

# Why we need to be transparent about career outcomes

---

**UA** [universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/beyond-the-professoriate/need-transparent-career-outcomes/](https://universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/beyond-the-professoriate/need-transparent-career-outcomes/)

The more open universities are about where their PhDs are getting jobs, the better equipped current students are to forge their own career paths.

*This is a guest post by Chris Pickett, director of Rescuing Biomedical Research.*

For the past 20 years, [expert panels](#) of [scientists](#) have recommended universities track and report the career outcomes of their PhD alumni. Little progress has been made, though it remains an important recommendation. Seeing where PhDs go after completing their degree is important info for prospective and current trainees to be able to blaze their own career path.

When we at [Rescuing Biomedical Research](#) started our career outcomes project in 2015, about two dozen (U.S.) universities collected and published career outcomes information on their PhD alumni. They were all using similar data collection methods, and they were also using similar career taxonomies to describe the jobs their alumni have.

To fully implement the recommendation to improve transparency in career outcomes, we had to do two things. First, gather the successful methods for collecting data on PhD career outcomes. Second, harmonize the career taxonomies being used. Universities using the same job definitions allows for direct comparison of career outcomes across institutions.

As more and more universities looked to collect and publish career outcomes data, we convened a working group with members from institutions that already collected and published data. These included members of the U.S. National Institutes of Health's [Broadening Experiences in Scientific Training consortium](#), universities that were in the process of collecting data, and university organizations such as the Association of American Universities and the Association of American Medical Colleges.

A white paper with the outcomes of this meeting can be [viewed here](#), and more detail can be found on the [RBR website](#).

Participants at the meeting delved into everything that needed to be done to have a successful data collection effort. This included identifying the offices on a campus that keeps track of all PhDs that have graduated from the institution. We also discussed how best to contact alumni, and, if contact was not possible, how to use social media sites to track down desired information.

Those at our meeting also agreed to a unified career taxonomy, which was created by merging similar documents from the NIH BEST consortium and the University of California, San Francisco. The taxonomy is a three-tier description of career paths comprised of sector, career type, and job function. Sector includes academia, government, industry, etc. Career type includes primarily research, science related, further training, etc. Job function is a description of what the alumnus does.

Those at the meeting agreed that a table with the data should be posted on each university's website to facilitate straightforward comparisons of career outcomes among universities.

By developing and publishing these methods and taxonomy, the guesswork behind data collection projects by universities has been eliminated. Universities do not need to invent methods to find their alumni or decide on which pieces of data can or should be collected. Nor do they need to have long discussions about how to best categorize the careers of their alumni.

Of course, questions remain and this process is not finished. One concern we have heard is that universities may

be discouraged from publishing career outcomes data if they think that it will hurt their ability to recruit high-quality students. Anecdotally, the opposite may be true: schools that have presented alumni outcome information to prospective students have gotten a very positive response. However, we need to collect data on how the presentation of career outcomes affect recruiting.

Another concern is how different institutions interpret and use the taxonomy to describe the career paths of different alumni. PhDs in a science policy fellowship could be described as doing further training in policy or they could also be described as postdocs – a fellowship is a temporary training position, after all. This and other grey areas exist in the taxonomy, and it will be important to understand how universities use the taxonomies so that further updates can be made to enhance data collection and presentation.

The publication of a common set of data collection methods and a unified taxonomy is a watershed moment for the movement to improve transparency in the career outcomes of PhDs. As [more groups](#) move to make this data more transparent, improvements will be made to the system. But ultimately, undergraduate and graduate students will have more resources at their fingertips when charting out their career path.

*Chris Pickett, PhD, is director of Rescuing Biomedical Research. Dr. Pickett presented “Improving Transparency in Biomedical PhD Career Outcomes” as part of Beyond the Professoriate’s free Research & Innovation webinar series. You can [watch a recording](#) of his presentation online.*