

Episode 51 – Bonus Episode! I Have a PhD: An Interview with Joerg Schlatterer

Welcome to this Bonus Episode of Grad-Post! I e-sat down with [Dr. Joerg Schlatterer recently to talk about the National Academies Summit on Reimagining Graduate Education and Postdoctoral Career Development](#) that took place in the summer of 2025, and as I do with all my guests asked him to share a little bit about his background and career preparation. His story was so thorough and compelling that I thought I'd present it as a separate bonus episode. Stories like his also fit into my overall goal of developing a set of profiles of people with a PhD, in a series I am calling "I Have a PhD." So enjoy this inaugural edition of "I Have a PhD" with Joerg Schlatterer!

Brian Mitchell: I always like to give my guests the opportunity to talk about their own career paths, you mentioned your doctoral degree in chemistry. Tell me a little bit more about your career preparation, especially how the German system, graduate education, may differ from what we're familiar with here in the United States.

Joerg Schlatterer: No, absolutely. No, thank you for giving me that opportunity. So, I think, as I reflect on my own career and the own preparation, there were several key factors that helped me get there where I am right now. If you would have asked me, let's say, 30, 40 years ago, what do you do in 2025, certainly I wouldn't have told you I'm sitting here in Washington, D.C, taking care of a large research grant portfolio, really caring about graduates and postdocs. I didn't know anything about that back then.

The journey started, actually, with high school in Germany, because, in Germany, I went through 18 years of education, ending up with an [Abitur](#), which really touches on a lot of subject areas, allowing me to discover what actually my preferences are and in which direction I could see myself developing as I possibly choose to go to a university for a higher education. Or I could have chosen to go to a more applied university, or I could have chosen to do a more technical training track for myself. So, there are many different options after high school you could choose from in Germany, more than you have here in the United States.

Back then, I thought I would go immediately to chemistry, because I discovered in high school, I love chemistry, and I was really good. I was flattered that I got a little book prize during the ceremony at the very end. But, at that time, actually, the wall came down in Berlin - or in Germany. I was one of the first generation of students in West Berlin that was drafted for the military. And, I thought "oh, well, that's a nice change in time," so you never know what life gives you, right? So, systems change.

I was, for almost two years in the German military. I was a trumpet player in an Air Force band, and I don't want to miss that time at all, because I learned so much about myself. I learned most importantly to work and to connect with people from many different cultural backgrounds. That was a wonderful time. After my time in the military, I went straight back to chemistry and in chemistry undergraduate education, I just focused on chemistry. So, inorganic, organic physical chemistry, and then mathematics and physics as well. But after my undergraduate studies, I continued with a master's degree, or with a [Diplom](#) back then, where I still focused only on chemistry. It was Physical Chemistry, organic, inorganic, and I had some electives. Again, I had the time and space to focus on one subject matter area. And when I started my PhD, no classwork at all. So within three and a half years, I did my research, I was very proud, very productive, and was ready to enter the workforce. I think that is a major difference that we didn't have back then, at least – classwork - which enabled me to move through swiftly through the graduate education experience, focusing entirely on research.

After graduate education, I was ready to leave academia. But I learned when I interviewed for industry positions that even industry appreciates very much, postdoctoral experiences because if you have done a postdoc - even if it's just one year - and you have been abroad, you have demonstrated (if you were

productive) that you could adapt to a new environment, you could do it, you could be thrown into a different project, and you could adapt and be resilient and be productive. So, I did that with the idea to be back in Germany after a max of two years. But when I came to the United States to do my postdoc at the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory in Florida in collaboration with Florida State University, several things happened. Academic research was phenomenal. I had freedom to start projects. My boss back then was not a micromanager at all. It gave me a lot of flexibility to go beyond my primary research project, and I started many different collaborations, which was very rewarding.

