

# Preparing Students for Diverse Careers in Our Science

February 28, 2017



*Psychological science shares borders with many diverse areas. Training in psychological science thus can prepare students to succeed not only in academic departments related to psychology, but also in nonacademic worlds. I asked my colleague Sian L. Beilock to describe the initiative that she is spearheading at the University of Chicago — UChicagoGRAD — which is dedicated to teaching PhD students, including students of psychological science, about the value that their skills can have beyond academia. Beilock has written several pieces on graduate education, which she drew on in writing this column.*

**-APS President Susan Goldin-Meadow**

What do you see yourself doing after you finish your PhD?" is a question I always ask prospective PhD students during their recruitment visits to the University of Chicago.

For several years, I accepted only one answer — that a prospective student aspired to be a professor at a research university. These days, my thinking about the types of answers that are appropriate has expanded.

It's not just because I am now aware that the number of psychology PhDs awarded in a given year outstrips available tenure-track jobs by a large margin, but also because I have come to recognize that some of the best students are interested in diverse career paths. Students are motivated by many desires, ranging from making a clear and immediate impact in the world to — dare I say it — maximizing their earning potential, and a career in academia is not the only option.

The varied career aspirations of students, however, present some faculty with a problem. Most of us are quite good at helping our students emulate the path we took toward a faculty position, but we have little experience navigating a career outside the ivory tower and are unprepared to advise students who want to move in a different direction. What do we do?

Three years ago, I stepped into an administrative role at The University of Chicago, and I am now the Executive Vice Provost of the university. As part of my portfolio, I worked with academic leaders to develop a new office and initiative called UChicagoGRAD (Beilock, 2015; 2016a, 2016b). UChicagoGRAD is committed to ensuring that graduate students and postdocs have the skills they need to become the next generation of leaders — both inside and outside the academy. Our philosophy is based on a simple premise that I would argue holds true for psychology as well as for many other fields: Many of the same skills are needed for students to be successful in the academy, industry, nonprofits, and government. It is important to be an effective writer, communicator, researcher, critical thinker, teacher, and team member, whether you end up in the classroom or the boardroom.

With these ideas in mind, UChicagoGRAD works with graduate students and postdocs to help them develop and demonstrate a varied skill set and then to connect them with the job opportunities they want. Crucially, many of our activities can be implemented at the department level, or even at the individual faculty level, to help psychology students become leaders in whatever careers they pursue.

Take a series UChicagoGRAD puts on called “*Expose Yourself!*” It is an interdisciplinary series of programs that gives graduate students and postdocs the opportunity to practice presenting their academic work to nonspecialists from across the university. Hundreds of students have, for example, gone on “lab crawls” — moving through four to five labs in an evening — in which students from each lab give short, 10-minute talks on their research-in-progress. The key is to have folks with a variety of backgrounds attend so that students are tasked with discussing the significance of their work to broad audiences. As I have told my PhD students on countless occasions, their goal in interviews for assistant professorships is not to convince the person whose work is most related to their own that they should get the job. This person likely wants to hire them already. Their job is to connect with the person whose work is farthest afield from their own. Activities like our “*Expose Yourself!*” series help students learn to speak “jargon free”; relate to other people's interests, background, and priorities; and adjust their presentations accordingly. As a result, they possess the ability to communicate in a way that will not only help them pursue careers as assistant professors, but also as psychological scientists in industry, government, or the nonprofit sector.

We also have started an internship and externship program for graduate students to explore diverse careers while gaining professional experience related to their research interests. These experiences range from 1 day to an entire summer. For example, this past summer one of my PhD students, whose research program focuses on understanding individual differences in executive function, attentional control, and human skill learning, spent 3 months in northern California as a paid intern performing research for

Sony. In a video-game research lab, he used his knowledge of how we attend and learn to help develop action video games. His experience at Sony, in turn, helped further his dissertation research on learning and performance in real-world, high-pressure situations.

Alumni engagement has been key to the success of our career exploration and development programming. Bringing together students and postdocs with alumni who have taken a variety of career paths benefits the professional exploration process while at the same time strengthening the connection between alumni and university.

The creativity, logic, and persistence that go into obtaining a doctoral degree in psychology and related fields prepare people to be powerful members of society and the workforce, including (but certainly not limited to) the academy. Obtaining a psychology PhD can be excellent preparation for research-based jobs across industries — from advertising and market research to consulting, recruiting, positions in government and private foundations, and a wide range of other types of businesses. Even if we as faculty members don't have direct experience pursuing diverse careers, we owe our students the kind of flexible training that will serve them well in and out of the academy and will prepare them to advocate for the value of their skills, which are likely deeply relevant for any career they choose.

## References

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