

## Beyond Academe: Exploring Your Options

### The Culture of Academia or How to Combat the Barriers Which May Prevent You From Leaving Academia

Because the academic world can be very unsupportive of people who want to leave academia, you will want to take some time to assess all of your goals, both personal and professional, when thinking about remaining in or leaving academia. Remaining in academia may satisfy some of your desires but does it satisfy you overall?

Think seriously about your personal life. Are you married and will you and your spouse be able to find jobs in the same town? While long-distance relationships can be successful, you need to ask yourself if this is the kind of marriage or relationship you want. If not, how long are you prepared to engage in a long-term relationship? If you're not married or involved in a relationship but want to be, will you be moving to an area where you are likely to meet potential partners? A job at a small prestigious liberal arts college may be wonderful in professional terms, but ask yourself: will I be able to find a partner there?

Think about your family as well: are you close to your parents and would you like to live near them? Or as far away as you can get?! Do you want to be able to get on a train and visit your old college friends, most of whom still live in Boston? Think about where you have always imagined living. There is no reason for you to make a sacrifice which requires that you live in a place which you actively dislike or even in a place to which you are indifferent. A job at Yale is not worth it if you loathe New Haven and have always wanted to live in Laramie, Wyoming.

Write down the amount of money which you would like to earn. Be realistic. If you have student loans, factor these payments into your ideal salary (for information on your loans, go to this website). Most starting academic jobs---and we are talking about tenure-track positions---pay between \$40,000 and \$45,000. Yearly pay increases, especially at public universities, tend to be extremely small (in fact, the only cases we know of where academics received significant pay increases occurred when the academic was offered another job). While \$45,000 may seem to be a significant sum of money when you are in graduate school, this is the salary you will be earning outside of graduate school. Determine your expenditures: as a working professional, you will probably need to own a reliable car, you may want to make down payments on a house (speak to realtors in the region in which you want to live to get the specifics on this), to pay for childcare, to put money aside for your child's future education, and even to travel to do research when you don't get a grant. For additional expenses and to help determine your taxes, go to this website. We suggest you break down and create a monthly budget. Now, ask yourself if your income will cover your costs.

Along with income, think about your pension and/or 401(K). Even if you are in your thirties and feel that putting money toward retirement is not an overwhelming concern, you need to be aware of two things. First, current discussions about projected deficits in

Social Security mean that you may not be able to count on Social Security to see you through retirement. Second, very few PhDs put money toward retirement while they are in graduate school. As a result, many academics, especially those who spent more than eight years in graduate school, begin their working careers with significant shortfalls in their pension when compared to the average American. Will the retirement package which you are being offered make up for possible deficits in Social Security as well as the shortfalls caused by the ten year gap in which you did not contribute toward a pension? If you are not being offered a retirement package, you may want to meet with a financial planner to discuss your options and whether you will be able to save enough money for retirement on your own (this type of meeting may be well worth it in the long term although it may be financially painful in the short term).

Benefits are a key component of any job offer. If you are offered a position which does not provide you with benefits, ask yourself some serious questions. First, can you afford to pay for health insurance on your own? And if so, how long are you prepared to pay for your own health insurance? While your circumstances may vary, you may be eligible for insurance under the COBRA Act. Go to this website to learn about whether you are eligible and how much you will be paying for insurance if you are eligible. Second, are you comfortable working for an employer who is reluctant to extend you these benefits? If you feel that you will begin to resent your employer for failing to offer you benefits, you would probably be better off not taking the position.

Think carefully about the academic position which you are being offered. Academia is currently characterized by a multi-tiered system-with tenured professors at the top, followed by tenure-track professors, visiting professors, instructors, and then adjuncts. What will your position be within this hierarchy and how comfortable do you feel about this position? If you are at the bottom of this hierarchy, how will your colleagues treat you? If you are taking a temporary job, are you prepared to deal with the insecurity which comes with this type of position? Can you afford to pay your moving costs for a one year position? You may be perfectly fine with this hierarchy and your place within it but you should be aware that the hierarchy exists when accepting a job.

