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## **Career Planning for Physical and Health Education: Ten Top Tips for Graduate Students and Early Career Scholars**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a compilation of ten top tips for navigating life after graduation gathered from faculty members and graduate students of the Physical and Health Education Canada Research Council who have lived experiences from such shifts. It provides graduate students and early career scholars with strategies for transitioning out of the student role and into a professional career, including academic and non-academic positions.

Graduate students are those individuals to whom the future of the field is entrusted (Goldie & Walker, 2006). Yet a cross-Canada survey of over 50,000 graduate students across various disciplines in 48 universities found that graduate students are dissatisfied with the preparation (i.e., advice, workshops) they receive regarding future career options both inside and outside of academia (Arnold & Smith, 2015). Thus, it was not surprising when the graduate students and faculty members of the Physical and Health Education Research Council (PHECRC) (see <https://phecanada.ca/about/research-council>) completed an informal online poll, in Fall of 2014, asking them to indicate which professional development topics were most desirable for graduate students in our field, “life after graduation: transitioning out of the student role and into a career” was one of the top responses. As a result of this poll, a symposium session on this topic was delivered by the authors - who, at the time were physical and health education doctoral students at Queen's University, Western University, and the University of Alberta, respectively - at the 2015 Physical Health and Education Canada Research Council Forum in Banff, Alberta.

This session included, among other items, a list of ten top tips to advise graduate students for life after graduation, compiled by synthesizing contributions from faculty members of the Physical and Health Education Canada Research Council who offered their support at the time of the online poll<sup>1</sup>. We are also sharing aspects of our personal career journeys both inside and outside of academia, as collectively, we have held a variety of careers and positions: consultants with provincial and national organizations (i.e., OPHEA, Ever Active Schools, PHE Canada), director of community programs at a charitable organization, journal editor, post-doctoral student, assistant professor, coordinator at a nonprofit, and research assistant. The aim behind this paper is to aid graduate students in the physical and health education field as they navigate the increasingly competitive graduate labour market to minimize the “stress, anxiety, shock, fear, uncertainty, loss, loneliness, depression and feelings of low self-worth” (Peronne & Vickers, 2003, p. 69) that have been described as accompanying life after graduation. Instead, we hope this paper can support students as they move forward productively to the next chapter of their careers. An overview and updated explanation of the ten top tips from the symposium session is presented, accompanied by reflection questions prompting the reader to consider their own point of view and experiences related to the tip.

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<sup>1</sup> These contributors included: Dr. Clive Hickson from the University of Alberta; Dr. Tim Fletcher, Nancy Francis, Chunlei Lu and Ms. Elyse Lappano from Brock University; Dr. Lee Schaefer from McGill University (now University of Saskatchewan); Dr. Lynn Randall from University of New Brunswick; and Dr. Nathan Hall from University of Winnipeg (now Brock University); and Dr. Amanda Stanec Founder & CEO of Move Live Learn.

## 1. Know Yourself

As you start thinking about your next step forward in your career planning process, take time to consider your strengths, weaknesses, and priorities. Every individual's situation is different, so reflecting inward and understanding your values, who you are, and what you want, will help you with this process. For example, if you have strong interests, experiences, and skills in research, but do not have a similar desire or expertise in teaching, you may consider entering a career as a researcher. A position for an organization that allows you to use your research skills, such as researcher for a provincial Ministry of Education, could better align with your interests as opposed to a faculty position that involves teaching. Conversely, if you love teaching but do not desire to balance it with research demands, instructing at a college might be a best fit. Lastly, if working with the public/community is a priority for you, seeking out a position in public health, a local business or nonprofit could be the next step.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- What skills, attitudes, and knowledge are your strongest assets? What careers might your particular assets be best suited for?
- What skills, attitudes, and knowledge do you need to improve upon to obtain and be successful in your desired career?
- What characteristics, tasks, or duties would you most like your career to include or exclude?
- How might certain pathways you are eligible for complement or hinder your personal priorities and/or boundaries?

## 2. Think Ahead and Focus Your Efforts

It is easy to put off thinking about the next phase of your career when you are trying to survive and thrive within your current degree. However, it is important to be strategic and not progress blindly as your present actions will impact your future career options. Channel your efforts toward actions that will contribute meaningfully to your chosen path(s). For example, if your goal is to enter academia, consider serving as a graduate student representative on your faculty's curriculum committee. This action will provide you with experience working at a faculty level that will give you insights into the programs, and could be an asset when you apply for a faculty position. Conversely, if your goal is to work at a not-for-profit organization, becoming a volunteer or working part-time in a program delivery position would be more suitable to gain skills necessary for a position within not-for-profit organizations.

