

A Ph.D. and a Failure

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BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER

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

As graduate career counselors at two major research universities, we encounter the F-word a lot, but not the one you think. The F-word we hear is "failure" -- a nasty, horrible utterance applied to many an overachieving Ph.D. who falls short of finding a tenure-track job.

Fear of that word -- for the summa cum laude, the Phi Beta Kappa, or the NSF grant recipient -- can become debilitating and demoralizing, turning a once confident and optimistic young adult into a depressed, panic-ridden, and paralyzed recluse. Unfortunately, we are not exaggerating.

The real problem here is the painfully constrictive definitions of failure and success within academe.

Failure, says academic culture, is anything other than achieving the ultimate goal of a tenure-track professorship. More specifically, the epitome of success is a tenure-track job at a major research university. You're still successful, albeit to a lesser degree, if that job is at a liberal-arts college, and even less so if it's at a community college. But a nonacademic career, well, that's just unacceptable.

That may seem a harsh indictment, but we've witnessed such attitudes time and again in our own experiences as former doctoral students and in those of the graduate students we now advise.

We know there are exceptions: deans who boldly pay for programs to help graduate students explore diverse career opportunities; faculty advisers who surreptitiously write reference letters for their students to apply to law school, to teach at a community college, or to seek a nonacademic job. And attitudes vary somewhat among disciplines.

But there are countless faculty members, administrators, and students themselves who continue to perpetuate a narrow definition of success in academe. Anything else is "less than."

Unfortunately, the hard facts show again and again that only a small percentage of doctoral students can achieve the success of becoming a tenure-track professor at a research institution. In their study, "Ph.D.'s -- 10 Years Later," Maresi Nerad and Joseph Cerny found that only 58 percent of Ph.D.'s in English were on the tenure track or tenured 10 years after graduation. Of those, less than a fifth worked at top research universities ([*The Chronicle*](#), September 10, 1999).

Those numbers do not include the approximately 50 percent of students -- cited by Barbara E. Lovitts in *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of the Departure From Doctoral Study* -- who never even completed their Ph.D.'s. Thus, a great majority of students who begin doctoral programs will never reach the "nirvana" of the tenure track. What happens to all of those students who don't make the cut?

Perhaps such figures help explain the recent finding that "depression and other forms of mental distress" were a serious problem in a study of more than 3,100 graduate students at the University of California at Berkeley. According to the study: "Nearly half of all survey respondents (45 percent) reported an emotional or stress-related problem that significantly impacted their academic performance or well-being." Another 67 percent reported feeling hopeless at times, 95 percent felt overwhelmed in graduate school, and 54 percent said they had felt so "depressed that it was difficult to function." About 10 percent had seriously considered suicide, and one in 200 had actually attempted suicide in the last year.

The Berkeley study cites dysfunctional relationships with faculty advisers, significant family responsibilities, financial difficulties, isolation from campus life and student resources, and an inability to recognize the symptoms of a psychological problem as possible reasons for graduate students' declining mental health.

We argue that all of those factors are part of the overall academic culture that privileges a narrow and largely unreasonable standard of success.

We've had to confront the academic line about failure in our own lives: One of us (Rebecca), a Ph.D. in musicology, recently ran into a former professor who said Rebecca would "never be truly happy" if she did not become an academic musicologist. The other (Megan) completed four years of doctoral work in communication before deciding that her current staff position allows her the balance that she wants in her life, as well as the opportunity to have a daily impact. But Megan has been scolded by people she barely knows for "giving up" and not becoming a professor. (Since when did a master's degree and a meaningful career become failure?)

We've also heard the stories of students who come to us for career advice:

- A Ph.D., thrilled to land a faculty position at a liberal-arts college near her home, is asked by her dissertation adviser when she was going to "get a job." Presumably, a "real" one.
- An alumnus, unwilling to spend yet another year unsuccessfully searching for a

tenure-track position, moves on to a new career. He hides his choice from his former adviser, fearing his mentor's disappointment.

- Two graduate students who are pursuing community-college careers are terrified to tell their dissertation committees, and another student fears that her fellow graduate students will shun her for considering leaving her Ph.D. program for the nonprofit world.

During a recent meeting of a new career-support group for graduate students, the topic of "feeling like a quitter" evoked painful emotions from many participants and was revealed as their biggest obstacle in choosing an alternative career path, with "not knowing there were other options" a close second. Clearly the myopic mission of many doctoral programs often clashes with graduate students' changing priorities, and could be a factor in academe's high attrition rates.

At both of our universities, we have established programs and counseling services to help graduate students counter the idea that they are successful only if they become research faculty members, and to help them explore other potential career options.

This spring the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign held a well-attended symposium titled "Defining Academic Success," during which faculty and staff members from non-research-oriented institutions shared their stories and introduced students to new notions of a successful academic career.

At the University of California at San Diego, a workshop on "Alternatives to Academia for Graduate Students" drew a standing-room-only crowd last year, prompting an encore this year that attracted more than 100 graduate students.

At both institutions, we encourage graduate students to learn about the academic job search process early on in graduate school, so they can better prepare for what it requires and make conscious choices about whether it feels right for them.

What can be done on your campus?

If you're a faculty member, open your mind to a diversity of career choices for your advisees. Validate their interest in teaching or other work, not just academic research. Acknowledge alumni or former students who have "succeeded" in a range of career paths. Be realistic with students about the job market, as well as your own experience in it, and realize that not everyone wants to do what you do.

If you're an administrator, support career panels, workshops, and conferences that validate a variety of career options. Offer mental-health services for graduate student and training programs for faculty mentors. Conduct studies on graduate-student attrition and satisfaction on your campus.

If you're a graduate student, step outside of the limited perspective of the Ph.D. world and look at other versions of success. Consider what you need to be happy and

successful, not just your adviser's definition. Cover your bases by pursuing other interests or experiences during graduate school; don't put all of your eggs in one basket. Take advantage of workshops and support services, and demand them if they're not available. Finally, realize that sometimes changing your mind is the right decision.

For all parties involved, we urge a re-examination of success and failure in doctoral studies. The abundance of shame, depression, anxiety, and paralysis among incredibly talented and capable graduate students can be lessened by offering them more options for a satisfying life and career, and more validation for their choices. Think about that the next time you inflict the F-word on yourself or on others.

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