

# Student Notebook: Back Yourself

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We've all seen the stories: postdoc positions with hundreds of applicants, PhD-qualified university instructors remaining in adjunct positions for years, dwindling career opportunities for graduates with PhDs (Notman & Woolston, 2020). Add to this the feeling that as a graduate student, you haven't quite started life yet. While peers from high school have long since graduated into professional jobs and are now getting promoted and buying homes, we graduate students stare down the tunnel of years of remaining study and a very uncertain job market when we do eventually graduate. It can be dispiriting to find yourself apparently behind everyone else in the game of life and simultaneously at the bottom of the hierarchy in the academic world. In this hypercompetitive domain, it can seem as though only the very fortunate go on to those coveted tenured positions many graduate students hope for. We'd be forgiven for feeling that gaining a PhD is an extended exercise in painting ourselves into a corner: Yes, we are experts in our content domains, but if that expertise doesn't translate into future employment, we might wonder what all the hard work was really for.

An interesting comparison can be made between how we perceive the capabilities of students who complete college and go into professional careers and how we perceive the capabilities of graduate students. On completing a college degree, the former are considered employable: They have domain-relevant knowledge and a bunch of skills that can be applied and refined on the job. In short, they are professionals capable of doing the jobs for which they were trained as students. Graduate students, on

the other hand, despite following similar undergraduate pathways, are seen as trainees: perpetual students in need of guidance and instruction, rather than professionals with the skill to do the jobs we've signed up for.

Even graduate students themselves may start to believe this. A lack of experience in professional careers can sometimes hinder our perspective on what we are capable of doing and can diminish our perceptions of the value we have attained. I would argue that the many and varied skills that graduate students already have can be applied in many careers and, indeed, are highly valued outside the cloistered walls of academia.

## **We are self-starters.**

It takes substantial intrinsic motivation and tenacity to even make it through the application process for graduate school, and the success of this process ultimately comes down to the student. Some of us have encouragement and help from prospective supervisors and mentors, but many of us don't and are instead motivated by our own desire to pursue an education at this level. Furthermore, graduate research degrees are not like undergraduate education. In undergrad, we gain knowledge through training: We are provided content to learn, and we learn it. Grad school, by contrast, comes with the expectation that we have the capacity to define and pursue our own projects, that we can identify our own knowledge gaps and work to fill them ourselves. Completing a PhD is a demonstration that we are capable of complex, independent work.

## **We are project managers.**

Not only do we conceptualize our own graduate research projects, we also work on tight timelines in order to complete them. We often manage our own research or aspects of larger research projects. We problem-solve when research doesn't go as planned (and when does research ever go as planned?). We juggle multiple competing deadlines for multiple projects, grant applications, conference and paper submissions. We prioritize effectively to get all this done—and often we work long hours. Try applying corporate language to what we do as graduate researchers: We report progress, we achieve outcomes, we get results. This shift in perspective can help us identify our skills and underline how valuable and broadly applicable they are.

## **We can write!**

Finishing grad school is all about writing: We spend inordinate amounts of time writing a dissertation and often several articles for academic journals. Over years, we refine the craft of writing suited to these academic formats. Clear and precise writing is not a skill to be sniffed at—all grad students know how difficult it is to get it just right. Some of us also spend time writing for different domains and audiences: science communication pieces for more general audiences, blog posts, or articles for the *Observer*, to name just a few. Presenting your work to nontechnical audiences is one way to help refine the art of writing, and it can help get your work out into the world in a way that's not possible in a dissertation or journal article format.

We are spectacularly good with technology.

Undergraduate training can provide some foundational skills in statistical programs, but graduate students more often gain programming expertise during their PhD program. Many of us train ourselves in multiple programs. Not only do we learn how to run complex statistical analyses, but we also establish and maintain data sets, merge data, make figures for publications or presentations, and write code to document it all. More recently, we've also become experts at online communication: recording presentations via platforms such as Zoom, setting up remote meetings, and sharing workflow tasks via apps such as Trello. All these tasks, because they are so embedded in our day-to-day work, may seem like nothing, but technological skills are an integral part of all workplaces. This technological expertise and flexibility is highly valued, making us eminently employable.

## **Finally, we have serious levels of commitment, versatility, and perseverance.**

We contribute to the positive culture of our workplaces via our participation in committees and mentoring of more junior students. We can speak in front of an audience, communicating complex information in engaging and relevant ways. We've thought carefully about the ethical implications of our work and can extrapolate these ideas to other domains.

Yes, graduate school is a long, hard slog, but completing a doctoral program says something about our ability to see projects through to the end and to persist in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The academic employment market is challenging in these times of uncertainty and ever-more-restricted budgets (Heffernan, 2020), and it remains true that not all graduate students who complete their PhDs will find employment in academia (Larson et al., 2014). With this reality in mind, it is worth taking a new perspective on the skills you've developed, or will go on to develop, in graduate school. Doing this one small thing can underline how very capable and qualified you are for your future career.

For more information on psychology doctorates making the switch to industry positions, see White and Stewart (2021).

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