



COMMENTARY

How Administrators Can Help Prepare Ph.D.s for Nonfaculty Careers

By *L. Maren Wood* | JANUARY 29, 2017

For the past four years, I've worked as a career coach helping Ph.D.s prepare for nonfaculty job searches. Most come to me after several years on the academic job market. They have never thought about nor planned for a career beyond the professoriate.

I'm excited, then, that some institutions are experimenting with ways to prepare students for a range of career opportunities. As institutions build these programs, I'd ask that they keep two important points about the nonfaculty job market in mind:

1. People find jobs through their networks. Over 70 percent of jobs are never posted. Submitting a résumé to an online job posting, without a contact at that organization, works less than 4 percent of the time.
2. Employers hire based on a combination of skills, knowledge, and abilities. Candidates must clearly articulate in professional documents and in-person interviews how their background can benefit an organization.

Institutions should build programs to address these two points. Here are a few ideas on how that might happen.

Bring alumni back into the institution. Alumni can do more than serve as success stories. Some programs are starting to track career pathways of Ph.D.s to make the case that a doctoral degree can lead to many different careers. More common are career panels where alumni are invited back to campus to talk to current students. Both are great ideas but limited.

Networks are essential to finding career opportunities. Graduate programs, especially in the humanities and social sciences, need to foster alumni networks. Alumni can serve as mentors, providing advice on professional documents and introducing students to professional contacts.



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A simple and relatively inexpensive tool is LinkedIn. Create and maintain a LinkedIn group for your school or department so that students can easily connect with alumni working beyond academe. More costly would be to build a portal or website connecting graduate students to alumni mentors. Such a website would have the double purpose of creating networks between students and alumni, as well as acknowledging the success of Ph.D.s working in all sectors.

Next, hire Ph.D. alumni to teach skills-based professional-development courses, such as project management, facilitation, corporate communication, nonprofit management, and business ethics. While Ph.D.s have transferable skills, they enter

the job market at a disadvantage because they lack the professional knowledge of their peers who have spent the past decade working in industry. Yes, writing a dissertation is a form of project management, but you'd be hard pressed to find a historian who has used the Scrum or Agile methodologies. Adding professional-development courses taught by Ph.D.s who work outside of academe would make students more attractive candidates when applying for nonfaculty positions.

Ideally, these courses would be mandatory.

While there are graduate students who decide that an academic career is not for them, most say their first objective is a faculty career. There is no way to know who will or won't be successful on the academic job market, so all students should be encouraged or required to take professional courses.

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Create opportunities on campus for students to develop new skills. The lack of employment diversity among graduate students while earning their degree is a significant challenge in career diversity after the degree. In the humanities, 41 percent of doctoral students rely on teaching assistantships as their primary source of financial support. In the physical sciences, 45 percent work as research assistants.

As much as possible, institutions need to provide graduate students with opportunities to gain work experience outside the lab and classroom. Students can apply their skills in a variety of creative efforts and expand their network beyond their department.

It's also important for students to learn to apply their knowledge to the benefit of potential employers. This could be a variation of the three-minute thesis challenge, but instead of asking students to tell you about their research and why they think it matters, ask nonprofits, businesses, and state and local government departments to provide examples of projects they are working on. How can your students bring their knowledge, skills, and abilities to help these organizations solve their problems and meet the needs of their clients?

In addition to teaching students important skills, this could lead to potential employment opportunities for students. Most employers don't know what doctoral students are capable of. These types of events can help build bridges between students and employers, as well as institutions and communities.

Don't create new Ph.D. programs for which there are no clear employment opportunities.

With the current dire academic job market, it is shocking that institutions are starting new Ph.D. programs. There are internal pressures that inspire the creation of new programs: tuition dollars and research grants; the need to employ students and postdocs in the lab and in the classroom; the desire of faculty members to train and mentor graduate students; and the goal of enhancing the institution's reputation. Most Ph.D. programs, even the oldest and most prestigious, operate independently of any job market, academic or otherwise. In building new programs, work closely with employers to make sure that the students graduating from your new programs have the knowledge, skills, and abilities that will enable them to find meaningful careers in a range of sectors.

Paying closer attention to economic and employment opportunities doesn't diminish the important intellectual work that goes on in an academic doctoral program. We're living in a creative economy, where critical thinking, problem solving, research and analysis, and creative thinking are valuable and necessary. We need scientists, social scientists, and humanists to help us solve some of the most pressing problems of our age, and we don't need to water down academic degree programs.

By paying close attention to how we can help nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies achieve their goals and missions, we strengthen the case for the value of the liberal arts and sciences to our society and the economy. And if institutions want to continue to attract the best and brightest, they must show that the Ph.D. degree is a gateway to a meaningful career, or the best and brightest will go elsewhere.

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