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Helping Ph.D.s to prepare for diverse careers (essay)

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Becoming a professor wasn't why I set out to get a Ph.D. I enjoyed research and teaching and thought that the skills I obtained in graduate school -- from writing to critical thinking to working with data -- could come in handy in whatever profession I pursued. But from the minute I stepped onto campus as a grad student, it was clear that there was really only one path that was considered a success. It was the academy or bust.

For six years, I worked tirelessly to conduct and publish original, interesting research. I learned how to teach in a large lecture hall and hold interesting discussions with students in small tutorial settings. My advisers were wonderful mentors and constantly worked with me to hone my teaching and research chops. They talked to me about my CV, networking with fellow colleagues and how to get ready for the academic job market. Not once do I remember having a conversation with them about other employment options.

Now that I have been training my own students for the past 12-plus years, I have come to realize that, just like my advisers, I am very comfortable getting my students and postdocs ready for the academy. But my knowledge stops short. Up until a few years ago, I didn't know what to say to students of mine poised to leave the academy other than "good luck."

Career options for Ph.D.s have changed rapidly over the past 15 years. Yes, there are fewer tenure-track jobs in some fields. However, it is also the case that some students -- star students -- who could be very successful in the academy and easily land one of those coveted tenure-track jobs are interested in other career paths. Whether the reasons have to do with career ambitions, the possibility of working with a wide swath of people or, dare I say it, one's earning potential, the academy is not the only option. We owe it to our students to help them be successful in whatever career path they choose. But how?

First, we have to get rid of the false dichotomy that you need one set of skills if you are going into the academy and another set of skills to go into industry, government or the nonprofit world. Being an effective writer, communicator, critical thinker or teacher, along with the ability to work productively in a team setting, is important whether you end up in the classroom or the boardroom.

Second, we need to help Ph.D. students advocate for their skills. It's simply not true that becoming an expert in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy during your doctoral career makes you qualified to think about Parmenides and nothing else. Rather, your training has probably afforded you the ability to identify significant details and their relationships, given

you clarity of thought and logic, and honed your ability to communicate. Likewise, working in a cutting-edge genetics lab as a biological sciences Ph.D. has given you invaluable experience working in a team setting toward a common goal, helped you figure out what it takes to learn new techniques and aided your ability to take in information and make reasonable judgments accordingly.

Finally, whether you are going to be a professor or work at a consulting firm, students need to be able to speak about their research to multiple audiences. As I tell my Ph.D. students when they go on interviews for assistant professorships, their goal is not to convince the person closest to them in the department that they should be hired. (They probably already want to hire them.) It's to convince the person farthest afield that their work is interesting and important. To be convincing, my students have to speak without jargon, understand where others are coming from and adjust their presentations accordingly.

Sitting next to a recruiter for a large consulting firm at lunch a few weeks ago, I was struck by how this advice could help my students outside the academy as well. When I asked the recruiter what an interview for a Ph.D. candidate looked like, she mentioned that even though the candidates that the firm ultimately hires probably won't directly be using the research they did in graduate school, the first thing she asks any interviewee to talk about is his or her research. If the interviewee can't explain that research in a clear, concise way that excites the recruiter, he or she is out of contention. As it happens, being able to communicate effectively about what you do is extremely important, regardless of your future career path.

Author Bio:

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