

“The Ideal Advisor for Non-Ac/Alt-Ac Paths: A Graduate Student Perspective”

Grace Kessler Overbeke is a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University’s Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama, where she is also affiliated with the Jewish Studies cluster. She is the Crown Center for Jewish Studies fellow, and was formerly a Graduate Teaching fellow for the Searle Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning.

In an effort to understand the most useful advising practices for graduate students who either have already navigated or intend to navigate the alt-ac or non-ac job market, I interviewed alumnae of the Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama at Northwestern (IPTD) who have successfully found positions outside the professoriate. Interviews focused on three questions: a) Can you describe any help that you got from professors/advisors/other that you found particularly useful or enlightening as you approached the alt-ac job market? b) Can you share anecdotal experience about your own time on the alt-ac job market? How (if at all) does it differ from the academic job market? c) What advice you would offer to those on the job market pursuing an alt-ac career? Alumnae emphasized these themes:

1. *Psychosocial Mentoring:* Though advisors may not have navigated job markets outside the professoriate, this does not mean that they are ill-equipped to offer crucial psychosocial mentorship, which involves “respecting many pathways to success.” Students may hesitate to declare their intentions to pursue alt-ac or non-ac paths for fear that their advisors would write less enthusiastic letters of recommendation or withhold support in other ways. **Do not underestimate the importance of affirming advisees’ diverse career paths, in both explicit and implicit ways.**
2. *Bridge-Building:* An advisor cannot be all things. Alumnae spoke of finding instrumental (expertise-oriented) mentorship and career mentorship in departments and programs *throughout* the university. Many times their advisor was the person who pushed them to expand their horizons. **Faculty are equipped to make connections between advisees and the larger university (e.g. career resource center, alumnae, education development centers etc.), resulting in advisees’ advancement.**
3. *Emphasize Skill Sets:* Students benefit from being able to translate the skills they develop in their doctoral program into a non-ac/alt-ac context. If, early in students’ graduate careers, advisors encourage reflection on the transferable skills students hope to gain from their time in graduate school, this helps students to both plan their courses and think about the work they are doing in terms of product and skill set. Additionally, rather than exclusively focusing on content, advisors can **frame courses in terms of tool kits.**

David Porter, at the University of Michigan, devoted a whole course to forging connections between his doctoral students and community organizations, mixing readings with site visits to workplaces like a technical consulting firm of a public radio station.

Likewise, Heather Nathans spoke at ATHE 2018 about Tufts’s new practice of integrating internships into coursework.

“The Ideal Graduate Student Preparation for Diverse Careers: Faculty and Industry Perspectives”

Noe Montez is Associate Professor and Director of the Graduate Program in Theatre at Tufts University, where he is also affiliated with the Consortium for Race and Diaspora. He is co-editor of Theatre Topics.

During the 4th gathering of the Consortium of PhD Programs in Theatre and Performance Studies, the directors of Theatre and Performance Studies PhD programs from across the United States and Canada were joined by Maren Wood of Beyond the Professoriate, Paula Chambers of The Versatile PhD, and Sarah Peterson of ImaginePhD. This generated information worth keeping in mind as one prepares for a career beyond the academy.

1. Data about PhDs in Theatre and Performance Studies

Are there ways that you can develop these skills in your graduate programs if you wish to move into careers that use these skill sets?

The top characteristics of PhDs who find successful careers beyond the academy are oral communication skills, a willingness to network, and extracurricular achievements.

According to research from ImaginePhD, the top job values articulated by PhDs in Theatre and Performance Studies are creativity, impact, intellectual challenge, and location.

When asked to rank their self-assessed skills from a list of nearly fifty characteristics, the highest ranked skills for students in Theatre and Performance Studies PhD programs are extensive knowledge of specific research areas, the ability to work effectively with limited supervision, creativity and innovation, the ability to communicate content to a general audience, and the ability to deliver information in a classroom setting.

How can you find the career trajectories that allow you to utilize these skill sets?

The lowest ranked self-assessed skills for PhD students in Theatre and Performance Studies are negotiation, developing and managing budgets, design skills, quantitative research methods, statistical analysis, and communicating in other languages.

Research on PhDs who successfully transition into careers beyond the academy reveals that many felt as though their experience in comprehensive exams was most applicable to learning a new job: it requires one to learn a new field and be a self-starter.

2. Advice for Beginning the Job Search within the Academy

Find PhDs in non-teaching roles within universities. Most universities are chock-full of them, and they are an untapped resource with a lot of information to offer. Similarly, seek out the career center. Most graduate school career centers note that they see a disproportionate number of students from the humanities. Utilize these centers, and their staff, as a resource.

Volunteer for organizations that you admire, for example by engaging with on-campus life through a graduate student organization or other group. Build experiences outside of the classroom, archives and libraries. This is how you will meet people in other disciplines who may have insight into other career sectors.

3. Think about Positions outside the Academy

As academics, we are not great at explaining in specific and discrete ways the actual work we do and skills we have. A resumé for non-academic employment requires that you account for what actually goes into a specific job; begin by asking yourself what is the thing that will drive you to get up every day and go to this particular job.

A lot of PhDs have to start at the entry level. PhDs often do not apply for such posts, but in career transitions it is important to say yes to offers at the entry level. This is an opportunity to learn the language of a new industry. Remember (and this is true in academia too), that the first job is rarely the last job: PhDs are apt to rise rapidly.

As you start to look for a new career, **ask yourself whether you have skills are you a good fit?** What is your particular value to an organization? For example, having created and executed a multi-year research project are highly transferrable skills of project management.

4. Networking and Informational Interviews

Blindly submitting resúmes is generally useless without networking. Talk to the people in your leisure/hobby groups and to family connections, **conduct informational interviews** with employers and people who hold jobs you would like to better understand, and seek out anyone who might offer you insight into careers beyond the academy. Knowing someone who can give you advice on an application, or who can put in a good word with Human Resources can go a long way towards job placement.

Be mindful that race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other identity markers do shape our networks and our ability to form networks. Those of us who navigate minoritarian positionalities may find that we have to put in extra labor to network successfully.

In an informational interview, mention the skills that you possess and the kinds of labor that interest you, then ask how you can use those skills and interests to get a job resembling your interviewee's. Let the interviewee talk about themselves and their trajectories.

5. Think About Tech and Industry Sectors

Finally, give some thought to careers in the tech sector, where there is an increasing demand for individuals from a humanistic background. **Knowing how to talk with others is a skill that a lot of tech and STEM specialists lack.** The ability to listen to people and to synthesize their concerns and desires are transferrable skills, as is the ability to ask thoughtful questions.

There is so much about the training of Theatre and Performance Studies PhDs that makes a variety of careers great extensions of this preparation. **This is a testament to the field's unique blend of theory, practice, and activism as well as self-directed research and artistic collaboration.**

For more information about academic and alt-academic job markets, see the materials from the convening posted on Howlround.com:
<https://howlround.com/strengthening-job-prospects-within-and-beyond-academy>
and
<https://howlround.com/happenings/4th-symposium-doctoral-programs-theatre-and-performance-studies-tufts-university>