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Tips to Ph.D.s for having a life beyond their research projects (essay)

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A Ph.D. student recently came to me to talk about exploring different careers. He lamented that while in graduate school, he gradually stopped doing everything in his life that was not research related. In undergrad, he was an avid outdoor adventurer, climbing mountains and rafting rivers. He loved volunteering with kids and the elderly because he could see his impact directly. But over time as his research project developed, he left these parts of his life behind because he “didn’t have time.”

Let’s compare this to the nonacademic world. For many, work is driven by deadlines. You have to produce something by this date and time in order to: a) please the client, b) please your boss or c) move on to the next part of the project. But in academe, all deadlines are “as soon as possible.” There is a never-ending sense of urgency. Do you have that chapter finished? If you’re not getting results, you should work harder and stay later. How many of us are guilty of analyzing data or writing a paper while on vacation?

When it comes to careers, the spread of research into your time will hold you back. From graduate school, you will gain a degree, technical skills, broader research skills and subject-matter expertise. But if you allow research to take over, you will be missing these important aspects: working with people outside your field, seeing what different careers actually look like, having experiences other than your research, developing key transferable skills, building a network of people who can refer you to jobs -- as well as maintaining and enhancing physical health, mental health ([read the research](#) ^[1] if you haven’t), a social life and an understanding of who you are in the world.

I recommend that you seek out opportunities such as the ones below to get outside of your office, lab or library. Advocate for yourself with your research mentor and negotiate that you need a number of hours every week to pursue specific activities. Or just stop working late every night and coming in every weekend -- and see if anyone even notices.

Teaching and outreach. One of the most common activities for graduate students is to teach undergrads or other graduate students. Your department may require you to be a teaching assistant, or you may participate in outreach to local institutions. Even so, consider what you are

gaining from the experience. Are you better at managing people, managing timelines, conveying complex ideas to novices, training, coaching or building rapport? Consider teaching new lessons or taking on additional responsibilities so you will have experience with spearheading and taking initiative.

Committees. We've all ignored the emails from the department administrators asking for volunteers for various committees, but what did we miss out on? Planning a symposium or conference can give you experience with working on teams, dividing responsibilities, holding each other accountable and organizing. Inviting faculty members for a weekly speaker series can help you improve your abilities to convince others, manage a budget and handle logistics.

Professional development. Many campuses offer opportunities to develop skills supplemental to or outside of your research. Seek out those workshops and programs to learn to negotiate, manage a team, lead, be a faculty member at different institutions, apply for grants, search for jobs, present and talk about your experiences. Writing is a vastly transferable skill, and you can find courses to help you write for the news media, policy organizations, regulatory affairs, federal agencies, patent agents or users of a product.

Volunteering. Academic research can often feel disconnected from the populations it's meant to serve. Volunteering for local organizations is a great way to reconnect with people and have a direct impact through doing something small. Plus, you will gain abilities in communicating with other people who come from different backgrounds, building trust, active listening, understanding the needs of others and fulfilling the needs of clients.

Hobbies. A peril of thinking about your research all day, every day is that you lose opportunities for inspiration. When we allow our minds to change focus, it can help us reframe problems we're working on. Tapping into your creativity can allow your brain to work in different ways and make new connections. So unearth that guitar from the closet, use a camera that's not on your phone, take a cake-decorating course, design websites, read a sci-fi novel or blog about bad movies. When applying for jobs, you can mention hobbies on a résumé or in an interview to be more memorable.

Sports and physical activity. I gained 20 pounds in graduate school. Many graduate students exercise less and eat fewer healthy foods. Get your fitness back on track by joining an intramural sports team or finding a pickup basketball game at a gym. Camp and hike at nearby parks and trails. Not only will you build teamwork and coordination skills and reduce stress, but you'll also have good topics for small talk when networking and interviewing.

Meeting professionals. Are you unsure of what careers best suit you? Or do you want to learn which companies match your interests and values? The best way to accomplish both of those tasks is to meet people who are in such careers. You can attend networking events or you can target individuals through LinkedIn and your current and previous institutions' alumni associations. If you ask about shadowing opportunities or trying out a portion of their work, you'll be able to write about your experience in an application and speak knowledgeably about the job in interviews.

Imagine you are the hiring manager for a company, and you're interviewing two candidates. One has strong research skills from a top university. The other has not only strong research skills from

a top university but also experience working on team projects, the proven ability to communicate research findings to nonexperts and over all seems more at ease. Whom would you hire?

Author Bio:

David A. McDonald is assistant director of graduate services at Duke University Career Center and a member of the Graduate Career Consortium -- an organization providing a national voice for graduate-level career and professional development leaders.



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[1] <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048733317300422>

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