Assess the factors which you love about academia and those which you dislike. Are you indifferent about teaching and do you prefer to do research? Do you hate grading? Do you love teaching introductory courses? Think about job offers which you may receive and/or have already received in these terms. If you are offered a position at a university where you will have a 4-4 teaching load and you really don't like teaching intro courses, this may not be the ideal job for you (especially as there is no guarantee nowadays that you will be able to "trade up" and obtain a job at a university or college with a lighter teaching load). Conversely, if you are offered a job at a major research university where you are expected to publish and where your teaching will not be valued as highly, ask yourself if this is the type of job you want or if this is simply the type of job which you are expected to want. Think critically, in other words, about job offers you may receive and recognize that accepting, or declining, a job offer is within your control.

When assessing the factors which you like and dislike about academia, remember that service is standard in most universities today. Do you feel comfortable serving on academic committees and are you prepared to devote a portion of your time to committee work? Ask employers about your service expectations and, if possible, speak with professors who work at similar institutions to gain an understanding of this type of requirement as it is rarely discussed in graduate programs.

Carefully consider your area of expertise and the possibility of finding a job in that area. Certain historical fields are dying and while we deeply lament the passing of these fields, you need to be realistic. For example, very few jobs in medieval and classical history open up every year. Other fields tend to be narrowly defined: British history jobs overwhelmingly call for specialists in imperialism, most German history positions require that you be an expert in Nazism etc. You may love your area of expertise, whether it is medieval history or eighteenth-century German history, but if there are no positions in that field, spending the next five years searching for a position may not be the wisest move. We want to emphasize this as the current economic situation makes it highly unlikely that this situation will improve in the near future. In fact, the number of available jobs will probably decrease significantly within the next few years and many tenure-track historians will probably be thrown back on the market as universities cut their budgets even more.

Finally, recognize and remember that you are the final arbiter of any job offer. If you want to remain in academia, that is your choice. Similarly, if you want to leave academia, that is your choice. Whatever choice you decide to make is the right choice. You know yourself and your desires best; never let yourself be influenced by other people's views of the type of job you should take.

## Weigh Your Options

Recognize that your graduate education provided you with very real and definite skills which can be applied to either an academic or non-academic job. While it is common for PhDs, especially those in the humanities, to maintain that they are "over-qualified for the typing pool and under-qualified for a real job," this is patently untrue (we also find it a stunning and very sad comment on how academics view their education).

If you are reluctant to leave academia simply because you believe you will be unable to find a good and satisfying job, realize that this is inaccurate. PhDs possess skills which are highly valued by employers. And whether you decide to remain in academia or not, you need to be aware that you have skills which can be applied in a variety of settings.

Think broadly and beyond the narrow world of academia.

## Finding an Internship

Large historical institutions, such as the National Park Service or the Smithsonian, often have structured, competitive, and paid internship programs. Smaller historical

organizations, such as a local historical society, rarely have structured paid internships. However, the smaller the institution, the more likely it is to need help.

Contact the Education Department or the Curatorial Department of these institutions to ask about internships. Treat this as an interview. Have a resume ready and explain clearly and succinctly why you would like to have an internship at the organization.

Stress your willingness to work as an unpaid intern. Yes, this may be painful in terms of time and your finances, but this will have a fantastic payoff whether you remain in academia or leave academia. If you remain in academia, you will be better able to assist students in finding jobs (simply because you will understand the options which exist for non-academic historians). You will also have an understanding of public history, a growing field.

Obviously, if you decide to leave academia, your internship will provide you with the skills and contacts which you will need to find a job outside the academy.

Finally, you should bear five things in mind when doing an internship. First, an internship can be done for one day a week for a semester. That's 14 days a year. 14 days over an eight year grad career (2,920 days) is a very smart investment. Second, make sure that you ask the people under whom you are working if you can do a specific and concrete project (this is better for you to have on your resume). Third, recognize that the internship is about making contacts so be outgoing and, if the chance presents itself, make sure that you work and speak to other people at similar organizations. Fourth, recognize that as a grad student you bring to bear very valuable skills which cash-strapped organizations would love to have; so with some very basic searching, you should be able to find an organization which would love to have you work as an unpaid intern for them (in other words, it should not be too hard to find a place which will take you on, especially if you are willing to do an unpaid internship). And finally, use an internship to explore what you like and dislike about a specific field. This information will be invaluable when you begin searching for a job.

