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The Graduate Student as Entrepreneur

By Sarah Ruth Jacobs

The market for academic teaching jobs in the humanities and social sciences is entirely different than it was 30 years ago, yet most graduate advisers and students still operate as if the path to the professoriate is the same as it was: You present at conferences, network with others in your field, be active in your department, work with someone of great renown, submit papers for publication, apply for fellowships, and then secure a tenure-track position.

Unfortunately, that approach is no longer enough to ensure a career in academe. My good friend "Ben," who did all of the above during his doctoral study in the French and Italian department at Princeton University, failed to secure a full-time position. Even as he excelled in his work, opportunities within his field were diminishing.

Some of my peers, however, have succeeded in securing tenure-track jobs in higher education. Yet they have only done so because of their willingness to step outside of the traditional boundaries of graduate-student work. "Lynn" is an assistant professor on the tenure track because of her years of experience in instructional technology. "Charles" is an assistant professor because of his invention of an online tool that visualizes knowledge networks between theorists in his field. "Frank" is an assistant professor because of his administrative experience in a writing-across-the-curriculum program. The list goes on.

I would like to suggest, then, the emergence of a new paradigm for succeeding on the academic job market: the graduate student as entrepreneur.

Graduate students can no longer lay the groundwork for their careers by following a mythical path set forth long ago that is fast disappearing. Increasingly, Ph.D.'s need to step slightly outside of their fields to define themselves, produce tools, appeal to wider audiences, attain rare skill sets, and forge partnerships beyond their disciplines and even beyond academe. In that spirit of self-reliance and innovation I'd like to present five ways in which graduate students in the humanities and social sciences can succeed by

drawing outside of the lines.

Propose, and participate in, unorthodox partnerships. Erez Lieberman Aiden, a Ph.D. in the areas of applied math and health sciences and technology at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, approached an executive at Google and proposed the creation of a tool that could measure cultural trends by charting word frequency over hundreds of years in Google's corpus of 15 million books.

Google agreed to provide the digitized books, and Aiden gathered a team of programmers and researchers in a variety of disciplines. As a result, Google's Ngram Viewer and the interdisciplinary concept of "culturomics" were born. In our current climate, graduate students should likewise consider doing work and forging relationships beyond our disciplinary boundaries.

Seek more technical training. Deena Engel, a clinical associate professor of computer science at New York University has been teaching a graduate course this semester in the English department on how to curate and encode online literary texts using CSS, HTML, and XML. In a similar vein, we as graduate students should seek to acquire advanced technical skills outside of our department's traditional offerings.

Even students in the humanities should consider taking classes in statistical methods, sociological research models, computer programming, information technology, and other such topics. Mastering skills in such areas will not only help you stand out in the traditional academic job search but can also give you something to fall back on should you apply for alternative academic careers.

Look beyond the semester system. True growth doesn't happen in the semester system. Too often graduate students write a paper in the final week of the semester, the professor writes a few cursory comments, and then the paper gathers dust. Substantial projects cannot be completed in a semester's time or with a single reader. Graduate students need to seek out groups of readers who will seriously interrogate their work as it develops over a year or more.

For many years, I was the victim of the "easy A." Professors, even in graduate school, would give me A's on my research papers without taking time to actually interrogate my ideas. That changed last year when I was fortunate enough to take an independent study with a professor, Matthew K. Gold, who ruthlessly engaged with me and challenged my arguments over 14 months and seven drafts. Graduate students need to seek out those mentors who will truly

scrutinize and advise our projects from beginning to end; otherwise, we will never grow into scholars.

Know how to appeal to different audiences. From the rise of private for-profit universities that offer a corporate-minded, part-time, and fast-track education to the adjunctification of the work force, the days of recondite scholars releasing their findings to 20 readers via a specialized print journal are disappearing. We only have to witness the decline in foreign-language programs to realize that academic professionals in our present cultural climate have to fight to prove their own "relevancy," a word that has increasingly become code for "economic worth."

If the humanities do not reach out and perform a species of cultural missionary service, they may well be swallowed up and transformed from the outside in. Graduate students, caught in a web of idealism and economic sparsity, are poised to be the conduits of that process. However, we need to understand how to engage with the broader public and how to use new media.

