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And thanks to you, the reader, who picked up our book. We hope it helps you imagine a career and a life outside academia. Actually, we just hope that it helps.
Introduction

JOSEPH FRUSCIONE AND KELLY J. BAKER

Not every PhD becomes a professor. Some never wanted to be one in the first place. Some tried and struck out on the market. Others thought they wanted to be a professor and then found a more fulfilling path. We don’t know how many PhDs thought being a tenure-track professor was the only acceptable job, but many of us believed this during and after graduate school. Call it the Tenure Track or Bust mind-set. A job with tenure or nothing at all awaited us, or so we thought. This mind-set has affected many current and former PhD students, leading some of us to think that not getting a tenure-track job made us professional, and personal, failures.

What we didn’t know at the time was that the odds were stacked against us before we took our first course. Academic hiring practices have changed dramatically since the mid-1970s. Adjunct and other part-time positions used to be largely reserved for full-time professionals moonlighting as professors to share their expertise. Now, such positions are essentially required for many ABDs and PhDs to gain teaching experience, but these positions are not necessarily steps forward on the path to a tenured position. Contingency is the new normal in higher education.

As of 2011, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) documented that 70 percent of academic faculty were non-tenure-track (NTT).1 Using data from 2009, the Coalition of

the Academic Workforce (CAW) claims 75 percent.\(^2\) For the last forty years, tenured positions have declined while contingent positions have increased. PrecariCorps, a nonprofit foundation aiding adjuncts, adapted the AAUP data into a chart that showed part-time NTT faculty increased 286 percent and full-time NTT faculty increased 259 percent since 1975. Full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty increased by a slight 23 percent, and full-time executive positions increased by 141 percent. This is the market that PhDs of the 1990s and early 2000s faced.

The 263-point difference between tenure-track and part-time faculty job growth is unconscionable. It’s also not accidental, given the massive uptick in senior administrative positions—and salaries—in the modern university. Due to various systemic failures in academia and graduate education, many PhD students from the 1990s through the 2000s simply weren’t prepared for

nonacademic careers. (Some were barely prepared for academic careers, as many of our writers show.)

Yet contingent work didn’t affect all academics equally. Women and people of color are more likely to end up off the tenure track and in contingent work. Marisa Allison, a researcher for New Faculty Majority Foundation, uncovered a problematic trend: the rise in contingent labor happened alongside the rise of women in doctoral-degree programs.3 And, writing for Slate, Tressie McMillan Cottom, an assistant professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University, writes that African American academics are 50 percent more likely to not land a tenure-track job. While Cottom noted the growing concerns in higher ed about “adjunctification,” she documented that Black faculty and students have been protesting the “ghetto-fication of Black scholars in adjunct roles” since at least the 1960s.4 Hand in hand with such skewed hiring practices is academia’s bias toward young, “fresh” PhDs. Our contributor L. Maren Wood has done some excellent, much-needed research on who gets tenure-track jobs.5 Despite what some humanities and social sciences PhDs might think—and hope for—their age and experience work against them on the job market. As Wood’s data have shown, the farther a PhD is from their degree, the less hirable they seem. The majority of recent tenure-track hires in humanities and social sciences have either gone to ABDs or PhDs within two years of their degree. The hiring window closes dramatically after that. Long-time adjuncts are at a disadvantage. Many of us simply aged out of the system.

When starting our professional journeys in academia, we wanted all those innovative courses, articles, conference presentations, and valuable service work to parlay themselves into tenure-track jobs. Of course, we thought, all this great work won’t go unnoticed—or unrewarded. All these CV lines will add up to a full-time position. I’ll keep at it. All those CV lines added up to a lot of things: student loan debt, contingent positions, unpayable credit card bills, frustration, heartache, and feelings of failure. What’s wrong


with me? we asked ourselves. I’m doing everything right; I’m following my advisers’ advice.

Then we started thinking about things differently: Hopping from lecturership to visiting professorship isn’t a career; it’s professional limbo. Maybe academia doesn’t deserve me. What else is out there for me? What else can I do?

Many PhDs have left teaching—or academia altogether—for different work: some in alternative-academic (alt-ac) careers and others outside academia entirely. Our seventeen contributors essentially trained themselves in their new fields because their graduate programs provided little (if any) career guidance for anything except being a scholar. We chose our writers because of their credentials, supportive attitudes, and career variety:

- Rusul Alrubail: education writer and speaker
- Abby Bajuniemi: user experience researcher and designer
- Chris Baker: director of engineering at a startup
- Kelly J. Baker: freelance writer and editor of *Women in Higher Education*
- Lee Skallerup Bessette: instructional technology specialist
- Jessica Carilli: federal scientist
- Melissa Dalgleish: career, professional development, and grants specialist
- Joseph P. Fisher: lecturer and assistant director of Disability Support Services
- Brian Flota: academic librarian
- Joseph Fruscione: editor, proofreader, and writing consultant
- Cathy Hannabach: editor and consultant for interdisciplinary academics
- Elizabeth Keenan: real estate agent
- Rachel Leventhal-Weiner: data specialist and policy analyst
- Lisa Munro: academic editor and writing coach
- Rachel Neff: digital strategist and freelance writer, editor, and indexer
- Katie Rose Guest Pryal: freelance writer, editor, and lawyer
- L. Maren Wood: career coach and researcher

Our contributors document how to develop a career from a diversity of vantage points. Most are PhDs who show how transferable our skills can be. That is not necessarily the message that’s usually provided to PhD students and other junior academics, who are typically siloed into one field or subfield. We can have trouble seeing past our specific knowledge to
the more general skills we gained from teaching and research. Some also followed the *Do what you love* and *Teaching is a calling, so don’t worry about money* platitudes often espoused by those in privileged positions. Many of us had to either learn from our mistakes or pay consultants to show us how to be an effective academic, or alternative-academic, jobseeker. Those of us who left academia had to learn about our new career paths on the fly because we were rarely, if ever, shown any other way.