For some additional thoughts on the value of internships, read this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article.

The following sites often list internships. But you must go above and beyond this list to find an internship which works for you.

Smithsonian

Holocaust Museum

Chicago Museum of History

Preserve Net

NASA History Division

National Park Service

## Five Steps To Make You a Better Public Historian

Most Americans learn their history in a public forum such as the internet, television, public talks, and museum exhibits. Ironically, few academically trained historians participate in these public discussions about history and even fewer graduate programs actively encourage students to explore public history.

Check out this pdf which lists some great reading to assist you in becoming a better public historian.

Here are five simple things you can do to improve Americans' understanding of history while simultaneously improving your job skills.

1) Volunteer to speak to local community groups about your research. For example, if your research is on the Reformation, volunteer to give a talk for a local ecumenical group or if your research is on voting rights, volunteer to speak to the local branch of the League of Women Voters.

2) Volunteer at your local historical society.

3) Find preservationists in your community. Volunteer to assist them in conducting historical research.

4) Historians and journalists who publish in the nation's leading newspapers often got their start at small local papers. Write a piece for a local newspaper about an historical event within the area or an historical event which may simply be of general interest to the paper's readers.

5) Develop a web exhibit based on your dissertation or your current research. Hosting a website is very inexpensive and you can use Dreamweaver or other similar web programs to create the website. George Mason University has also released a free software program (Omeka) intended for use in museums. Learning Omeka and using it to develop a web exhibit of your own will provide you with new skills and a better understanding of how exhibits are developed.

Finally, we also recommend that you look at the website for the leading organization on public history, the National Council on Public History. NCPH is actually an internationally-oriented organization and its members come from all over (Canada, Europe etc.) and they practice non-American, as well as American, history.

## Suggested Reading and Web Sites

Even if you are not the kind of person who reads self-help books, you will want to invest in one or more career advice books. These books provide the best advice both for finding a job which you will enjoy as well as outstanding tips for writing a resume.

Career books should not be read in one sitting nor should they be read cover to cover. Carefully skim the book for advice and do as many of the exercises as you can.

### Suggested Reading:

Richard Nelson Bolles, *What Color is Your Parachute?* (Tenspeed Press, 2009). There's a reason why this book is a classic: it offers great advice! Check out the sections on doing informational interviews as well as the word list for resumes.

Maggie Debelius and Susan Elizabeth Basalla, *So What Are You Going to Do With That?: A Guide for M.A.'s and Ph.D's Seeking Careers Outside the Academy* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). This book is tailor-made for academics; it has already entered its second edition which speaks volumes about the demand for a book of this type. The book's greatest strength lies in the fact that it reassures academics that it's okay to leave academia by providing anecdotes of successful former academics. These stories should motivate you to look in many places.

Nicholas Lore, *The Pathfinder: How to Choose or Change Your Career for a Lifetime of Satisfaction and Success* (Fireside, 1998). Lore uses techniques created at the Rockport Institute to help you determine the kinds of jobs you should pursue and the ways in which you can obtain these jobs. The book provides a step by step process by which you can find the job of your dreams while creating a fulfilling personal life.

### Great Web Reading:

**Sellout:** Mark Johnson is an English PhD who left academe and works at Intuit. His ironically titled website provides job information as well as encouragement to PhDs considering a career outside of the academy.

**Relevant History:** Alex Pang, an historian of science, left academe in 1996. His blog can give insight into life outside of the academy. Check out his fantastic essay about leaving academe.

**Re-envisioning the PhD:** This website grew out of a \$515,000 project funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts which posed the challenging question: "How can we re-envision the Ph.D. to meet the needs of the society of the 21st Century?"

**Out of Academia:** Annalee Newitz's thought-provoking article on leaving the academy. This article originally appeared in *Salon*.

**Doctor Outsider:** Michelle Tepper's wonderful essay about leaving the academy. This article originally appeared in *The Minnesota Review*.

We suggest as well the other web sites we view as making history.

### Readings We Suggest You Ignore

Leading journals on higher education and all of the different blogs and websites which discuss the academic market. These are of marginal interest and while they may help you in the very early stages when you are making your decision to leave academia, they can be very destructive in the long run. The people who write in to these journals and blogsites tend to be academics in transition; they may provide a cozy support network and you can use them for that but always remember: these are not the people who will help you get a job.