Be willing to enter into or create opportunities outside of academe. For many Ph.D.'s, the end result of the aforementioned "cultural missionary service" may well be a position outside of academe. With every crisis comes unique opportunities.

Ironically, many unemployed artists, writers, and graduate students could possibly make greater contributions outside of their desired fields than within them. Graduate students represent some of the most creative and socially aware minds of our time. It might be a hidden blessing if some of us are pushed into careers in government, finance, or civic service.

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fiona 1 week ago

The advice here is good and realistic, but it also basically says that humanities scholars should abandon humanities scholarship and pursue technological ways to handle information.

The message: If you want to do traditional humanities research, such as looking into the life of an author or an historical figure or era, you're on your own. No one's much interested in hiring you or promoting you or giving you the tenure that would enable you to do long-range research, such as the study of historical problems or controversies.

We're back to the era of the gentleman scholar, where only those with an independent income (capital) would pursue humanities research. I suppose that means fewer useless monographs churned out to meet Ph. D. requirements. But I still believe foolishly in the "life of the mind," and I think that's gone the way of the dodo.

The Fiona, Dodo

23 people liked this. [Like](#)



dcbetty 1 week ago

"Ironically, many unemployed artists, writers, and graduate students could possibly make greater contributions outside of their desired fields than within them." Yes -- though I'd say it's more than "possibly" -- I'd extend it to "much more likely."

And also: Grad students and new PhDs MUST understand that their lot is very similar to that of American artists and writers: Your work is a calling, almost no one outside your small circle cares about what you do or understands it, the pay is low to nonexistent, and enormous amounts of training and experience are needed before you'll be any good. And the chances of becoming a star (even of modest stature) are tiny. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep on doing your work.

The big difference is that among artists and writers there is no shame at all in taking a day job unrelated to your real work in order to pay the bills. We really need to get over the intense stigma against nonacademic employment. It's completely crazy that adjuncting for \$2000-\$3000/semester with no benefits is considered to be more desirable and prestigious than, say, working an office job somewhere or waiting tables to pay the bills (and making 3-10 times as much as an adjunct) -- or even teaching high school! Or being an editor or professional writer!

Yet for PhDs, such work is evidence of your non-seriousness and your failure, and completely takes you out of the running for any future "real" academic job. But no artist would ever take such an attitude seriously. No artist would ever be discounted by his peers because he was a drywall hanger or painted houses when he wasn't on stage or in the studio. I see no reason, other than the exclusiveness of academic culture and the stigma against manual labor, why a scholar couldn't do the same. In fact, I bet plenty of people DO have jobs like this -- they just don't tell anyone about it.

My one demand would be to allow people with advanced degrees to apply for full membership in any academic library (including full access to e-resources!) -- not just alumni privileges from where you went to grad school. Keeping PhDs out of academic libraries makes about as much sense as keeping artists out of the Met.

31 people liked this. [Like](#)



racheltoor 1 week ago

Many excellent points here. I would add that all of these changes make it even more important for graduate students to learn to write clearly and without resorting to academic jargon and tics, especially but not only those related to specific fields. And graduate advisers have to let them--even encourage them--to do this.

4 people liked this. [Like](#)



Michael Hardy 1 week ago

"Sparsity"?

[Like](#)



arthurgp 1 week ago

I'm sorry, I really don't mean to be rude, but this article just totally rubs me the wrong way... In essence, you have penned an academic version of the neoliberal talking point that is always promising more and better jobs if American workers would only seek more training in order to be "competitive in a global marketplace," a line that always manages to shift the blame for joblessness and the disappearance of the middle class from structural conditions like economic policy to individual workers who have supposedly just made bad career choices. Look, graduate students in the humanities especially can't find jobs, and it's not because they haven't been trained correctly, and need to seek extra training on top of the excessive training most are already undergoing. Rather, it's because of structural policies in higher education that have incentivized PhD programs to over-enroll their grad programs way beyond what the academic job market can possibly support. Everyone knows this, and has known this for some time. So, you want to write an article for the Chronicle advising already-exploitably overworked and underpaid graduate students to take on even more burdens in order to more successfully fight over the few crumbs this job market is providing (probably in no small part as a sweet "extra" to go on your own CV)? Fine, but at least have the decency to situate your advice in its appropriate structural context. It's not because of some personal failing that incredibly hardworking and well-qualified candidates like your Princeton friend can't find a job in the field they have spent 7 or more years being groomed to enter; all the courses in statistics or computer programming in the world aren't going to change the destructive structural realities of our imploding higher education system.

