I thought that attending a top-ranked university in the West, and especially the United States, would be a guaranteed ticket to success. I was also eager to help the world by studying the impact of pollution on the global environment. As a child growing up in a remote village in India, I had seen some of these effects myself, such as how indoor air pollution from cooking leads to health problems and how changing weather patterns affect farmers’ crops. I hoped that the atmospheric science research I planned to pursue could help improve the lives of my family and friends back home and the many others in similar situations. So, when I arrived in the United States in 2007 to start my Ph.D., I was ready to put my head down and get to work.

But within my first semester, I began to have doubts. My research seemed unlikely to lead to the real-world change that I sought, and my intellectual satisfaction with my work started fading. Strangely, my newfound freedom to explore a range of interests—very different from what I had experienced as a student in India—fueled my dissatisfaction. Besides pursuing my doctoral training, I was excited to take courses in a variety of disciplines, including civil and environmental engineering and public policy. But I found that I was more engaged in class discussions than with my research colleagues, which made me question where my research and career interests truly were.

I was faced with a choice. Should I continue pushing forward in an endeavor that I was no longer sure was the right fit, or should I abandon my Ph.D. to return to India and take some time to figure things out? My family and friends discouraged me from leaving. They thought I was risking both my career and the livelihood of my family, whom I helped support with my doctoral stipend. Nonetheless, about 2 years in, I concluded that I would never be satisfied with my work if I didn’t make a change. Even though leaving my program would bring trade-offs and uncertainty, it was better to find the right fit than to risk a lifetime of career frustration and disappointment.

My family’s dreams were shattered. Most of my former colleagues and mentors started ignoring me. My confidence was shaken when I was out of a job for months and my harum-scarum decision left me and my family struggling. Seeing my colleagues and friends racing ahead in their careers while I was still unsure about what I wanted also made me doubt my decision.

Eventually, I got a job in governance with India's Planning Commission. It was completely unrelated to my previous work, but—as with my initial interest in atmospheric research—I had a personal stake in the topic. Growing up in India, I had experienced governance failures at many levels, including education, health, and other essential services, and I was enthusiastic about the opportunity to improve the situation for others. After 4 years of working for the commission, I realized that I am more interested in solving development challenges through policy than through the “hard” scientific research that these policies build on.

With this new perspective, I decided that I needed to go to the United States to pursue my doctorate—again. I’m now happily a Ph.D. student once more, and I’m confident that this time I’ve found the right fit.

I could have saved precious time and resources if I had explored more before embarking on my first doctoral program. Yet, that experience helped teach me how I want to spend my career, so I don’t think of the time as wasted. It also taught me how important it is to evaluate how I feel about my work along the way and whether it is bringing me intellectual and personal satisfaction. Going forward, this mindset will help me explore, take risks, and ultimately find work that is deeply rewarding.

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