

Don't let the fact that you have a PhD limit the way you see yourself

UA universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/from-phd-to-life/dont-let-fact-phd-limit-way-see/

As a PhD, you can think of research as one of your many useful skills, but it is not necessarily your primary identity.

One of the brow-furrowing moments for me when I read articles on doctoral education or participate in panels is when the idea that “PhDs are researchers” comes up. It’s common for commenters to refer to PhDs in this way.

This is often an intentional move, one that pushes the conversation forward from the limiting notion as PhD as [proto-professors](#). In that way, it’s a welcome intervention. The idea is to help doctoral graduates see how their skills and experiences have broader relevance and value. In the U.K. and Europe, “early-career researcher” and “early-stage researcher,” respectively, are used to refer to individuals currently undergoing doctoral studies and/or within the first few years of obtaining the degree. If you think of a PhD as a “research degree” this of course makes perfect sense.

If thinking of yourself as a researcher frees up your imagination and helps you move toward a fulfilling career, then by all means embrace the term. But if it leaves you as cold as it does me, I’m giving you permission to jettison it.

You can think of research as one of your many useful skills, one that may come in handy in whatever job you have, but not necessarily your primary skill, and certainly not your primary identity. You are welcome to think instead of yourself as a teacher, or an analyst, or a problem solver, or a communicator, or – in my case – as a community builder. These are all fine. You can think of yourself as a marketer or salesperson, or as a writer or editor, or as an artist or thinker. Don’t let the fact that you have a PhD limit the way you see yourself.

One of the important discoveries I made about myself after my PhD was that I wasn’t much interested in doing research for research’s sake.

A few years back I was doing freelance work for a client. He’d asked me to research something and then give him an overview of the field. Okay, cool. I did that, but along the way I made up my own mind about a few things. So when I took him the information, I also pitched him an argument about what we should do with this information. His vision didn’t align with my own, and in the end I felt that the research I did wasn’t used. That frustrated me. Lesson learned: I prefer my learning to be in service of solving a problem, and I myself want to be actively part of coming up with the solution.

That distance from the solution – how close your own work feels to having a direct impact – is an important consideration for PhD job seekers. Three of my own clients these days are grappling with this issue. All three no longer think that the work they currently do has enough positive impact on the people and communities around them. (This is a personal judgment, not a condemnation of the inherent value of the work they are doing.)

One is a tenure-track professor who likes her job but hopes for something more meaningful and fulfilling, another is a senior PhD student who’s considering working in politics after finishing up, and the third is an adjunct professor who’s deciding between non-academic job options. They all happen to be Americans, but they could just as easily be Canadians, Brits, Australians, you name it. We’re all in this together, wanting to step up where we can as politics gets ever more divisive and government policies increasingly cause harm to those most vulnerable.

If your own values and priorities may have shifted over the past little while, you’re not alone. Take some time to reassess what’s important to you and see how well your current work and life align with that. This can be a scary process, but we know the alternative is even worse.

One of the big goals of [Beyond the Professoriate](#), the organization I run with Maren Wood, is to get people with

PhDs working where we're needed. That includes higher education and faculty roles, for sure, but also basic science, research and development, K-12 education, business, nonprofits, and government. Our world needs smart, thoughtful people – including but certainly not limited to doctoral degree holders – working *everywhere*. (Check out the recent [webinar](#) Maren and I gave along with our colleague [Michelle Dionne Thompson](#) all about how to be an engaged academic in the Age of Mass Distraction.)

I've drifted some from my starting point of frustration over the equation PhD=researcher. The bottom line for me is that each individual gets to decide their professional identity for themselves. Let's not simply replace one box (professor) with another (researcher). You do you. The world needs us at our best in places that work best for us.