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Outside, Over There

By Alexandra M. Lord

In my favorite children's books, there was always a dark forest filled with unfamiliar shadows and strange inhabitants. As a child, I found the lure of that world "outside, over there," hard to ignore. I was both frightened and enticed by the possibilities.

When I decided to leave academe after several years of teaching, I found myself viewing the outside world with much the same trepidation. My academic friends followed in the best tradition of fairy tales by issuing dire warnings: Those who walk into the dark forest, they said, were unable to return to the world they had left.

Even as they issued such ominous pronouncements, many spoke wistfully of the nonacademic world as a place of untold delights -- where people earned good salaries, jobs provided health-care and pension benefits, and spouses could live together in regions of their choosing.

Upon entering the nonacademic world, I found that it does offer those untold delights and that its inhabitants are neither terrifying nor unfamiliar. In fact, I discovered a strong community of former academics linked by the Internet. Members of that community have generously reached into their own pockets and given the even more generous gift of time to deal with the very serious problems caused by the overproduction of Ph.D.'s in fields from anthropology to zoology.

When I left academe, I was an unhappy professor, but reading blogs like *The Escape Pod* and *Alex Pang's Journeyman: Getting Into and Out of Academe*, enabled me to reassess both why I had gone to graduate school and what my graduate education had given me.

In academe everyone told me that my doctorate in early modern history enabled me to do one thing: Be a professor. But outside of academe, I discovered that my degree was more

versatile. Ultimately, the various blogs and my discussions with other nonacademically inclined Ph.D.'s enabled me to make the transition into a well-paying and satisfying job in the city of my choice.

In the three years since I left academe, the Internet community for former academics has grown. Today an incredible number of Web sites and forums deal with the Ph.D. surplus. Some are for a broad audience. Other sites cater to a specific discipline, including one I helped found for historians called Beyond Academe, as well as others such as Leaving Physics or Philip Greenspun's Career Guide for Engineers and Computer Scientists.

Given the reluctance of both professional organizations and graduate programs to take serious action on the question of overproduction, the efforts of people outside the academy seem to provide the best, and the only real, hope available today for improving graduate education.

I do not want to dismiss completely the efforts by organizations such as the American Historical Association or the Modern Language Association to reform or at least assess the problems in graduate education. But their efforts have been very limited. As a professor and member of the AHA's committee to reform graduate education once told me, "Professors know nothing about nonacademic careers, so we can't advise students about this."

Still I can and do fault professors who claim to be mentors but refuse either to educate themselves about all of the nonacademic job opportunities available for their students, or to have an open mind on the subject of careers.

Discussion groups and blogs created by former academics and graduate students have done much to fill in the gap. Additionally, by pushing graduates students to understand that they have options -- that they are not doomed to spend years as adjuncts and that leaving academe does not mean that they are "failures" -- these Web sites have a tremendous potential to transform graduate programs for the better.

On a very basic level, these sites -- ranging from the ironically titled Sellout to the more prosaically named Wrk4Us, provide graduate students with open-ended mentoring and career advice, as well as much-needed role models.

On Wrk4us, a discussion group created by Paula Foster Chambers and hosted by the Web site of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, graduate students can speak

directly to Ph.D.'s in a wide variety of careers. There are literary scholars who bring their skills to bear on the videogame industry; historians who work as corporate researchers; classicists who work for the U.S. State Department; philosophers who work as epidemiologists; and linguists who work as researchers for think tanks.

Over and over, these people answer the questions asked by graduate students who want careers that will draw upon their education, reflect their values, and enable them to pay their bills. A typical discussion might begin when a graduate student asks how he or she should describe a dissertation for a nonacademic audience, or, even more simply, the experience of graduate school.

By prodding graduate students to broaden themselves, to look beyond the narrow confines of academe and to use their education in unique ways, the participants on this and similar discussion groups are indirectly reshaping graduate education -- one student at a time.

For the many Ph.D.'s in English, history, and other fields who have been unable to obtain tenure-track jobs, these Web sites and forums are a lifeline. The advice on most of the sites is basic -- for example, recommending that graduate students learn and understand their options and make decisions based on facts, not myths. Yet that simple advice can be stunningly provocative for students unused to hearing that they have options at all.

The scarcity of academic jobs has made their allure even stronger while simultaneously reinforcing the disdain academics have traditionally felt for nonacademic careers. Graduate students are now routinely told to anticipate spending three to four years searching for a tenure-track job -- and, as many Ph.D.'s have discovered, even after three or four years, a successful search is not a sure thing.

So on the one hand, graduate students are taught to believe that a nonacademic career is evidence of "failure." And on the other, the tightening of the job market means that many with stellar publications and teaching records will be unable to avoid "failure" by obtaining academic positions.

Doctoral programs have offered little or no discussion as to how graduate students are supposed to support themselves during that three-to-four-year search. And even less advice has been offered as to how they can support themselves if that tenure-track search ultimately fails.

In my fairy-tale world, professors would take their jobs as advisers seriously by recognizing that good mentoring does not mean recreating a scholar in your own image but rather opening a scholar up to possibilities, whether those possibilities are in academe or not.

As a historian, I know that there are no fairy tales in real life. My own journey out of academe taught me that even the dark forests built from our fantasies and fears do not exist. But if history has taught me that there are no fairy tales, it has also taught me that change and revolution often come from outside forces. Still, I cannot but wonder why academics have left it to the outside world to confront the problems which they have created.

Alexandra M. Lord is the co-creator of a Web site, *Beyond Academe*, designed to help historians find nonacademic careers.