

Your Job Is Not You

 [insidehighered.com/advice/2017/01/30/academics-can-and-should-stop-equating-their-identity-work-essay](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/01/30/academics-can-and-should-stop-equating-their-identity-work-essay)

Many people decide to get a Ph.D. because they feel a strong personal connection to the subject matter. Thinking, writing and talking with people who appreciate a subject or field of study as much as you feels validating. For some, the discovery of that subject may have clarified a sense of educational purpose. Perhaps it even illuminated a sense of individual purpose or a frame through which the world makes more sense.

Of course, not everyone feels that way about the material they research and teach during graduate school. But for those who do, it can be easy to tie one's sense of identity to the academic enterprise. "*I am* a scholar of 19th-century German painting." "*I am* an ecologist." Rather than "I am currently teaching a course on the figure of the child in British poetry." Or "Right now I am working on understanding the how the charter school movement impacts social mobility for low-income children."

The difference might seem purely semantic. Yet the length of time spent in graduate school can enculturate students to feel a deep sense of connection between their identity and their field of scholarly inquiry.

This sense of intense personal investment in a subject can make you feel engaged, invigorated and interesting. When you are reading or talking about it, you feel smart. You have unique and meaningful knowledge to contribute. Spending time learning more about this topic, asking new questions about it and sharing new ideas with others who value it can make you feel a greater sense of purpose -- or just feel good about yourself.

Over the five-plus years you spend as a graduate student, you begin to feel the subject matter is inherent to who you are. So the thing you get paid to research, teach and present is no longer just a professional identity but also foundational for your whole identity. One of the consequences of that tie between sense of self and subject matter that informs professional identity is that if your professional identity changes, you may feel like you will also lose your sense of self.

Among other possible life challenges, this false equivalence can make a nonacademic job search, in particular, really difficult. It also creates challenges for efforts within the academy to normalize career pathways where the focus of the work is not one aligned to their scholarly interest or self-determined -- in other words, it looks different from that of a typical tenure-track faculty member. Further, when seeking positions outside the professoriate, an applicant must widen interests after years of narrowing them and seek out jobs described in terms of skills and responsibilities rather than a body of knowledge. In general, few of the common assumptions about nonacademic work seem to align with the value system of the professional community to which Ph.D.s have belonged for the previous nine years or more.

Graduate students and recent Ph.D.s can find this perspective shift a bit startling. It then becomes not only an intellectual challenge to identify and articulate transferable skills persuasively, but also an emotional one. If I take a job fund-raising for a natural history museum, for instance, I will no longer be developing new research on Mesoamerica -- I'll just be asking people for money, so I won't be intellectually fulfilled. If I am developing marketing materials for consumer product companies, I will be wasting my Ph.D. If I work for a pharmaceutical company, I'll be a sellout. It is difficult to imagine how a new context for work will create the same sense of intellectual engagement and gratification that so often enlivens people, inspires their pursuit of the Ph.D. and shapes their sense of self.

And so graduate students considering nonacademic career paths may wonder: Does someone managing grants at a think tank feel the same sense of intellectual fulfillment she did as an academic? When she goes to work, does she feel unstimulated and without a sense of identity? Such questions may crowd out the consideration that she goes to work, engages many of the same intellectual muscles she did as an academic and comes to recognize meaning and value in the application of her knowledge -- not in the knowledge itself.

How can we shift mind-sets that equate identity with academic work? And in doing so, can we relieve [anxiety](#) about exploring unfamiliar career pathways? We can:

Talk to graduates who have been gainfully employed for more than two years. Being employed full time in any capacity, particularly in a nonfaculty position, is different than being a graduate student, even if much of the day-to-day work looks similar. The things we find most impactful about our work or where we take the most pride are often not what we expected. Listening to the stories of friends and colleagues who have some distance from their initial job search often provide a useful perspective about the evolution of the professional identity in their sense of self.

Participate in activities unrelated to your research and teaching sooner rather than later. When you spend the large majority of your days thinking about topics related to your academic identity and talking with other people who do the same, it is easy to lose sight of all that provides your sense of self. Volunteer in your community. Spend time with friends and family outside your academic community. Get a part-time job or internship to learn about other professional opportunities that interest you. That will broaden your network and skill set, clarify your [values](#), and connect you with fulfilling opportunities outside your academic research and/or teaching.

Learn about aspects of higher education beyond your discipline. [Becoming knowledgeable about or involving yourself with](#) other units of your university demonstrates higher education is an industry that does more than just support and require scholarship and teaching. You'll find that student affairs, fund-raising, government and public relations offices, and many others are doing important and rigorous work.

Practice thinking and talking about your academic work differently. Pay attention to the intellectual muscles you exercise when writing an essay, teaching a course or presenting a conference paper. Which aspects of the writing process do you enjoy most? Is it the research, the planning or composing the sentences and paragraphs? When you leave a class feeling energized, which aspects of teaching made you feel most fulfilled? Was it the moment you confidently explained a complex concept? Or when the student who had not said a word in class all semester shared insights into the text under consideration? Identifying the specific experiences and activities that create the feelings of engagement and intellectual satisfaction we often align so closely to the academic enterprise can help broaden our sense of self as constructed and fulfilled more by *how* we work rather than *what* we work on.

People feel personally invested in their work for a variety of reasons and at different levels. Broadening the way you understand your work and its role in your life helps avoid a merging of professional and personal identities and the challenge of disentangling them if and when your career shifts. The best approach is to try to clarify the values that make your work feel self-defining. Doing so can make the process of identifying other career pathways that feel similarly fulfilling much more gratifying.