

# Should I stay or should I go?

When my adviser asked to speak with me in her office in March, I figured she wanted to discuss plans for a possible lab shutdown. What she actually said took me completely by surprise: She was moving her lab to a new institution. I could go with her, uprooting my life but continuing to work on the science I loved—or I could stay, find a new mentor, and hope to keep some semblance of my original project. “Either way, you will get a Ph.D.,” she reassured me. She emphasized that she would do everything she could to support me, no matter what my decision was. Still, there I was, two-and-a-half years into my Ph.D., with a huge curveball to deal with. When I had heard about other students in similar situations in the past, I had always thought, “I’m so glad that’s not me.” Now, it *was* me.



ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT NEUBECKER

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My initial response was impulsive. When my mentor said the name of the highly regarded institution she was moving to, I committed to relocating in less than 30 seconds. "I love my adviser and my project," I thought. "I'll transfer and get the new institution's name on my CV." I was thinking solely about my career.

A few days later, my reality check began. I realized I should approach this decision the way I chose my Ph.D. program in the first place: If I moved with my adviser, it needed to fit my career aspirations *and* my personal life. How would moving affect my significant other? Would my stipend be livable in a new city with a higher cost of living? Would we be happy living in that new city? Did I really want to transfer, potentially starting my Ph.D. over? As each new question arose, I became increasingly uncertain.

I didn't want to burden my mentor with my doubts. After all, I had already agreed to move, and she was already going above and beyond to accommodate me, including offering my significant other—also a scientist—a research associate position with our group. So, I downplayed my concerns and buried them at the end of our regular meetings. I mentioned them one at a time, always starting with, “I'm not that worried ... .” But I *was* worried, and this approach left me carrying around the anxiety of each unknown detail for weeks.

Ultimately—with the help of friends, family, my significant other, and my mentor—I decided to stick with my decision to move. But that wasn't the end of the challenges. At first, I thought that transferring to the new institution would be simple. I had completed my coursework and teaching requirements, and my mentor's new department thought I should be able to integrate seamlessly. So I was thrown for a loop when my prospective program determined that I would need to retake my qualifying exam and complete several classes and a new teaching requirement, likely adding at least 1 year to my grad school timeline.

In the end, I decided to become a visiting student at my new school but earn my degree from my original institution after all. But being halfway in at two schools has its drawbacks. I miss my friends every day, and trying to build a social network in a new city as a fourth-year student amid a pandemic feels impossible. Occasionally I experience waves of impostor syndrome, convinced I do not deserve to be at this new, more prestigious

institution. Email chains to work out administrative details are long and often contain some flavor of, "We have never had a student in exactly this position before and are still learning." Simple tasks such as getting a university-sponsored flu shot are complicated when I can't decide how to answer, "Are you a student here?"

Despite these challenges, I still believe I made the right choice—for me. If you are in a similar situation, I can't say you should do exactly what I did. All I can say is that you should work to find a solution that accommodates *you*, both professionally *and* personally. And it helps to remember that, as my mentor assured me, either way, you'll get your Ph.D.