Setting goals and sticking to them is another aspect of thinking ahead; your degree will go by faster than you think! An approach from education—backwards design—is a helpful way to understand this tip: decide your overall career goal first, *then* design a plan for how to get there. Having a clear direction helps lay the foundation for the strategic actions needed to reach the desired end goal. Remember you cannot do it all. While it is important to gain experience in a variety of areas to build your CV, you do need to focus on areas that will help you accomplish your career goals.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- What are you doing now to prepare yourself for your intended future career?
- In terms of your future career goals, identify gaps on your CV? List two things you want to add to your CV within a year's time to address these gaps?

### 3. Be Open-Minded and Aware of Your Options

Life beyond the university walls has various career paths (academic, non-academic, and entrepreneurial). The authors have explored various paths in their own employment journey. For example, Director of Community Programs at the YMCA, Consultant for provincial and national organizations (e.g., OPHEA, Ever Active Schools, PHE Canada), or Research Project Coordinator at universities. When you are starting to plan ‘what’s next’ after you finish your degree, it is a good idea to talk to past graduate students to see (a) where they are now, (b) how they got there, and (c) ask for advice or resources to guide you through the possible options. The following write-up from Statistics Canada (2020) offers some tips on how to approach choosing a career (see: [Choosing a career isn’t easy. Some tips for making an informed choice](#)). Most universities have aids (e.g., webinars, resources) or a career services office to help graduate students with career planning. Take the time to seek out the free supports your institution has created for you. There are also resources available within the larger community tailored for individuals searching for jobs (e.g., Indeed, Workopolis, provincial job centres) and supporting content within academia, including University Affairs, Times Higher Education, and Canadian Association of University Teachers.

#### *Questions for Reflection:*

- What are the opportunity structures, academic and non-academic, related to your field?
- How far afield are you willing to look (e.g., locally, regionally, nationally, internationally)?
- What available supports/resources/people can extend your knowledge of options and what is your plan for seeking out this information?

### 4. Expand and Utilize Your Network

As a graduate student you are starting to build your network both inside and outside your institution. Whether we like it or not, networking is part of ‘finding a job.’ Your networking journey might start small by meeting people in your graduate courses, joining a committee at the university, or volunteering for an organization you are passionate about. You should also think about expanding your network outside of your immediate community to learn about work options in the larger field. Avoid the pitfall of connecting exclusively with the same few people in your network. For example, if you want a career as a faculty member, conferences such as the PHE Canada Research Council Forum or Canadian Society for Studies in Education are appropriate venues. If you are planning on a non-academic career, presenting at and/or attending the main PHE Canada conference or your provincial organization’s conference (e.g., Health and Physical Education Council of Alberta or PHE-BC) might be more suited. We recognize that starting discussions with new people is not always an easiest task. This is an exercise in being comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. Make the effort to approach new people (e.g., at conferences, meetings) where appropriate and follow up virtually to solidify this new connection (even if it is just to say “it was nice to meet you”). Furthermore, communicate your interests, strengths and aspirations to all the people in your network, so that they think of you if something relevant comes up.

***Questions for Reflection:***

- What are you doing to expand your interpersonal network? How might you inform your supervisor/committee/other colleagues of your aspirations to allow them to support you most effectively?
- If you imagine an academic or non-academic career, what relevant conferences and/or events might you engage in?
- How will you go about making connections with people from various sectors and seniority levels?
- What efforts are you making to connect with and contribute to your network (e.g., sharing research opportunities or articles of interest)?

**5. Market Yourself and Your Work**

Having an active presence in the field is a good strategy to market the skills and experience from your resume and/or CV in a more impactful way. When looking for potential employment, you need to market yourself and your work as employers will be evaluating the whole package. Given the access to virtual spaces, establishing an online presence (e.g. Twitter, blogs, LinkedIn, Researchgate.net) can assist in curating your professional image. Be mindful that you want to create content tailored to colleagues, potential employers, and a professional community not your friends and family.

***Questions for Reflection:***

- How can your colleagues find you and your work?
- Is your virtual profile current, active, and professional?
- In addition to marketing yourself and your skills, is there a need to showcase your work?

When sharing your research, find a way to make it relevant and accessible given that many different audiences may access this information (e.g., publish in an academic journal or professional magazine, present a practical workshop, create an infographic of the main findings etc.). Sharing your work beyond your degree program is necessary for application and uptake in the field. In an effort to expand the reach of your research, take some time to review the term, knowledge translation (KT) and associated strategies. KT is described as moving beyond sharing information to the actual use of knowledge (Straus, Tetroe, & Graham, 2009). To this end, being able to demonstrate how your expertise fits within more than one niche or area can demonstrate transferable skills and expand employment opportunities. For example, if you are pursuing an academic career, be an expert in a research topic *and* a methodology. If you are looking for a non-academic position, be able to explain how your skills could work in the education *and* recreation sectors.

***Questions for Reflection:***

- How can you disseminate your work in a way that it is most impactful for your desired career path?
- How does the method of dissemination match the target audience?

