



## Hope, rediscovered

Easton R. White

**E**arlier this year, a graduate student from another lab knocked on my door in tears. She had previously taken a course I taught, but her visit surprised me. She said she no longer thought graduate school was right for her. She felt she couldn't do anything right and didn't fit in. She worked constantly, yet didn't feel productive. A cynical voice inside my head whispered, "That's just how academia is." Yet, as she spoke, I realized how much her story echoed my own. The hope and optimism I'd come into academia with had started to fade for me, too. But over the coming weeks, as I helped this bright young scholar rediscover hope in her journey, I rediscovered my own.

Like her, I was the first in my family to go to college, and my first encounter with academia was inspiring. When I was a senior in high school, I enrolled in a human anatomy course at a local community college. One Saturday I wandered the campus, hoping to catch a glimpse of a lecture hall—something I'd only seen in movies, where they seemed full of promise and possibility. Those 2 years at community college opened my eyes to the possibility of a career in research and teaching—something I hadn't known existed—where I could create new knowledge and help others achieve their dreams.

When I finally became a professor, I still believed deeply in higher education's transformative power. On my first day as a professor, I even had my partner snap a photo of me with a whiteboard noting: "First day of college." I was beaming. When a senior colleague warned my optimism wouldn't last, I thought they were just bitter.

Now, 4 years into my dream job, I understand how cynicism can creep in. I feel it with every wave of job cuts, every attack on science, and every student laden with debt and uncertainty. It was easy to feel discouraged while serving on the university's finance committee during several rounds of layoffs. My view of college as a beacon of hope had started to feel more like a mirage. At some point I stopped taking photos of my first day of the academic year.

When that student came into my office, she reminded me of myself at that age, bearing the weight of being first generation and the resulting insecurities and impossible expectations. The negative gossip, disillusionment, and other toxic elements of academia I know well as a faculty member were starting to drag her down. Her situation shook me out of my complacency, and I resolved to do what I could to help.

Over several weeks she and I dug into the issues and considered her options. I told her that during the third year of my Ph.D., I had considered dropping out. Instead, I managed to renew my sense of purpose by aligning my work better with my original goals, changing my research topic, and getting more involved in mentoring undergraduates. In the end, she decided to try a similar approach, changing up her dissertation committee and her project focus and conducting research in collaboration with communities she cares about. We don't meet on a regular basis anymore, but she seems to be thriving.

This experience helped me see that maintaining hope doesn't mean ignoring hardships or naively expecting things to work out. It still takes effort.

Now that I am facing my own doubts again, I am creating more opportunities to connect with graduate students, including new office hours. When I meet with them one on one, I try to help them focus on the things they can control, such as building healthy work habits and supporting one another, and tune out the things they can't, such as shifting institutional priorities or the politics of funding decisions.

Taking notice of the hopeful signs around me also helps sustain me. I felt hope again this semester when I stepped into the lecture room for our first class activity and saw that students were already asking questions and helping one another. I might have overlooked that before. But this time it helped remind me why I've stayed in academia. □

Easton R. White is an assistant professor at the University of New Hampshire. Do you have an interesting career story to share? Send it to [SciCareerEditor@aaas.org](mailto:SciCareerEditor@aaas.org).