

Every Ph.D. Needs a Plan B

By Alexandra M. Lord

The résumé runs two tightly packed pages, with extended margins. The small font makes me reach first for my glasses and then, in a moment of irritation, for a magnifying glass, which may say more about my vision than the font.

This is the fourth résumé from a doctoral student that I have been asked to review this month, and I find myself feeling frustrated and concerned. As the creator of Beyond Academe, a Web site that helps historians find nonacademic jobs, I frequently receive e-mail messages from Ph.D. students who are desperately looking for work. In the last few months, as the economy has worsened, I have received more requests than usual.

The converted CV I am looking at now is almost identical to the last one I reviewed. And that, more than anything, has me alarmed. These résumés all make it fairly clear that most graduate programs in the humanities still promote the idea that their students will become professors.

As we all know, the truth is quite different. In history, English, philosophy, and almost every humanities discipline, a significant majority of Ph.D.'s will never obtain tenure-track positions. A student can do everything right — win teaching awards, publish articles, and have a degree from the nation's best graduate program in a particular field — and still fail to obtain an academic position after years of searching.

OK, OK, doctoral students cry, we already made the bad decision to go to graduate school. And, yes, yes, we know the job market is bad, but must you flaunt the impending carnage of our future careers in our faces? After all, there's nothing we can do now to change things.

Actually, there is a great deal you can do now. What few graduate students, and even fewer of their advisers, understand is that you can prepare simultaneously for the academic and the nonacademic job markets while in graduate school.

Traditionally, graduate programs in the humanities have trained their students to be scholars and teachers. Central to that training has been the teaching assistantship — academe's version of the internship. Graduate students learn how to become teachers through assistantships that are ideally done under the guidance of a mentor. While teaching assistantships have now primarily become a cheap way for universities to pay for instruction, that model of graduate education still holds some validity. In fact, the notion that the more teaching experience you have, the better your chances will be in the academic job market, is so pervasive that graduate students often hold six or more teaching assistantships over their graduate careers.

It's not a bad thing to have multiple teaching assistantships, and it's more than understandable, given the fact that many stipends and tuition waivers are tied to teaching. But when that is your sole job experience, it's worrisome, especially when it comes time to look for a job that does not require a demonstrated ability to teach Western civilization or the American novel.

So what can you do to expand your skills? In other words, how can you ensure that your résumé has the two things employers want: education and experience? Graduate schools already

advocate on-the-job training via assistantships. Why not encourage doctoral students to find an internship outside the university, or even inside it, in a nonteaching position? Internships, paid or unpaid, can have extraordinary benefits to your ability to acquire a job either in or outside of academe.

I speak from experience. As an undergraduate, I had an internship at the Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. That experience led directly to my first job as a program assistant in the education department of the Walters Art Museum, a position I held for two years before attending graduate school.

Jump ahead 10 years. I had earned my doctorate and spent four years on the tenure track when I decided to leave academe. I applied for a position as a historian with a federal agency. In many ways, the job was an awkward fit: I was in the field of British medical history, but the job called for a historian of American medicine. Yet when I tentatively pointed that out, my interviewer told me that I was the only candidate who possessed both a Ph.D. and museum experience, even of a limited type.

After I took the job, my interviewer, now my boss, told me that he had been impressed by my application, which had stressed the connections between my training in British history and my knowledge of American history. It was, he told me, pretty clear that my work in the museum, all those years ago, had opened my mind to the mental flexibility that public historians need to demonstrate on a routine basis. A former academic himself, he said that he had been concerned about hiring a historian who could not operate outside of her narrow area of expertise.

I remember thinking at the time, "Wow, who knew?" And the truth is, I was just lucky. My career experience at the two museums predated graduate school. The decisions I made all those years ago were not driven by a conscious desire to beef up my résumé.

Like many students, once I was in graduate school I was single-minded in my pursuit of teaching assistantships, and I accumulated lots of those to prove to future employers that I could teach. I never thought to pursue opportunities outside of teaching. And yet diverse job experiences outside of academe would have enabled me both to make the switch more easily to a nonacademic job and to prove to an academic employer that I could bring something different to its history program. If nothing else, a demonstrated knowledge of the job skills you gain from a history degree would have enabled me to provide better guidance to the undergraduates I advised.

Now, as I review the résumés of doctoral students, I wish more graduate programs would encourage their students to expand their horizons. Won't a graduate student in literature surely bring added value to the classroom when she teaches the ubiquitous freshman-composition course if she has worked as a journalist or done technical writing along with her scholarly writing? Won't an art historian who has worked at an art gallery have a more nuanced understanding of the impact that the art market can have on an artist's career, and won't that more nuanced understanding benefit his research on the 18th-century art market? Won't a historian who works with a small town to preserve its 19th-century school building not only gain a better understanding of how the public uses history but also build skills that will serve her university well when she is asked to do service in her college town?

And of course, all three of those hypothetical faculty members will be able to provide their brightest students with career advice that goes beyond the suggestion that they go to graduate school. In short, faculty members and graduate students who have stepped outside academe in their careers will be better able to address an issue recently raised in a February 24 article in The New York Times, "In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth." Encouraging graduate students to pursue internships can, in other words, benefit academe by demonstrating how humanities programs are relevant and provide real skills. But internships can provide even more benefits to that majority of students who will ultimately leave academe. An internship provides contacts and references that can be crucial in a job search. More important, an internship can assist in acquiring multiple skills that, when seen in conjunction with a doctoral degree, are highly appealing to employers.

Even as I raise those points, I hear the murmurs of dissent. Sure, all of those things are nice, but a graduate student's life is so demanding, comes the lament. You cannot possibly add a internship into the mix. It's just too much!

But how much time does an internship really require? You don't necessarily have to take a semester or a year off. You could arrange a one-day-a-week stint. Add up the time involved in a one-day-a-week internship, completed over a 14-week semester and you come up with ... 14 days. On average, graduate students in the humanities take eight years, or 2,920 days, to complete their degrees. An internship of the type I am proposing will consume less than 1 percent of their time in graduate school. Two internships, which would enable students to understand their nonacademic career options more clearly, would take up less than 2 percent of their time.

As a historian, I'll admit that math isn't my strong suit, but those figures make a great deal of sense to me.

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