you spend a number of years doing the same thing, that thing will inevitably become ingrained in your sense of self. So, it's no surprise that after 17 years of being a student, I would consider that a significant aspect of my identity.

I've always loved learning, whether it be about art or statistics or anything in between. That girl who sits near the front of the class with color-coded notes and spare mechanical pencil refills? That's me in a nutshell.

I'm a senior now, and I'll graduate from UCF in the spring. Although that's an exciting thought, it also raises an important question for me: What happens next? For the first time that I can remember, "student" will no longer be an accurate way to describe myself.

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I've spent a lot of time reflecting on this upcoming change and how I should adjust to it. If nothing else, I figured I could look forward to going to grad school and one day becoming a student again. But I knew that wouldn't fill the void in the years between, so I resigned myself to letting the studious aspect of my identity slip away.

At least, that's what I figured until something occurred to me recently while in the middle of one of my regular Wikipedia deep dives. You know when you search for the page about Britain's Parliament and next thing you know it is two hours later and you're reading about the origin of the bubonic plague? That's the kind of deep dive I was embarking on when the realization hit me: I was learning!

That may seem like an obvious fact. Of course, I knew in a literal sense that learning was the activity I was taking part in at that moment. But the realization that I'm talking about was a bit more subconscious. It made me think about the multitude of other ways—besides falling down Wikipedia rabbit holes—that I could continue to get the same satisfaction that learning as a student in the traditional school environment gave me for so many years.

I began to research and found a number of online courses (some free) that cover everything from ancient Greek heroes to the fundamentals of neuroscience. Some of the courses even offer certifications for a small fee.

Of course, online courses aren't the only way to keep learning after graduation. In a broader sense, remaining curious is a matter of choice. Being a lifelong learner is something you have to work at every day, whether it's through the television programming you watch or the books that you read. You can even make it a community endeavor by volunteering at (or just paying a visit to) your local museums, libraries or the like.

As graduation looms ever nearer, I feel a mix of emotions. No longer being in school is definitely a bittersweet notion, but it's no longer something that fills me with uncertainty about my own identity. I no longer fear losing a part of myself—I'll just have to incorporate my desire to learn into my daily life instead of setting aside a specific time and place for it.

The only question that remains: Where to start? I'm sure I'll find out the next time I fall into a Wikipedia rabbit hole.

Nicole Wills is a University of Central Florida senior in the Burnett Honors College studying advertising-public relations, political science, and writing/rhetoric. She can be reached at nwills@knights.ucf.edu.