## 6. Be Professional

Professionalism should always be at the forefront of your mind as you network and market yourself. Being professional is important in all avenues used to communicate *who you are* to others (e.g., behaviour, communication, appearance etc.) You want to express to potential employers or colleagues that you are the “whole package.” While your work, skills and credentials are often what get you an interview (i.e., meeting job requirements), employers are also evaluating you as a potential colleague. Remember that colleagues and potential co-workers are generating an opinion of you from your first introduction (and how you have presented yourself in forums they might access before they meet you!), not just at the beginning of a formal interview. Therefore, be cognizant of your interactions and responses in all professional realms. For example, whether you are at the lunch table having a conversation or presenting a paper at a conference, if you encounter someone with opposing or negative views, acknowledge and respectfully discuss contrasting viewpoints. Also, be humble. Do not be afraid to admit you do not know something rather than provide an uninformed response.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- What kind of image do you want to portray in the ‘professional’ realm? What efforts are you making to do so?

## 7. Be Knowledgeable About Where You are Applying

It is critical that you do your ‘homework’ and get to know the academic institution or organization that houses the position you are applying. Get to know their vision, mission, and what they stand for. Having background knowledge on the place at which you are applying and communicating that to search/hiring committees will show that you are serious about working there and will help the committee visualize you as the successful candidate. For example, if you are applying for a tenure track position at a post-secondary institution, gather a sense of what the faculty members in the department are researching and be able to show how you can complement and add to the current work. Alternatively, if you are applying for a government position, be aware of the relevant mandates for that department and the public service more generally.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- For your desired career pathway(s), what ‘homework’ might you do to be able to speak knowledgeably about the organization and how you are the best fit?

## 8. Have a Plan B and C – Do Not Let Discouragement Derail You

People often change their jobs multiple times in their career; according to Workopolis (2014), a leading online service specializing in job searching, indicated that Canadians will have approximately 15 jobs throughout their career. This does not mean that the position you are looking for will not come up, however, considering multiple options for your career trajectory is important and necessary. Using the colloquialism, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket,” we suggest putting some effort towards an interim career or have a plan B and C to ensure you are taking on new experiences that will support that “dream job.” For example, if you are interested in an academic career but a suitable position is not currently available, you might consider pursuing a postdoctoral fellowship or a sessional teaching contract. Both of these short-term contract positions connect with the responsibilities of a tenure-track position (i.e., research and teaching, respectively). Be aware, however, of the varied deadlines for such positions. Postdoctoral fellowships that are

funded by government agencies such as SSHRC must be applied for at least eight months before they can be taken up, while sessional contracts can sometimes be posted just weeks before they are set to begin. Consider being strategic with plan B and C in the following ways: fill a gap on your CV or resume; stay connected to an institution and/or explore more institutions; disseminate your research in a different method and/or to diverse populations.

***Questions for Reflection:***

- Do you have plan B or C career options? What potential interim employment opportunities might you pursue while you ‘wait’ for your Plan A career?
- How long are you prepared to wait for your Plan A career?
- What employment opportunities would be a good fit for your qualifications?
- What opportunities are available inside and outside of academia?

**9. Plan for your Personal Life**

We often forget to plan for our personal lives in the same way we do our professional ones. Earlier in Tip 1, we emphasized the need to know yourself to help in career planning, however, here we stress the importance of making a plan for your personal life. Your career can have a vast impact on your personal life and it is important to consider how the two overlap and intertwine. Elements you might want to consider include working hours, significant others and family, geographical location, other priorities etc. When considering your personal priorities and boundaries, if you want to keep working hours restricted to the day time, then perhaps pursuing a faculty position that requires researching, teaching, and/or grading in the evening, might not be the most suitable choice. When looking at career options in locations outside of your current home, contemplate how this will impact the career of a significant other, children in school, and/or the distance you may end up living from family and friends.

***Questions for Reflection:***

- How do your personal relationships and responsibilities currently influence your career choices? How might this change in the coming years? How does this impact your career search?
- Will your career choice complement or hinder your personal priorities and/or boundaries?

**10. Take Care of Yourself**

One of the most pertinent tips that came through the synthesis of information was taking care of yourself - valuing your own health and wellness. To ensure that you take time for yourself, try scheduling it in your calendar similar to a meeting or appointment. Even more important in our field of physical and health education, you should be practicing what you preach! As knowledgeable pupils, you know how important regular physical activities are and the benefits that go alongside this engagement (e.g. increased productivity, reduced feeling of stress and anxiety etc.). Taking part in regular wellness and relaxation practices may even give you a chance to practice Tip 4; networking opportunities often present themselves as people in our field tend to engage in the same health and fitness activities.

***Questions for Reflection:***

- How will you make yourself a priority?



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