

# Graduate Students, Take Charge

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Talking to a graduate student is a little like an old Abbott and Costello routine about a mythical baseball team composed of players named Who, What and I Don't Know. Career counseling sessions can be, however, more like a double act with just two players: the student and the professional. And unlike a comedy routine, the scenes take place within the context of dollars spent in stipends, fellowships and expectations of intellectual growth.

When "I don't know" appears in a conversation about professional options, worry -- not laughter -- ensues. Worry because our university has invested financial resources and scholarly leadership in a student, but that person is stuck repeating, "I don't know." Scary, too, because anguish displaces logic.

Here's the scene:

Me: How can I help you?

Grad Student: Who can help me? I don't know. My adviser wants me to graduate, and I don't know the next step.

Me: What do you mean? What are your goals? Who are your sources for advice?

Student: I don't know.

The student's response of "I don't know" may imply uncertainty and absence of focus despite progress toward a degree. "I don't know" is often a place marker for an assortment of family, teachers and peers who encourage academically strong but highly uncertain students to attend graduate school. Even at the level of Ph.D. training, many students' motivations can be more related to a desired life event than an interest in advanced study. One young man I know openly admitted he enrolled in the applied math graduate program of my institution, [Stony Brook University](#), because he wanted to marry! The university's proximity to New York City's Orthodox population was his main goal. The accumulated expertise and academic ranking of our faculty less so.

Sometimes "I don't know" means the student has ceded a life transition to the faculty. In other words, the student expects university faculty members to systematically and rationally direct career paths. But elevating faculty mentors to the status of omniscient narrators for all matters related to professional options is more than an error.

Surrendering career decisions in that way means avoiding situations that would stimulate intellectual and personal growth. The behavior associated with "I don't know" might express itself in artful delay about all sorts of things, including writing a teaching statement, teaching and conference participation.

Essential confusion about faculty mentors and personal accountability exposes itself in not only “I don’t know” but also “Who.” For example, we had a Ph.D. program alumna arrive for a career coaching session with a folder overflowing with MBTI results, a Strengths Quest evaluation and a Strong Interest Inventory report. She also had an eight-page CV featuring teaching assistant positions from the 1990s. She filled the conversation with a who’s-who roster of my university’s more radical faculty while stating she was overqualified. She repeated mentors’ names as if recalling secular stations of postmodern intellectual thought. The faculty admired her teaching and research, she told me. And she hoped her mentors’ reputations would give her an advantage on the job market.

But the power of connections from academic mentors has a shelf life. Dissertation advisers retire, relocate and even depart this earth. As a Ph.D. recipient committed to the academic job market, you will need to update and replenish contacts. You should realize that the longer you’re on the job market, the greater the need to develop new connections and update skills. The contemporary job market includes educational technology, resources and methodology that were mere dreams 10 years ago.

Faculty members can be allies for graduate students seeking career advice -- credible sources if only because they sit on hiring committees. Your adviser, for instance, can tell you which journals to submit to and which conferences to attend. Want insight about doing well in your chalk talk? Then confer with faculty. But a faculty mentor cannot know everything.

Career-savvy graduate students constantly adjust their perceptions about the academic job market and its alternatives. They take charge of professional options while sorting through insights from faculty members, professional staff and peers. Plus, career-savvy students recognize that all sources of information have limitations.

Such graduate students stay current on pedagogy and read up on flipped classrooms and online collaborative learning. Potential research faculty learn to maintain relationships across geographical and disciplinary boundaries.

A career-savvy graduate student also recognizes benefits of advice from peers. Two passionate graduate students in molecular and cellular biology started an eight-step career education series, the Ph.D. Career Ladder, on my campus. They realized the limits of the traditional cycle of graduate degree to postdoc to faculty member, but rather than quit their doctorate, they opted to reimagine roles for their dedication to science. The Ph.D. Career Ladder is now in its fourth year, and the founders graduated with Ph.D.s and transitioned into other types of science careers.

There are now two postscripts to this homegrown peer-advising initiative. Our molecular and cellular biology faculty not only approve of the program, but they also benefit from the career-oriented focus of program participants. In addition, the university expanded the Career Ladder to graduate students and postdocs in other departments with support from a National Science Foundation Innovations in Graduate Education grant.

In sum, there's no predictive algorithm for a successful transition from graduate student to

professional. But holding yourself accountable for what you know is the foundation. So, here's an alternative approach to "I don't know": defer to your adviser on matters of scholarship, but balance the influence of your adviser with relationships with people outside the department. Most important, own your professional development and understand that you are in charge.

Career-savvy graduate students watch the "I don't know" chatter vanish by infusing personal values, professional vision and job market knowledge into their lives.