A cursory search of these sites (done on a bi-weekly basis by us over a three month period) also revealed that the sites frequently gave erroneous advice (for example, academics who had no experience in the field of federal history made completely inaccurate statements about the work federal historians do and many academics who wrote in seemed to have a poor or non-existent understanding of how the for-profit sector works). You will be much better off contacting people who do the work in which you are interested as opposed to academics who may know little about specific professions and who may be prejudiced about the non-academic world.

We were also concerned about the fact that many people seemed to be almost daily contributors to these sites. These sites undoubtedly provide people with support but your time would be much better spent making contacts with non-academics (additionally, studies have shown that extensive internet use can contribute to depression---we exempt our website from this, of course!).

### The Opening of the Academic Mind

Most graduate schools provide little or no career counseling for their students. If you have spent six or more years in the Ivory Tower, you are unlikely to know anything about the non-academic world or non-academic jobs---even if you spent time in the non-academic world before entering graduate school.

Recognize that your understanding of the non-academic world is non-existent or, at best, six or more years out of date. If you have an assumption about a job but have never done an informational interview with someone who works in that field, admit that that assumption is based on a lack of knowledge and is therefore probably incorrect.

There are many myths about the non-academic world and the academic world. We are going to list some of them because we want you to understand that they are myths. One: people in corporate America are faceless drones who labor in cubicles and are all unhappy. Two: unless your job title is "Historian," you do not use the skills or training

you learned in graduate school. Three: academic jobs are all wonderful and allow you to engage in scholarly research 24-7. Four: public historians do History Lite and the field is occupied by people who are not real scholars. Five: jobs at think tanks and foundations are so rare that an historian will never obtain one and should not bother to try. Six: independent scholars, even those who possess PhDs, are not really serious historians and their work is not deserving of respect. Seven: people who did not go to graduate school have never heard of, much less read, the works of Foucault, the Annales School or any other great thinker or great intellectual movement of the twentieth century. Eight: everyone in the "real" world follows a straight career path. Nine: people in the "real" world do not understand or value the training a PhD has. Ten: managers and high-level people simply grind the faces of the poor and oppressed every day and those who work for them become Part of the Problem.

Does Number Ten seem silly? Of course, it does. But Numbers One through Nine are equally silly (although sadly, these statements are commonly accepted as the truth by many PhDs and graduate students). Any PhD who believes these things has failed to do research on this subject; whether you remain in academia or not, you need to understand that these statements are myths which are detrimental not only to your job search but to the historical profession in general.

For a PhD to be ignorant is acceptable---for a PhD to claim to be a scholar but fail to do research and end this ignorance is troubling. You must approach your job search with an open mind and you must understand that the title "historian" is not and never has been reserved for professors. If you want to be a scholar, whether in or out of academia, be open-minded and recognize that your prejudices may be just that---prejudices.

## FAQs

### **What kinds of opportunities exist for historians outside of academia?**

There are many opportunities for historians outside of academia. However, you do need to be creative and aggressive when marketing yourself.

Begin by breaking down your skills. Are you a specialist in a specific geographic region and, if so, does this entail specific linguistic skills? Are you an historian of science and do you have a background in or rudimentary understanding of a scientific field? Are you a gender historian? Does your work use legal documents? Does your dissertation focus on political issues? The opportunities which are available should reflect your skills---for example, if you are a women's historian, look at organizations which cater to women's issues. If you specialize in a specific region, look at businesses which work in those regions.

To learn about careers which are very suited to academics, you may want to look at the various guest discussions hosted by Wrk4Us.

While opportunities will vary depending on your specific skills, there are some career paths which are especially suited for historians. These are consultants, policy analysts, speechwriters, intelligence officers, curators, museum educators, lobbyists, managers of historical sites, editors, and reporters. Do not, however, limit yourself to these professions!

Think outside the box!

### **Should I tell my advisor that I am considering leaving academia?**

This really depends on your advisor and your relationship with him or her. Some advisors can be extraordinarily sympathetic. Other advisors can be less sympathetic and they may be reluctant to write glowing recommendations if they feel that you are ambivalent about remaining in academia. They may also become unwilling to read your dissertation as it progresses.

