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Should You Finish?

By [MEGAN PINCUS KAJITANI](#)

BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER

What you should know about nonacademic careers for Ph.D.'s

If you are a graduate student who has no doubts about wanting a tenure-track job, this column is not for you. Stop reading, join a dissertation support group, log on to PhiniseD.com, and complete that degree.

Read on, however, if you are among those having second thoughts about academic life and wondering whether it is even worth it to finish your doctoral program. To consider leaving graduate school without your Ph.D. in hand does not inherently make you a failure. In fact, it could be the best decision you've made in a long while.

To some academics, it's taboo to even suggest that graduate students might not want to finish. My goal here is not to encourage graduate students to abandon their doctoral aspirations en masse. But I do aim to bring the conversation about whether finishing the Ph.D. is actually right for everyone out from the shadows, and provide some advice for people who have found their priorities shifting throughout their years of doctoral study.

Last spring, I wrote [a column](#) with my fellow graduate-student career counselor Rebecca Bryant that urged a redefinition of success and failure in academic culture. It is important to note that most students who leave doctoral programs shy of the degree are not failing in their studies. The majority are, in fact, progressing quite well and are fully capable of finishing. But they are consciously choosing to make a career and/or life change.

Ask Yourself the Hard Questions

I understand from the tears I see in my office at the University of California at San Diego -- and from those I personally shed before deciding to leave my own Ph.D. path after four years -- that this decision can seem as heavy as life or death to someone embroiled in it. It should not be made lightly, which means you must commit to some serious soul-searching.

I have found that there are eight pertinent questions that get to the heart of the to-be-or-not-to-be-a-Ph.D. decision. Sit down with a journal or with someone you trust, and explore your feelings about these questions.

- Why did I start this program in the first place?
- What kind of work do I want to do after this?

The first two questions are about connecting with your desires, goals, and skills. Recognizing what brought you to graduate school -- whether it was a true passion for science or literature, a desire for the prestige of the highest degree attainable, or a safer option than the "real world" -- can reveal a lot about where you may be now. Are you simply burned out from several years of intense study but still in love with the work, or have you discovered through experience that the

academic lifestyle is truly not the right fit for you? Is a Ph.D. actually necessary for the career paths you are now considering? Do you even know much about your career options?

Look at what you want for your career and what you have to offer. In her book on attrition in doctoral programs, *Leaving the Ivory Tower* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), Barbara E. Lovitts found that students with alternative career plans had a much easier transition out of the Ph.D. track than those with no idea of what to do instead. This is where self-assessment and career exploration are critical to make an informed decision.

- If I leave my program, where will my regrets lie, if I have them?
- Can I live with myself if I don't finish?

Those questions delve into issues of identity and self-worth. How much of your own identity is invested in receiving a Ph.D.? If you know you will never forgive yourself if you leave, figure out the most productive and efficient ways to finish the degree.

Perhaps a shift of focus is more appropriate. Complete the degree but do some internships or volunteering at the same time. Sometimes just seeing a different light at the end of the tunnel can motivate you to move forward.

If you can see yourself living a happier life outside of academe, without torturous regrets, then walking away from the degree may be right for you. In short, consider how well you will be able to let go of your original goal.

- What are my true priorities?
- What is the point of diminishing returns?

The challenge here is to separate your own priorities and expectations from those of your advisers and colleagues.

Question your own assumptions: Why do you feel that your desire to live in a particular city -- which can be a hard goal to achieve on the academic market -- is an unworthy priority? What is wrong with wanting a break to raise children? Are you holding onto beliefs that fit you five years ago but not now?

You may be relieved to confirm gut feelings you've had, or to let go of ideas that were keeping you down. You also may come to some uncomfortable conclusions for yourself and others close to you. Consider how you will handle certain people's expressions of disappointment if you decide to leave, which is usually a short-term reality of this choice. Think about who would help you celebrate. Also consider whether shifting your own rigid expectations could help you either proceed on your Ph.D. path or take another one.

In any case, once you've connected with your true priorities, you can assess the point of diminishing returns -- the stage at which going further with the program does not bring you closer to your true goals and in fact may keep you from them. That point will be different for everyone.

- What is really wrong here?
- Is there a middle ground?

The final questions are about digging deep to discover why you are struggling with the decision about whether to finish your Ph.D. or to leave. Is your hang-up about not finishing an abstract

fear of the unknown after graduate school, or are there tangible issues now that can be dealt with?

If yours is mostly an abstract fear, you may decide to continue pursuing the degree while taking practical steps to prepare for your job search. If you'd like to finish but you are tired of the isolation of research, find some social activities that will help you earn the degree with your sanity intact.

Maybe the challenge you face is more tangible -- perhaps you need, or want, to live in a particular city where academic jobs in your field are scarce or nonexistent. That reality may lead you to set aside your doctoral work for an alternative career path that would allow you to live where you want to live.

In Lovitts' study, social support was a key factor both in helping people finish and helping those who chose not to finish move on more seamlessly.

Finally, ask yourself if you can find a middle ground in your decision about whether to finish. Can you write your dissertation in another city? Can you finish more quickly if you tell your adviser about your alternate career plans? Can you take a leave of absence to try something else? Many middle grounds exist, and exploring them can help you find your own comfort level.

Cover Your Bases

Whatever you decide, there are ways to be better prepared for any career you choose. Take advantage of graduate-school experiences -- teaching, writing, serving on committees, organizing events, presenting research at conferences -- to gain valuable skills for both academic and nonacademic careers. Keep track of those experiences by regularly updating your CV and/or résumé. Build up your contacts. Use campus career and counseling services. And continually assess what you like and dislike about what you're doing.

A Ph.D. may or may not be the means to your definition of success. To find out, you must commit to figuring out what matters most to you. In the meantime, continue building skills and connections that will help you succeed in whatever career step you take next.

Megan Pincus Kajitani is the graduate-student career adviser at the University of California at San Diego's Career Services Center. A former journalist and editor, she received her M.A. in communication/cultural studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

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