But also, being in a new country, it was just wonderful to see that it was a life-changing experience. I married my girlfriend which I met back then in Florida, and we are happily married both now here in Washington, D.C. But before I got to DC, let me share with you, I did this two-year postdoc in Florida, and decided to go to New York City, because back then Sarah my wife started her MD-PhD program at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. So, I became a postdoc at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, for two years, was on the job market for a faculty position, and at that point, my mentor played an important role. My mentor said ... well, after I got an offer from a PUI in New York State, he said, well, "I know at some point in your life, you might want to go back to Germany and think about how would Germany actually appreciate extensive and high-quality research and teaching experience." And I must say, he was right to ask that question, and I said, well, actually, there's not really much benefit if I would be able to do more research and produce more research articles and possibly patents that would be viewed as more efficient. So, I was able to secure a research faculty position at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and continuing there. But in that time, I also had the opportunity to start from scratch a career and professional development program for graduate students and postdocs, and after two years running that program on the side, I discovered I actually like supporting the next generation. And I scratched my head - back then I had certainly more hair - and asked myself, what does it mean? I'm a researcher! I'm a chemist! Why do I care so much about that people aspect of science?

And at the same time a colleague of mine said, well, "do you know that at Columbia University, there's an opportunity for becoming an assistant dean for faculty professional development? And I think they might appreciate to see your experience?" I applied not thinking that I would get the job, but I was interviewed, and I got the job, and I was super excited and proud to be part of the Columbia family. It was eye-opening to work, actually, with faculty members that really were asked, not as trained mentors, to start on day one, as their own board, as a faculty member, to take care of a research group, and to be an educator, to be a supervisor, to be a mentor, to be a researcher. It was overwhelming for a new faculty member, and even for established faculty members. So anyway, that time really helped me to shape a little bit more my appreciation for how complex the entire system is for surrounding graduate and postdoc experiences.

I switched again gears based on the fact that my wife got accepted to a wonderful residency program here in Washington, D.C., at the Children's National Hospital. I applied for federal positions, and it happened that my background was seen by professionals in the Division of Graduate Education at the National Science Foundation. I was, honored to be, recruited by that division, and it was a very rewarding time to work in the Division of Graduate Education. But also, I knew, there will be a limit. After my almost three years of service, at the National Science Foundation, I knew I, would have to leverage my skills and competencies in a different environment, and it happened that at the same time, I learned about an opportunity here at the American Chemical Society to lead the Student and Postal Group Scholars Office.

And I was very proud of the work that we have done over more than 5 years together. We created new large-scale programs. I mentioned the Bridge project, for example, including the Bridge program. But also many other mechanisms by which we support the younger generation of researchers. I was involved in strategy building for us as ACS at the, at many different educational levels. And in 2023, there was another

opportunity for me at the American Chemical Society to combine, actually, both, my passion for, young junior researcher support, and my grant-making and grant development passion that I started appreciating at the National Science Foundation when I learned that there was a director position open for leading the Office of Research Grants here at ACS.

And since 2023, I work with a phenomenal team of dedicated professionals to really make a true impact for many researchers. One part of our portfolio is now the ACS PRF program that supports fundamental research in the hydrocarbon field. With that, we support more than 190 projects every year. Half of them, approximately half of them support assistant professors within their first three years of their academic appointment. We have grants available for more established professors. But with those grants, we also support more than 1,000 students and postdocs every year. We've just established, again, support mechanisms from ACS to really allow everyone in the cohort of grantees to learn with ACS about their future possibilities as a professional in the chemical sciences. I could go on and on, Brian, but let me stop here.

Brian Mitchell: Well, I appreciate you sharing that with the audience here, Joerg. It highlights some of the things that I've tried to talk about, the importance of mentorship. For example, you mentioned your mentor and your postdoc. You know, just how life can change our mind about what we're doing, and where we're going, and how important just the preparation part is, and developing skills and building skills, because you never know what doors are going to open for you, what pathways are going to become available to you. I think your life story there, in short, kind of summarizes the importance of developing those skills and being open to new opportunities, so thank you for that.

Thank you again to Joerg, and to all of our listeners! This is the last episode of 2025. Grad-post will be back in 2026 with all new episodes, guests, and information to help you make every degree count!

Links

<https://youtu.be/Sw3LjWexufk>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abitur>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diplom>