



## Do You Need a Postdoc?

Many Ph.D. students simply default to postdoctoral training as a logical next step, when instead they should be making a much more intentional choice, writes Stephanie K. Eberle.

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As postdoctoral training has become more common, it also has become an opportunity to delay career decisions. In some sectors and fields of study, and for developmental reasons, postdoctoral training can greatly increase one's likelihood of success in academe. In other cases, however, it can create a bottleneck effect in the academic milieu, causing trainees to choose opportunities without the personal reflection necessary for efficient advancement into their career of choice. Postdoc positions provide extra tweaks to training -- opportunities to practice independent research separate from one's adviser and to switch one's focus. Just two decades ago, very high-achieving Ph.D.

scientists could get tenure-track academic research jobs without such training. While that is not the case today, a broader perspective on the value of graduate education and of postgraduate career choices now pervades the job scene. New trends in [NIH predoctoral training](#) redirect the purpose of training from research productivity and academic career preparation to skills development for myriad fields.

These changes are especially aimed at decreasing time to degree. Ideally, as students become more intentionally focused on career choices and personal fit, the time to complete a postdoc will lessen and fewer postdocs will be sought overall. While many postdocs pursue additional training because they are confident in their desire for academic research positions, others are uninformed about their options and simply default to postdoctoral training as a logical next step.

Unfortunately, such an exploratory postdoc approach proves an illogical option for those seeking careers in fields outside bench or academic research science. That is not to say that postdoctoral training hurts candidates outside academic research fields; it still develops, among other things, independence and professional connections. For those seeking paths such as business, policy and communications, however, internships, fellowships and postgraduate jobs -- even short term -- offer more effective exploration and specialized connection opportunities.

While some resistance to immersive career experiences exists in graduate school, far more difficulty occurs during postdoctoral training, when trainees are employees in labs and not strictly students.

Furthermore, given pay gaps between postdoctoral appointments and traditional employment, trainees cannot afford to take these positions without an intentional, future direction. While exploratory postdocs must attempt to fit career events and courses between experiments and manuscripts, their working colleagues are contributing to a 401(k) and gaining hands-on experience.

Intentional career decision making is a process: it requires knowing personal interests/skills/values, comparing these with various options, and then using connections and resources well enough to tailor applications. Time and fear of adviser resistance often prevent graduate students from beginning this process until it is too late. Once in a postdoc, time crunches and institutional pressures still exist, decision paralysis sets in and, before too long, training extends beyond the three, four or five years planned. Or, once set on academic research positions, trainees struggle to find other positions, so they stay. Then they stay longer. And longer. And longer.

### **Avoiding Fear-Based Decisions**

The question of whether or not you have to complete postdoctoral training to get a job is not a good starting point. You should decide if you want to do one in the first place. Ideally, around the second or third year of your doctoral training, use [myIDP](#), other assessment tools and informational interviews to both understand yourself and the activities and values of various career options. Pursuing a postdoc because you might regret leaving academe later is fear-based decision making, not intentional. Remember, something is pushing you away from academe in the first place. Lean into that fear and work with a coach to define and explore options.

Second, be specific about your desired career options and the benefit a postdoctoral experience provides. Many people erroneously dichotomize options as academe versus industry, two very broad terms. A research postdoc is not ideal preparation for academic teaching-focused jobs, for example, and industry's business side may respond better to a corporate postdoc or none at all. Figure out exactly what you want and how the postdoc, specifically, leads to that path.

Finally, if a postdoc seems ideal, choose the right one. A postdoctoral position at universities like Stanford or Harvard does not guarantee

success, and it can even prove to be detrimental if the environment, research area and/or mentoring approaches misalign with your needs. Get references from potential labs, and ask potential principal investigators questions designed to assess fit with your interests, skills and values.

You may decide the postdoctoral experience fits your needs. If you decide it does not, or if you change your mind halfway through training, you can find myriad more direct options to get you to your ideal career of choice. Choose a postdoc because it fits -- not because you do not know what else to do.

## **Bio**



**– GRADUATE CAREER CONSORTIUM** – *Stephanie K. Eberle is assistant dean of the Stanford University's BioSci Careers community, which serves Ph.D.s, postdocs and M.D.s in the medical and biosciences fields. They are also an adjunct faculty member at the University of San Francisco and vice chair of the board of directors for the National Postdoctoral Association, as well as a member of the Graduate Career Consortium -- an organization providing a national voice for graduate-level career and professional development leaders. The views presented here are the author's own.*