Carefully assess your relationship with your advisor and make the determination based on that. If you have several advisors and feel only one is trustworthy, ask the person you tell to keep this in confidence.

However, you should be aware that leaving academia is your decision, not your advisor's. While he or she may express displeasure or sadness at your decision to leave academia, you must do what is right for you---not what is right for your advisor.

### **How do I contact people and what's an informational interview?**

Networking allows you to meet the people who are hiring---before they begin the hiring process. This can give you an incredible advantage when applying for jobs.

Use the Career Office of your graduate and undergraduate schools. Ask to look at their reference guides as well as their lists of graduates who work in professions which interest you.

Look up the organizations, individuals, and agencies which match your interests on the web. Most of these organizations will list contact people (if they do not, call the organization and ask for the email of the person whose interests match yours).

Send the person a short email explaining who you are and asking if you can speak with them about the work they do (never ask directly about job opportunities). If at all possible, try to meet with the individual in person. Most people are flattered to be asked and, unless their schedule is very busy, you should be able to meet with them for a 30 minutes or an hour.

During the informational interview, ask about the profession, what it entails and how one enters the field. Obtaining information about a field and learning how to position yourself for a job is the goal of an informational interview. Although you will hear of people

obtaining jobs through informational interviews, be wary of assuming that your informational interview with a specific organization will lead to a job offer. The point of an informational is to obtain information which will assist you in deciding whether a field will suit your interests and what skills you need to enter that field.

Always bring a resume to the interview and ask for suggestions as to how you can sharpen your resume for positions in that person's field. Keep the resume brief (two pages) and avoid listing every academic prize or paper you have published.

The person who helps you has taken time out of his or her busy schedule to meet with you---you must send them a thank you note. Send the note promptly (within the week following the interview). Not sending a thank you note indicates a failure to understand good business etiquette and it will make people reluctant to refer you for a position which may be opening up.

Even when someone is unable to thank you, send them a thank you note for considering this. This is very important---as it demonstrates clearly that you possess good social/professional skills. Additionally, this type of note will make people more eager to assist you if they do discover a way to help you in the future.

### **Can historians outside of academia continue to be scholars?**

Absolutely. You may need to be a bit creative about finding time to do your research and write but this is true in academia as well (where heavy teaching loads and committee work can make research difficult). Most organizations provide at least two weeks vacation (some provide much more) and you can easily use this time to travel to archives or research libraries. Additionally, some employers will provide their workers with unpaid leave. In this case, you can take some time to research and write.

Working 9-5 creates a structured day and can help you be more focused in your writing. Unlike in academia where weekends and evenings are sometimes taken up with grading papers, historians outside of the academy have more structured time for writing.

Contrary to popular belief, there is a strong and active community of independent scholars. Independent scholars routinely publish work with leading academic presses (Oxford, University of California etc.) and they also frequently speak at national and international conferences. The work produced by independent scholars, especially those with a PhD, is on a level with that produced by academics. Check out the website of the National Coalition for Independent Scholars for more information. And if you need further reassurance, check out the profiles in Real Jobs, Real Historians. Many of the historians we have profiled have published work as independent scholars. And many of these historians routinely participate in historic conferences.

Because being outside the academy broadens your horizons, it can sometimes provide you with a new and different perspective. And this perspective may lead you to approach your research in a radically different way. For an example of this, read Alex Pang's

thoughtful essay, *Journeyman*, in which he discusses how a scholar outside the academy brought a new perspective to his research and led him to understand and view his own historical research differently;

Next time you receive a journal, check the authors' biographies. You may be surprised to learn that many of the historians whose work you routinely read and enjoy work outside of academia.

### **Are internships worth it and how can I obtain one?**

Internships are almost always worth the investment as they will give you an opportunity to expand your skills and discover what certain professions entail. Internships can not only provide you with exposure to jobs outside the academy, they can also help you to meet people who work in the field which you would like to enter. These contacts can ultimately help you to obtain a job (contacts are key---this is true in academia as well as outside of academia), and, of course, a good internship will also teach you very real job skills.