25 people liked this. [Like](#)



pete_l_clark 1 week ago [in reply to arthurgp](#)

In part I agree with this (and I'll admit that the overall premise of the piece makes me somewhat uneasy as well).

But I think what you are saying is also rather harsh: this is a piece published in the "advice" section of the Chronicle of Higher Education. Unlike many such articles which are opinion pieces or slice-of-life narratives, this one gives actual advice. You seem to agree that the advice is sound as far as it goes (and so it seems to me, but I have no direct experience with this part of the academy) but that in principle one should be talking about the systemic problems with graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences. But of course many, many articles on this topic have appeared in the CHE, often (but not often enough?) in sections other than the "advice" section. It would probably be more useful for the graduate student readers -- none of whom are after all directly empowered to retool their graduate programs -- to discuss whether and in what ways this is indeed good advice.

Finally, at the risk of annoying everyone: I could imagine myself writing an article for CHE at some point in the future. But of all possible motivations for doing this, the desire to list it as a "sweet extra" on my CV is certainly not one of them: I cannot imagine listing this on my CV, because I cannot imagine anyone reading my CV and caring about this in any professionally pertinent way.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



Janine Norberg 1 week ago

Ummmm, so what you are saying is that a person should get a PhD AND do additional study in a tech field? How, precisely, are they to pay for this and where are they to find the time? How about people should instead get two MAs--one in the given humanities field and one in a marketable field--or just one in a marketable field? If the person then chooses, s/he might go on and study (for fun) for a PhD with the slim possibility of getting a tenure-track job. Trust me, not too many people will do a PhD "for fun" when they find out that intellectual amusement is really all one gets from it.

Yes, I think that people should dead stop getting PhDs in the humanities when the only real use of the degree is a professorship that does not exist. There are new laws preventing fraud in colleges--and any department which is perpetuating the notion that a PhD is a useful thing is defrauding its graduate students. Humanities departments should be cut--dramatically--some tenured professors can lose their jobs and find out just what life is like for those they have duped into getting a degree. I believe that humanities departments have made this bed--and they, too, should lie in it.

There is already a glut of candidates, new PhD candidates are doing them no favor by adding to the glut. People can do those candidates and themselves a favor by immediately dropping out of PhD programs in the humanities and going into fields in which one can get a real job--mostly tech fields (such as instructional design) and service fields (such as occupational therapy).

People who already have tenured and tenure-track jobs need to realize that college is not about training "informed citizens"--that is what high school is for. College was originally a way for people to train for law, medicine, or the ministry--and it remains a way for an individual to enter a professional field. It was never intended as an amusing way to spend four years, six, or a dozen years making oneself an informed "gentleman." That is a bogus idea that informs many idiot tenured professors in the humanities who think they are doing people a favor by encouraging them to invest a lot of money and most of their young adulthood only to wind up with massive debts, no job, and no future.

I had a great time in my PhD program--but now I have few opportunities (the PhD PREVENTS me from

getting many jobs I am otherwise suitable for as people assume I will not stay), a permanently low income, and absolutely no future opportunities (unless I start a company and run it myself--something I could have done with a high school diploma). The university system that I went through is an utter fraud--it doesn't even have useful, marketable degrees. Not one college in the state where I matriculated has an advanced degree in linguistics. Not one. This despite the fact that linguistics is one of the few humanities PhDs which allow one to get a real, well-paid job. (Just in passing, linguistics was what I wanted to study--and they didn't have an advanced degree back then either--I couldn't leave the state because that was where my scholarship was located and my husband employed.)

