

## Graduate Student and Post-doctoral Scholar Career Mobility

“...somehow my reasoning on this issue is always in question” - *Fight and Flight* - Fullick, 2014

For much of 2013 I was working on a project to investigate graduate student supervision and success. During that time I read widely on student supervision, mentorship, and persistence. I also spoke with students, deans, professors, post-doctoral scholars, and non-academic staff to understand problems and effective practices for dealing with them. In my reading I found the “university crisis” genre and began collecting everything I could find in regard to graduate education. Hyperbole abounds in the crisis literature, but there are common themes in research on graduate student success, and what I learned in conversations with faculty. The problems facing graduate students, I now realize, have much to do with mobility—in/out of the classroom/field, in/out of relationships with supervisors—and an absence of thought, discussion, or support around in regard to these transitions. One of the biggest issues for doctoral students and post-docs that resonated with me was the move in/out of academe. Before proceeding I want to note that in the interest of brevity my discussion here is by no means comprehensive and glosses over many complexities of the issues at hand.

The quote in the title of this piece was taken from a recent post by *University Affairs* blogger Melonie Fullick, and is exemplary of the problem that one is likely to face if one chooses to move to a career outside of the tenure track. Students and post-docs that make the choice to move on to non/alt-academic careers are often questioned, shunned, or shamed if they speak openly about their decision. I heard this in conversations with faculty, students, and post-docs here at U of A, at a session on the topic I held at the CSA conference last year, and you need not spend much time online to find similar stories from across the globe. Most of the time students are silent about their decision because they fear that speaking about it will lead to informal punishment. For example, supervisors may not provide them with the same attention, departments may not consider them for funding or research-assistant opportunities. Silence may also mean that students and post-docs don't consider all of the career options available to them, so sometimes moving into an alternative academic career track is a decision made under less than ideal circumstances. For example, after years as a sessional instructor or several post-doc positions. Without thinking about the possibilities for how one can have career mobility many students and post-docs end up lost and confused once they do realize that professorship is not for them, or that it is a goal they will not achieve. Silence also means departments are not challenged to be open about doctoral career outcomes, or provide resources to prepare students for diverse careers.

The challenge is less complicated than it seems. Everything that employers want most graduate students and post-docs will have acquired through their course work, research, and service on committees. The trick is being aware of the context of each job market, and how to articulate one's appropriateness for a given position. Currently, universities usually teach only one version of that trick. Academic departments have a choice to make, they can facilitate these conversations and support their students to move in/out of graduate school, post-doc positions, and in/out of different career streams, or leave it to them to figure it out on their own. Introducing such conversations may require a delicate balance so that they do not focus on the hyperbole of the crisis literature (though I think this can be useful to incite people to think about the topic at hand), which can create a sense of hopelessness, or that discussions come to be dominated by talk of one career stream. Graduate students and post-docs always (as far as I know) find jobs and many regard their jobs as enjoyable and rewarding, but the work of finding a rewarding career need not be as painful as the stories I have read in the crisis literature, and have personally heard from students and post-docs. Departments have a role to play in moderating that pain.