Many summer internships are paying ones and we suggest that you look into these, even if they entail your moving somewhere for a summer. You may discover, especially with an internship which requires you to move somewhere for a summer, that you will manage to simply break even financially but it is worth it in the long term. If you can afford it, take a non-paying internship during the school year. When you are not being paid, you will have a fair amount of freedom to negotiate how much you work and what you do; a year long internship where you work for 8-10 hours a week is very much worth the commitment.

We strongly recommend that all historians, even those who are determined to remain in academia, explore internships while in graduate school. An internship, especially one in a museum, a public history office or an archive, will broaden your understanding of the historical profession and make you a better scholar by exposing you to different types of history, different types of questions, and different approaches to history. If you remain in academia, this knowledge will also better enable you to advise undergraduate majors and graduate students about their career options---and advising students is a fundamental aspect of all academic jobs. In short, an internship can open up an extraordinary number of new and different options, whether you remain in academia or not.

To learn more about internships, go here. Also read our profiles carefully; many of them got their start through an internship (and yes, even one internship can make a significance difference when you go on the job market).

### **What about post-doctoral fellowships?**

Post-docs can provide you with a wonderful opportunity to expand your horizons---which is always a good thing. If you are fortunate enough to be offered a post-doc, you should take it, if you feel it will enable you to advance your professional goals. Use the time to

take extra courses (this includes courses in other departments) which will enhance your resume. Good places to look for post-doctoral fellowships include: museums (especially the Smithsonian), think tanks, and universities.

### **Can life outside of academia truly be intellectually rewarding?**

We were reluctant to put this question on our website because the answer seems to be so obvious. But having read countless essays and articles in which academics loudly proclaim that their low-paying adjunct position is worth it because it enables them to enjoy the "life of the mind," we feel that we must address this issue.

The answer is: life outside of academia can be more intellectually rewarding than it is inside academia. Do you love to read? Guess what! You can do that outside of academia (you can even afford to buy the books you want outside of academia). Do you love to visit museums? Hear lectures? Travel to visit Gothic cathedrals? You can do all these things outside of academia---and because you will have a choice as to where you live, you can suit your lifestyle to reflect your interests.

Moreover, contrary to the belief of most academics, a good and challenging job will always provide you with interesting and well-read colleagues. We have found that we met people with broader and deeper interests outside academia than we met inside academia where the emphasis tends to be on narrow specialization.

Further evidence of this can be found in a forthcoming study by Maresi Nerad of the University of California, Berkeley. An examination of the career paths and attitudes of 6000 PhDs "Ten Years After" in six disciplines from sixty universities found that there was no difference in job satisfaction between academics and PhDs working in business, government, and the non-profit sectors.

Enough said?

### **Should I consider additional education?**

We do not advocate that you immediately return to school for more training or another degree. Your training as an historian should have provided you with sufficient skills to find a job in most fields. If you are interested in entering a field which requires that you obtain another degree, we strongly recommend that you find an internship in this field. Do not, in other words, rush to obtain yet another degree without investigating the field thoroughly; you may be surprised to discover that you do not like the field very much or you may learn that you can find satisfying and well-paying work in that field without investing more time and money in additional education. And finally, some employers pay for the education of their employees--after you put in a few years, your employer may pay you to obtain an MBA, an MPH, an MLS or another degree.

We also want to point out that additional education is not a guarantee of employment. Many PhDs rush to law school, unaware that almost 50% of people with law degrees do

not work as lawyers. Do serious research before you commit to additional education; additionally, factor into your decision to return to school an understanding that you may very well wind up with another degree but not a job. If you are interested in law school, check out this website hosted by the American Bar Association. If you are interested in getting an MLS, check out this website hosted by the American Library Association.

**I feel as though I am being forced out of academia because of the terrible job market. What are some positive reasons for deciding to leave academia?**

Historians can often accomplish more outside of academia than inside academia. Public historians, policy analysts, and many government officials who possess PhDs can do more to influence policy decisions in a week than most academic historians do in a lifetime. Additionally, historians who are in the public eye (whether they are in the profit or non-profit sector) demonstrate to legislators and the general public the importance of a training in history. As it is legislators and the voting public who determine the funding for history programs, this type of contact does a great deal to advance the cause of history.