Administrators should immediately look into humanities programs and what is happening to people who graduate. Those programs which have graduates who report that there are no jobs should be dramatically cut or eliminated on the graduate level, those programs which have graduates who report a fair to good job market should be left alone or augmented, and those programs which they DO NOT HAVE (linguistics, instructional design outside the education department, any field which they don't have but which a check of the OOH reports is growing) should be created as a graduate program immediately. In a wretched economy, professors should stop expecting that their ivory tower is somehow immune. They, too, can become more "versatile" rather than trying to shift this burden to the graduate students and to blame graduate students for not being proactive about their own futures.

5 people liked this. [Like](#)



totoro 1 week ago in reply to Janine Norberg

I don't think she is saying this, though I would take with a grain of salt what a PhD student who doesn't yet seem to have reached the dissertation stage is saying about what will help you on the market. I think it could definitely help to show that you have thought about doing innovative things in teaching which use technology creatively. And doing something innovative and different on the scholarship side can't hurt - i.e. the things here which are basically "digital humanities". What really has changed now I think is that in fields where new PhDs hadn't necessarily had to publish anything before finishing the Phd, the advantage is now very strongly in favor of those who have published in good outlets before getting the degree. Well, I had an accepted article before starting my PhD 20 years ago, that's not yet necessary though. I see people who came out of prestigious programs and then don't get much or anything published as assistant profs. I don't want to see that happen with people I hire and so proving you can do it is important.

3 people liked this. [Like](#)



22234377 1 week ago

You might be interested to know that this concept has been discussed and developed at the University of Texas.

See the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Consortium:

<https://webspace.utexas.edu/ch...>

Among the many articles:

Richard Cherwitz and Charlotte Sullivan, "Intellectual Entrepreneurship: Vision for Graduate Education," Change, November/December, 2002.

<https://webspace.utexas.edu/ch...>

Many others about IE at:

<https://webspace.utexas.edu/ch...>

[Like](#)



jrjrjr 1 week ago

I like this article, I think it goes to the heart of the problem: Graduate student / new highly trained PhDs have to earn less than they would without their PhDs many times if they want to pursue the ever enlarging funnel leading to a career in academia. PhD students and post-docs should be encouraged to pursue the entrepreneurial path as they are not only high skilled and ready to take on ambiguity, but they also have much less to lose: they make very little and have a slim chance of getting to the top of the academic path)... unfortunately, many of the chances of starting companies with technology created in universities are snatched by greedy faculty who do not have time to run a business nor want to risk losing their difficultly earned faculty position.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)

**boredwithacademia** 1 week ago

An excellent article about people who see the academy for the horror it largely has become and have done something creative to succeed nevertheless! Kudos!

In my own experience, though, entrepreneurial proclivities can go far beyond the Ivory Tower. I still hold a full-time professorship in my humanities field but also have worked in venture capital, travel and tourism, journalism, and commercial book publishing. The results? I continue to do my academic work while reaching huge, diverse audiences by creatively using the very same skills I needed to succeed in academia. And, thanks to the venture capital work, I was a self-made millionaire at 32 (but don't tell my university colleagues!).

2 people liked this. [Like](#)**willismg** 1 week ago

Of course, there's always room at the top... If you're REALLY as good as you think you are, somebody somewhere will throw money at you. At least, that's been my experience...

Part of the problem might be that there is no objective way to determine how good somebody in the humanities actually is. That makes everybody as good, and as bad, as everybody else.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)**trendisnotdestiny** 1 week ago

If I never hear the word the entrepreneur again, it will be too soon. We are not talking about anything other than a shift in risk (only to later be co-opted)....

3 people liked this. [Like](#)**lumbse smith** 1 week ago

Best post. Great job is done by you behind this one. I like all the point which you are discussed over here. The ability which is must be present in entrepreneur student.

[hospitality business management](#)

[Like](#)**cwillse** 1 week ago

There is a term for what you are describing, and it's "neoliberal privatization." Is that really something we want to be celebrating? Entrepreneurialism is just a code word for "figure out yourself how to survive in circumstances of artificial scarcity." In taking that on, we endorse and enable those circumstances. Hidden blessing? For capital maybe. Let's leave privatization to the bureaucrats who are destroying CUNY and other systems of public education, and figure out our own survival strategies that don't glorify competition and precarity.

3 people liked this. [Like](#)

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