

Episode 9: Individual Development Plans – A Graduate Student Haiku

Welcome to Grad-Post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

I've been meaning to do an episode on Individual Development Plans, or IDPs ever since I started this podcast. Too many topics to cover! Today is finally the day, and I'll explain why I moved this up on the topic list in a moment. For those of you who are unfamiliar with them, IDPs are electronic documents that help graduate students think about their scholarly, artistic, and research training while they are doing them, and how their activities can be tailored to meet their career goals. I originally thought one episode for graduate students would suffice, but recent developments on the use of IDPs and mentoring plans by federal funding agencies has made me reconsider how to approach this topic. So, I've decided to do **two** podcasts on this topic as a set. Bonus episode! Today's episode is directed at graduate students, while the next episode on IDPs will be primarily for faculty, staff, and administrators. I invite you to listen to both episodes to gain some important perspective regardless of your role, but I wanted to manage your expectations up front.

Why all the fuss about these individual development plans? Artists have had portfolios that include unfinished works and ideas for future ones; businesses have had performance reviews, personal development plans, and in-house training courses to help employees advance in their jobs. Well, graduate students outside of these fields traditionally have not had such planning documents. In the old model, you entered graduate school and did what your advisor told you with the assumption that your degree would take you on a pre-determined career path. You see the problem. Luckily, those days are mostly gone, and advanced degree programs have started putting much effort into helping graduate students plan for the many and varied compatible careers they can have while they are building them. The IDP is a tool that is gaining increased used for this purpose.

The IDP provides structure for conversations between you and your advisor or advisors. As a living document, an IDP helps you establish milestones for academic and research progress. It helps you set goals for the next year, define the specific skills and strengths you will need, and map out a plan to obtain them. For example, it might include coursework, technical skill building, or teaching and supervision opportunities, along with an anticipated timeline for executing them. An IDP helps you articulate your career goals – such as they are today - and create annual plans to reach those goals. Career development goals can be both short-term and long-term. Short-term might mean this semester and long-term might mean by the time you complete your degree. As you near the end of your tenure in grad school, those timelines should converge and ease your transition into the next phase of your career: a job.

There is a body of literature on the benefits of IDPs in the postdoctoral scholar community (Hobin et al., 2014). While the extension of IDPs to the graduate student community is still relatively new and few studies are available on their effectiveness in this population, there is emerging evidence that IDPs benefit career optimism and job search self-efficacy. This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic according to one research report by Chang and Shaw. (Chang & Saw, 2021).

An important characteristic of the IDP is that **you** provide the input. The hardest part of an IDP is often just being honest with yourself. That's why an IDP is an important tool even if it is not required by your university or program, or if it is even read by or discussed with your advisor. If you don't have a plan, then how can anyone help you with it? The idea is to then review and revise the document periodically – at least annually – to reflect how your career preferences are evolving.

Some professional societies have developed their own IDP tool, like [ChemIDP](#) from the American Chemical Society for students in the chemical sciences, and [myIDP](#) by AAAS for students more broadly in the sciences, including the social sciences. They are finding increasing use in the humanities and fine arts through organizations like the [Modern Language Association](#) and the [American Historical Association](#), as well as dedicated websites on career planning for humanists like [ImaginePhD](#). Some institutions have implemented mandatory IDPs for all graduate students and have even developed their own institutional instruments. I invite you to review the IDP tools and policies at places like the [University of](#)

[Florida](#), the [University of Missouri](#), and the [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#), just to name a few that have their own instrument. They're not hard to find – but links are provided in the transcript if you prefer.

I mentioned mentoring plans at the outset of this podcast and we should spend a little time discussing them, as well. Unlike IDPs which are specific tools to help facilitate professional development conversations between advisees and advisors, a mentoring plan is a document developed by your advisor or advisors that outlines the mentoring philosophy and activities that your advisor uses for their advisees. Those activities could include regularly-scheduled research meetings, annual reviews conducted by the program or graduate school, tools like presentation rubrics and IDPs that provide the advisee with structured feedback, or even their views on advisee participation in professional activities outside the program like dissertation writing workshops, Three Minute Thesis, and student government. Mentoring plans are usually only about a page long and comprise all mentored participants in the advisor's scholarship, including undergraduate researchers, graduate students, and postdoctoral scholars. Such plans have recently become a mandatory component of research proposals submitted to the National Science Foundation (NSF), so there has been renewed interest in them in the STEM community. They are not new, however, and are certainly not limited to the STEM community, just as I described earlier for IDPs. If you are in a STEM discipline, however, you may find a [recent report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine \(NASEM\)](#) to be of interest to you (National Academies of Sciences, 2019). Whether you read this document or not, whether your advisor provides you with a copy of their mentoring plan or not, you should ask if they have one and request a copy of it. If your advisor isn't providing the mentoring services they have outlined in a grant proposal – especially if that grant was funded – you should be asking some questions. But it's not just a one-way street; the mentoring plan isn't just about what the advisor will do for you. It is also about the expectations of the advisee in the mentoring relationship. Are there expectations in that mentoring plan that haven't been provided to you? Again, you should be aware of what your advisor expects from you in the mentoring relationship.

Let me close by saying that mentoring plans, IDPs, and related career planning tools and activities involving your advisor or advisors are based upon mutual trust. Without it, **any** conversation – much less one about your career aspirations – can become difficult or outright impossible. You might think that completing an IDP without an ability to discuss what's in it with your advisor is a complete waste of time, but it actually becomes even more important in situations like this. If you took the initiative to complete an IDP and shared it with your advisor but received no acknowledgment, follow-up, or response, then they haven't held up their part of the agreement. At least you have a defensible position to say that you tried and at most you have a document that you can share with someone you **do** trust, even if they are not your advisor. One of the key recommendations of the NASEM report on mentorship is to minimize negative mentoring experiences. If you are in one of those, you should know that you are not alone. There should be programmatic or institutional policies and practices to review and remedy negative mentoring experiences. The IDP is your secret weapon in those conversations.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links referred to in this podcast are available on my website at grad-post.com. There you'll find additional podcasts and resources to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree. I leave you with an IDP haiku to brighten your day:

*Inclined, Dark Passage -
Trust illuminates my path.
Every degree counts.*

Links and Resources

American Chemical Society ChemIDP <https://chemidp.acs.org/>

AAAS myIDP <https://myidp.sciencerecareers.org>

Imagine PhD, <https://www.imaginephd.com/>

AACSB <https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/articles/2017/04/12-professional-development-tips-for-mba-students-from-coursework-to-workplace>

Chang, C.-N., & Saw, G. K. (2021). Individual development plan, mentoring support, and career optimism among STEM graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. 2021 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting

Hobin, J. A., Clifford, P. S., Dunn, B. M., Rich, S., & Justement, L. B. (2014). Putting PhDs to Work: Career Planning for Today's Scientist. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 13(1), 49-53. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe-13-04-0085>

National Academies of Sciences, E., and Medicine. (2019). *The science of effective mentorship in STEM*.