Historians outside of the university setting often work with people who genuinely love history. While working with undergraduates and graduate students can be rewarding, non-academic historians tend to encounter people who are choosing, long after they have left school, to pursue history on their own.

And finally, within the university setting, history can be extremely theoretical and abstract. Outside of a university setting, people use history---to influence policy decisions, to understand why an event occurred and what the ramifications will be if a tradition is changed etc. This can be extremely exciting.

**If I leave academia, does that mean I can never return?**

Leaving academia is not a death sentence. Take it from us: many people have left academia, worked in other professions and then returned to academia.

In fact, depending on the position you get, leaving academia can actually enhance your CV and enable you to return to the academic job market as a stronger candidate. If, for example, you leave academia and obtain a position at a think tank, you will have an opportunity to work on projects which strengthen your research skills and add to your publications. Working as a public historian will also provide you with an opportunity to expand your publications.

Even if you do not enter a profession which encourages research, nothing will prevent you from doing your own research and publishing. A good track record of publications can only help you in a competitive academic job market.

One final note: while returning to academia is always an option, you may find, as many historians have, that you will not want to return to academia once you have experienced the very different work environment of the "real world."

### **Is using a career counselor worth the investment?**

There is no definitive answer to this question. You must research the career counselor before you make any decision as well as assess your own financial position relative to the cost of the counselor. Ask the counselor directly if he or she has ever placed academics in non-academic positions. If not, ask the career counselor directly about how he or she intends to approach your job search (do this before you lay out any money---if the counselor says you must pay first, then, this is obviously not a good investment).

Finally, before investing in a career counselor, assess your finances; your decision should reflect your own financial situation.

### **I am very unhappy in my graduate program. Should I leave academia before I complete my PhD?**

No one can answer this question for you. However, there are some issues which you may want to bear in mind as you explore this question.

Begin by looking at the question of careers: are you interested in a career which would require an advanced degree? Some jobs outside of academia actually do require a PhD or, if they don't require a PhD, a PhD may be necessary if you want to move into a management position. Conversely, you may find that a PhD is completely irrelevant to the position.

To ascertain whether the PhD will be beneficial to your future career, do informational interviews with people in the occupations which you would like to enter. Tell these people that you are ambivalent about completing the degree and ask them what they would suggest based on their knowledge of the field.

Along with thinking about your future career, you should assess your own character. Ask yourself whether you (as opposed to your advisor or fellow students) feel completing your PhD is important or whether in believing that this is important, you are simply reflecting and responding to the culture in which you are living.

And finally because this is a difficult decision, you may want to take a semester off. Working outside of academe may provide you with the information you need to make a decision which is right for you and your future career.

### **I spent several years in graduate school pursuing and ultimately obtaining a PhD. Now, this experience does not seem to be helping me on the non-academic job market. Was my time spent in graduate school a waste?**

Thirty years ago, the pursuit of a doctorate was a form of vocational training and earning a PhD would, more often than not, result in a job as a professor. Obviously, that is no longer true today.

That said, you should not assume that obtaining your PhD will fail to help you on the job market. Even if you had spent seven years pursuing your passion as a rock-climber, you would have accumulated skills which would be of use to you on the job market. Think seriously about the tasks which you accomplished as a graduate student and/or as a professor and the skills which you gained. These are the tools which will enable you to find a good and satisfying career and to succeed in that career.

Overall, how should you view your graduate training? View it as a wonderful opportunity to pursue subjects in which you were and remain passionately interested. Not many people have the opportunity to spend several years following their passion---count yourself lucky that you had this opportunity. If you accumulated debt doing this, compare yourself to someone who just took out a mortgage or bought a luxury car. Yes, it may not have been the wisest financial move but, for better or worse, you bought a luxury item which brought you enjoyment.

And finally, a word of caution. Potential employers may ask you why you obtained your graduate degree; you need to be prepared to answer their questions about your education positively. Do not tell the employer about the academic job market and your attempts to obtain an academic job. Employers are not interested; moreover, in this crowded job market, employers who have a wide choice among applicants will prefer to hire employees who are enthusiastic about a new career, not mourning an academic career.

