

Tips for Talking About Other Options

IHE insidehighered.com/advice/2016/11/07/how-talk-your-adviser-about-your-nonacademic-career-plans-essay

One of the scariest conversations to have with an adviser can be telling that person that you are not interested in an academic career. Depending on your field, they may have high expectations that you will follow their path to a tenure-track position. But you may not even be sure whether you want to go into academe or another industry, and you'd at least like to talk about your different options. So how do you mention to your adviser that you are considering nonacademic career fields?

Choosing an Adviser

The best-case scenario is to choose an adviser and department open to students with diverse career interests. Before applying to a graduate program or while rotating through research groups, look at the department and lab websites. Where have alums gone after graduation? Search their names with Google or LinkedIn on your own if the information looks out-of-date. Rarely does a department graduate 100 percent tenure-track faculty, so be skeptical of lists of alums that do not mention other career outcomes. That could indicate that the department or faculty member is not supportive of students who don't fit the academic mold.

To be bold, you can ask potential advisers via email or in person where nonacademic graduates have gone. Keep in mind, however, that departments that are hostile to this type of conversation could hold a question like this against you in the admissions process. Ideally, you can focus on applying to programs that support all students.

Is It Worth the Risk?

If you already have an adviser, the first question you should ask is "Is it worth the risk?" Put another way, what do you gain from telling your adviser? Bringing your adviser into the career conversation can give you another perspective. They could provide connections in particular industries. At the very least, it may be a weight off your shoulders to no longer feel you have a secret to hide.

At the other extreme, the conversation could go poorly. Some people will become upset if you share your nonacademic career plans. I have worked with many students facing this problem. Some of their advisers called them things like "immoral." Other advisers told their students that they would receive less support and their thesis committees would be changed. A very unfortunate subset of students was forced out of the adviser's research group, sometimes landing in another group and sometimes leaving graduate school.

If any of this is a possibility for you, look into your program's policy handbook, check with the larger graduate school to learn about what protections they can offer, contact the campus ombudsperson for advice and reach out to other faculty members who have continued to mentor students who are not interested in a career in academe. If finishing a graduate degree is still one of your goals, it could be very risky to tell an unsupportive or hostile adviser, and you may want to reconsider involving your adviser.

Many advisers may fall somewhere in the middle. They will not hold it against you that you're considering other career paths, but they may not be able to help you much, either. Faculty members have successfully made it through the gantlet of the academic job search, and for most, this is the only line of work they know. They may accept your choice to not become a faculty member like them, and the conversation may end there. If that is the case, consider contacting your campus career center. Such centers serve graduate students, so schedule an appointment to learn more about how you can prepare for different careers.

Testing the Waters

You may be unsure of how your adviser will react to the news that you are considering a nonacademic career. In that

case, you can start asking questions to learn more about their views on nonacademic careers without revealing your plans. You can start by asking how many students they have graduated and where they are now. Even if they only mention students who have gone on to postdoc and faculty roles, you can contact those alums to gain their perspective on how your adviser may react to your news.

Asking your adviser about their career path can also help you understand them better. How did they choose their postdoc adviser? How did they decide what to study when starting their own research career as an assistant professor? Ask for their advice, such as, “Other than my research project, what should I be doing while in grad school? What skills should I build?”

Coming Out of the Nonacademic Closet

If you do decide to tell your adviser, it can be a difficult topic to bring up. If you have regular meetings with them, let them know ahead of time that you’d like to talk about career topics in addition to the usual research topics. If you want to soften the blow, you can say, “I’m exploring both academic and nonacademic career paths.”

Make sure you don’t approach the topic apologetically or focus on the negative. Your adviser chose academe, and often they will feel a strong drive or passion for the work. Instead of, “I really don’t want an academic career,” you could say, “Based on my interests in research, communication and education, I’m considering a career in outreach.” Share details about why you’re interested in particular careers to orient the conversation toward the positive.

At that point, you have an opportunity to ask your adviser to still be involved in your career even if they don’t have direct experience in what you are interested in pursuing. Engage them as a mentor by asking what they know about your career paths of interest, why they made certain career decisions and what alternative paths they considered.

Multiple Career Mentors

After all of this, whether you told your adviser about your career plans or not, you have an opportunity to build a collection of career mentors. No single person will be able to mentor you on every aspect of your career. You can find mentors for research, writing, teaching, museum curation and any other relevant topic. Reach out to faculty members at your institution, alums or other professionals. LinkedIn can be an invaluable tool to identify potential mentors. You can establish formal mentoring relationships or simply have informal conversations. Like any research project, it’s good to increase your sample size and draw from a variety of sources.