

Ph.D. candidates should consider careers other than in the faculty (essay)

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Stop Resisting Nonfaculty Careers

You can love your field, your specialty area and academe, but sometimes they won't love you back, writes Christine Kelly.

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By

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In the national conversation about career opportunities for Ph.D. candidates, we hear a lot of dialogue about faculty resistance and solutions for how faculty members can become more supportive of students considering wider career options. What we don't hear as much about is student resistance to career exploration. I recently met with a student who told me he had no intention of considering anything but faculty jobs. He told me it was a waste of his time to take on any work during his program that was not teaching or research, since he was going to be a professor.

He's not the only student I've worked with who sees a faculty position as the one ideal career. In fact, I can empathize with the people who think this way, as I once held that view. When my tenure-track dreams didn't come true and I became a part-timer, I was completely resistant to exploring options. I went through the motions of the process, but my heart and mind were just not in it, so my first exploration of nonfaculty career options was a total failure. But given all the evidence that most Ph.D.s won't get tenure-track jobs, and all the conversations current graduate students have heard telling them that, many people still believe they will get the prize -- and to even doubt that is to reject their whole sense of who they want to be in the world.

A question I consider each time I meet with resistant Ph.D. candidates is, how can I help them discover a different, and equally satisfying, career option? If you are one of those resisting Ph.D. candidates, here is some advice for overcoming your resistance.

First, research what it really means to be a faculty member at the different types of institutions where you want to

work. I've met graduate students who have a very unrealistic idea of what the job of a university professor entails. And once they become junior faculty members, I've heard them express a number of common concerns. For example, one was dismayed that she had three different class preps in her first year. Another was surprised the college couldn't pay for him to attend a conference where he had a paper accepted. Another said she was so busy with all the course prep and meetings (and she had no committee work or service her first year) that she had no time to do any research and wasn't seeing much hope for that during the spring semester.

My response in all those conversations was, "Welcome to faculty life." One faculty member whom I spoke with in his first semester in the role told me he was considering looking for a different faculty job, thinking that what he was experiencing was distinct to his institution -- and that if he went to a more research-focused university then he'd have time to do his research. Of course, he wasn't considering the amount of time it takes to advise graduate students or compete for grants.

A common reason I've heard for why Ph.D.s want to be faculty members is that the job is flexible and you get to have deep intellectual conversations with your colleagues. But do you know about all the other faculty responsibilities? Most faculty I know are too busy to sit around having the kinds of deep intellectual conversations they did in graduate school, and sometimes flexibility means choosing whether to grade on Friday night or Saturday morning.

When I recently suggested to a department chair that he tell his students about all the duties of a professor, he responded, "Do you mean I should tell them ...?" Then he gave me a list of things he does that are not teaching or research related and asked if I thought he should let them know all of that. And I told him, "Of course you should!" It's possible if you develop a better understanding of the full range of activities involved in being a professor, you might decide it's not for you and then you might be willing to explore other options.

Another suggestion is to consider your sources for the information you have about nonfaculty careers. I've been to a lot of new student orientations and other panels where faculty members speak about their careers. I've noticed that many people at those sessions will tell students the best reason for being faculty is that *you* are your own boss and *you* get to decide your own career path. Underlying that comment is the implicit suggestion that other career options do not allow you the freedom to design your own path. And I have heard some faculty members explicitly tell students that if they take a nonfaculty career they will be micromanaged.

But there are so many options outside academe where you can be your own boss and create a job that fits what you want. And even if you aren't entrepreneurial enough to start your own business, it is still possible to find careers within existing organizations that allow for creativity and the ability to adapt the job to your goals.

One factor that contributes to this lack of knowledge is that alumni who leave faculty tracks are often ignored. Some departments only provide the placement information about alumni who went on to faculty jobs, so many faculty members and current and prospective students don't know what careers other alumni have. I know many departments are now actively working to locate their alumni off the tenure track and inviting them back to campus to talk about their career paths. If your department doesn't do this, ask them to start now. The more you see your department honoring both academic and nonacademic paths, the more comfortable you will feel and the more options you will see for yourself.

Are you still resistant? Considering all of your options is a smart thing to do, and so is getting some experience outside the traditional faculty preparation activities. Even if you are intent on becoming a professor, you should know more than just how to teach a class and get published to be successful in a faculty career. And you need to be prepared in case you don't land a faculty position, because being an adjunct and hoping you'll be the lucky one who finally gets recognized for your sacrifice to the profession and rewarded with a tenure-track line is often a fantasy.

Being prepared for a wide variety of options is also smart even if you do get your tenure-track dream job. One of the new faculty members I mentioned earlier worked in industry before earning her Ph.D. She mentioned that, in

addition to seeking other faculty jobs, she's also considering going back to industry. As it turns out, she's not the only professor who discovered that faculty life is not for her, but she knows she has other options. A great time to try out different careers is while you are a student -- through internships, short-term projects or even extended job shadowing -- with no commitment to stay. Once you begin your career, it's not acceptable to change jobs every few months.

Another cause of your resistance may be the commingling of passion and career. I am not a fan of the career advice to do what you are passionate about. I recently watched [Cal Newport's](#) YouTube video on this topic. He made a good point that we can't know what we are passionate about until we do it and, even then, it may take a while before we become passionate.

I understand having a love for your field, your specialty area and academe, but sometimes they won't love you back, and you have to move on to a healthier career relationship. But if you've only focused on your love for being a professor and haven't explored other paths, how can you know you won't discover a new passion?

I didn't know I'd like being a career coach as much as I do. And in fact, this career gives me a lot of the things I really liked about being a faculty member: helping students build new skills and discover new ideas, working one-on-one with students, creating and presenting to students (always a voluntary audience, and there's no grading!) and collaborating with faculty members and administrators to ensure students have an excellent experience at my institution. And I still research and write. So even if you can't have the job title you want, you may still have a career where you can perform the tasks you most wanted to as a faculty member.

I know it's not easy to give up on a dream. I struggled with that and did some deep inner work to get to a point where I was open to exploration. And I've successfully coached others who are now very happy in their newfound careers. If you are resistant, I hope you will try to reach outside your comfort zone and explore your options. There's a whole universe of wonderful careers waiting for you.

Bio

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