### **Why didn't I get an academic job and does my inability to obtain one mean that I am a failure?**

A couple of hard facts. The academic job market is in a state of collapse. You may have outstanding credentials but this will do little to alter the fact that there are very few jobs. Academic search committees can pick and choose among an outstanding array of candidates; as a result, they can and often do take into consideration a range of random factors. There is no way you can prepare for this and because search committees are often flooded by applicants, they will only rarely discuss the reasons for their decision. Moreover, even if a search committee tells you that they wanted someone who could teach women's studies and they nixed your application for that reason, another department may want someone who can hold a joint appointment in the economics department. In other words, the qualifications for one job are rarely ever the qualifications for another job and as search committees rarely ever clarify (or even know) what they want, you can not prepare for this. You may feel you nailed the interview (and you probably did) but unbeknownst to you, the department decided to go with the applicant whose dissertation paralleled that of the department chair or they went with the applicant who had family in the area.

To put it very bluntly, the academic job market has become a lottery with many qualified (and over-qualified) applicants vying for one winning ticket. If you bought a lottery ticket with 100 other people, would you regard yourself as a failure if your ticket didn't win? Would you insist that you deserved to win? Or if the winner was a woman or a minority, would you insist that it was because of "affirmative action" that you failed to win? Think about the market in these terms.

Sadly, there is no "winning" formula for obtaining an academic job. There are countless PhDs with books, degrees from top-ranked universities, teaching awards etc. who did not obtain a tenure-track position. These people are not failures! In fact, they are success stories. They have published thought-provoking books, they earned degrees through effort and hard work and they have won awards for teaching. Yes, they didn't get a tenure-track position but when compared to the overall list of their accomplishments, this is one (and sometimes the only) task in which they did not obtain that which they wanted (and for the above reasons, their inability to obtain an academic position had nothing to do with their abilities or efforts). Very few people have track records like that!

### **Will having a PhD hurt me on the job market?**

There is no easy answer to this question. Some employers, it is true, are very reluctant to hire PhDs. Others, however, relish the opportunity to hire PhDs.

Remember: the majority of PhDs in this country do not work in academia which means that many employers do look favorably on PhDs. Tailor your search to accommodate this. Good places to look include: federal, state and local government (where the majority of PhDs work), foundations/think tanks, research and development groups, and consulting organizations.

And finally, remember that while many people say they did not enjoy their high school history classes, the History Channel, the American Experience series on PBS, and the incredible popularity of places like Williamsburg indicate that most Americans actually enjoy history and spend money on history-related products. These organizations need and routinely hire historians.

### **I'm still in graduate school. Is there anything I can do to make myself more attractive to non-academic employers?**

If you are still doing coursework, you may want to look at classes and opportunities in the different professional schools. For example, if your dissertation deals with legal issues, take a course or make contacts with people in the law school. If you are interested in preservation, take a course in architectural history or in preservation law. In other words, try to broaden your experiences and background as much as you can (one of the things which non-academics do not like about academics is their narrowness).

Two types of courses which non-academic employers like very much are statistics courses and language courses.

We also recommend expanding your work experiences. Volunteer for a non-profit; you may be asked to assist in writing grants, to help manage a website or to assist in organizing events. The skills you can learn while volunteering will only enhance your resume. Additionally, the contacts you make while volunteering will assist you when you begin exploring the job market.

Consider a structured internship. An internship can help you determine the kinds of jobs you might enjoy (as well as the kinds of jobs you do not want---an equally important lesson). You may also find that the person under whom you do an internship will be pleased to write you a letter of reference.

Reach out to others in your graduate program and university. We suggest that you organize graduate student workshops on grant-writing, teaching or researching. Developing and running a workshop requires management skills which will be highly valued in the workplace; it will also ensure that you learn new skills such as how to write a better grant proposal. Talk to students across disciplines (the contacts you make may help you in the future).

Finally, we strongly urge you to begin reading job ads and speaking to potential employers now. Reading job ads a year or more before you intend to enter either the academic or non-academic job market, will educate you on the skills and experiences you will need to have when you begin looking for a job. If you begin to acquire these skills now, that will put you ahead of the game when you go on the job market.

**Beyond Academe was created as a free service for the historical profession. Please contact Alexandra Lord at [beyondacademe@yahoo.com](mailto:beyondacademe@yahoo.com) if you would like to excerpt material from this site and post it elsewhere. Thank you.**