

The Ph.D. Identity Crisis

 chroniclevitae.com/news/2167-the-ph-d-identity-crisis



March 4, 2019

Illustration by Getty Images

By Kathryn R. Wedemeyer-Strombel

Last month, I opened up about one of the side effects of doctoral study that I hadn't anticipated: the Ph.D. identity crisis.

With the date of my dissertation defense looming in four months, I'd begun to realize that I couldn't answer two rather important questions:

- Who am I outside of "Ph.D. Candidate"?
- What do I want out of life and this degree?

I talk a good game on Twitter — about staying true to yourself in graduate school, about being more than your research, about being a whole person. All of that talk is often fueled by my failure to do any of those things well. I have written in these pages before about how graduate school, and the toxic aspects of academic culture, can strain your personal relationships. But honestly, the relationship it has strained the most is the one with myself.

I was nervous to admit any of that publicly, afraid that maybe I was alone in these feelings. Ever since I did, however, the response on Twitter has been humbling and huge. Turns out the "Ph.D. identity crisis" resonates with thousands.

When I entered my doctoral program I had a really strong sense of self. Before starting graduate school, I had worked for a few years in the outside world — as a lead educator at a small zoo and aquarium and as an intern for a federal research lab. Fascinated and inspired by sea turtles, I was determined to better understand science so I could better communicate it, creating connections between people and nature, and between people through nature. I worked full time, interned for free, played soccer two days a week, went to the beach, and had friends and a love life.

I felt so prepared for graduate school. But right from the start of my program, I gave in to one of the most common and toxic pressures of graduate study: the idea that my Ph.D. had to be everything — the only thing I talked or thought about, the one thing to rule them all. I let it consume me.

At times, I tried to fight that pressure and burned bridges in my program along the way. But mostly I bought into the unnecessary competitiveness and the kudos I got for spending 12 to 17 hours a day in the lab. We all did that every day — except for Fridays, when we would leave the lab early to binge drink (something that was oddly encouraged, presumably to help us "blow off steam" or "bond").

I lost connections to my life outside of my lab and my doctoral cohort. Pursuing a doctorate became this strange, surreal experience in which I kept waiting for "real life" to begin. I would tell myself, "If I focus really hard this semester, then I can be me again during winter break." But somehow I never did. I kept putting off life, and the people who were important to me, until "after this grant, after this exam, after this meeting, after my fieldwork is done." It was a never-ending cycle of goals and expectations that weren't even mine anymore, yet I measured my self-worth by whether I achieved them.

Certainly I loved the occasional praise from a professor or a colleague. It felt good, even if only for a second, even if I was losing myself and changing in ways I didn't like. The momentary high meant I belonged in academe and it fueled me — until it didn't.

By the time I reached out for advice via Twitter, I realized I'd forgotten why I was in graduate school in the first place.

Yes, doctoral study should change you. It should be challenging. After all, that's why we're here — to learn new things, to change. But it feels like graduate school is very different from other life-changing experiences I've had, such as studying abroad for 18 months as an undergraduate. In those cases, my identity took on new layers. It wasn't ripped away and stripped down to "Hi I'm Katie, Ph.D. candidate." And nothing else.

Don't get me wrong: I've enjoyed fieldwork and met wonderful people

throughout my studies. I am so fortunate for the many amazing experiences I've had in pursuing my Ph.D. I just wish I would have lived them in the context of my "real life" — and not the weird extended no-man's land of doctoral study. Unable to turn off my inner academic, I let my work dictate how I would live.

And it turned out, I was not alone. After I tweeted, I heard from many A.B.D.s and Ph.D.s who said their own identity crisis had hit either just before their dissertation defense, or shortly after. Among the hundreds of replies:

- *"The 'It's over! I should feel great! But actually I just feel very tired and empty!' thing is something I've seen very often — and it usually seems to catch people unawares (I know it did that to me)."*
- *"I'm a few months (hopefully) from handing in, and this resonates so much with me. When people ask me 'What's next?,' I still feel like a little kid being asked what I want to be when I grow up. ... And I still don't know!"*
- *"As the toxicology saying goes: The dose is the poison. I have allowed [academe] to consume my life, out of a fear of poverty and because that's what the environment pushes. Recently, I resolved to work less and reclaim other parts of my aca-squashed soul."*
- *"It's OK. Many of us have been there. It gets better!"*
- *"With the help of great advisers, I was able to view it as a transformation. One adviser even talked about emerging from a cocoon — kind of silly maybe, but it was a powerful mental construct. You have so many possibilities, where are you going to fly to now that you have new wings?"*
- *"And if you don't feel you belong in academia — or you feel you do but can't get paid enough to stay — the identity crisis is worse. You're no longer a student or an academic. Gotta sort out what's left, and that required a lot of self-reflection on my part. It's ongoing, really."*

So, what comes next for me? Who will I be when my degree is in hand and I am no longer "Katie, Ph.D. Candidate"?

To answer those questions, I have spent a lot of time trying to find my passions and rebuild my life outside of graduate study. Thankfully, my university has accessible mental-health support, which has been critical in helping me accept how I have changed and grown, while filtering out the toxicity I've picked up along the way.

Departments and graduate professors have a major role to play in helping us through this transition. They can:

- Encourage doctoral students to take time off, guilt-free.
- Support students who pursue hobbies and interests outside of academe and alcohol.

- Normalize mental-health care and offer accessible, affordable services — and not just for those times when students are in crisis, but for the day-in, day-out pressures of graduate-level work.
- Hold faculty members who abuse their academic power accountable.

Students, you can also take steps on your own, or with peers, to set boundaries in your academic life:

- If it's an option, go to therapy early and often.
- Pursue hobbies unrelated to your field or work.
- Talk about something other than your research.
- If you have to formally schedule calls with friends and family outside of academe to maintain those relationships, do it. Put them in your calendar.
- Every week take some "me time" and ignore that nagging voice in your head whispering "you should be writing."
- Surround yourself with people, peers, and mentors who honor that.

I'm taking my own advice. With my defense approaching, I am going to therapy. I am taking time for hikes and walks with my dog and my husband. I am protecting my "me time" fiercely. I am working hard — on my dissertation and on myself.

Kathryn R. Wedemeyer-Strombel is a Ph.D. candidate in environmental science at the University of Texas at El Paso, and a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow.

More News & Advice

The MLA Gets Practical: Less Theory, More Profession

Leonard Cassuto, February 28, 2019

This year's meeting of the nation's largest humanities organization focused on the academic workplace more than ever before -- and that spotlight promises to widen.

Join the Conversation

1 Comment [↗](#)