*Succeeding Outside the Academy* hopes to change this.

We’ve asked readers like you who’ve been through a PhD program to imagine if, in addition to having guest scholars lecture about their research, you also had guest speakers explain, discuss, and hold a workshop to help train you for different careers. Our guest lecturers are not professors talking to the next generation of scholars or telling them to hang in there and keep applying for professorships. They’re writers, editors, or translators. Maybe they’re programmers or designers. Perhaps they freelance while working or parenting full-time. Or they’ve carved out their own career niche. Instead of talking about a recent book they’ve written or some research topic, they’ll discuss their field and show you concrete ways to start finding a different kind of job in a market with considerably greater growth potential.

It’s a simple concept—offering PhDs diverse job training—yet it’s not as common as we’d like to see. Our contributors tell their stories and then offer practical, relatable, and repeatable advice for transitioning into alt-ac positions. Each contributor writes about

- how they’ve gotten to where they are
- what they would have liked to hear (or learn) when finishing grad school and entering the academic market
- what they’ve learned from their struggles
- the specific steps readers can start taking.

This approach allows our contributors to both share their experiences of what they had to learn on their own and give practical advice to help you start your own alt-ac career journey. They address several issues: how they got started; how they draw on academic training while doing the work each day; how they reworked their approaches to writing, deadlines, and collaboration; and how they distilled useful, transferable skills from the specific knowledge they gained in academia. They also offer the kind of information and advice that many tenured faculty aren’t able to give. They’re up-front about the struggles and successes they’ve encountered. Honesty,
given the current state of academia, is *Succeeding Outside the Academy*’s most important objective.

If you have (or are about to have) a PhD and want to know what career options you have besides being a professor, then you’re holding the right book. If you work in the academy advising graduate students, then you’re holding the right book. If you’re a longtime adjunct realizing you’ll only ever be a longtime adjunct, then you’re holding the right book. *Succeeding Outside the Academy* offers options beyond the academic positions you’ve trained for and shows how contributors built the careers, and lives, they now have. Our writers use clear, accessible, and concrete language to model the kinds of writing done in alt-ac or nonacademic fields. In giving you necessary preparation for different kinds of careers, they’ll address the types of work you have to do. In essence, our writers describe their journeys from academia to other employment—and then provide a map of the tasks along the way so you can follow a similar path, such as

- assessing their skills
- marketing themselves and networking
- learning how to be entrepreneurs
- handling interviews and salary negotiations
- learning to write specific documents (e.g., cover letters, résumés, pitches, professional bios, cold-call emails, reports, and freelancing policies)
- drawing on academic training while doing the work each day.

Our writers discuss what they had to learn about the alt-ac job market on their own, and then they’ll help you start learning the same things. They’ll also share their struggles and failures, since knowing what didn’t work can be just as instructive as what did.

At least four contributors address academia’s two-body problem, which both points to entrenched sexism in higher education and shows how complicated the academic job search can be for partnered women. It’s hard not to notice that most of our contributors, thirteen out of seventeen, are women, which suggests that gender still deeply matters in who succeeds in academia and who doesn’t. It’s also important to note what this collection suggests about race and academic careers. Most of our contributors are white, and so are most of the faculty at institutions nationwide. As of 2015, 77 percent of full-time faculty at colleges and universities were white: 42 percent were white men, and 35 percent were white women. The other demographics suggest deep racial imbalances in hiring and promotion. The
rest of full-time faculty included 6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander men, 4 percent Asian/Pacific Islander women, 3 percent Black women, 3 percent Black men, 2 percent Hispanic women, 2 percent Hispanic men, and up to 1 percent American Indian women and men. Structural racism is a problem that the modern university has yet to solve.

Ultimately, our writers are the experts. They’ve written as if they’re running a workshop for grad students and fresh postdocs. Given this chance, they’ll tell you about their alt-ac job searches and share what they would have wanted to learn while in their PhD programs. *Succeeding Outside the Academy* addresses how, as our colleague M. G. Gainer described it when we started this book, alt- and post-acs are not failures but adapters. This journey is about adapting to different fields, needs, and challenges. Since changing careers is not always a seamless transition, we’re not simply offering success stories but showing you the work you have to do—and that it’s not easy. Academia, as many know, is not necessarily conducive to building a life. This book emphasizes how readers can build lives (not just careers) and emphasize other priorities (not just academic goals). We’ve all had to adapt and continue adapting.

*Succeeding Outside the Academy* is a book for anyone who got limited guidance on careers outside academia. In graduating scores of students unprepared for anything except a tenure-track job, PhD programs have created the stigma of being a “failed” academic who leaves higher ed. Many new and would-be alt-acs have no idea how to navigate a new job search, network, and learn industry expectations. Some also equate not getting a tenure-track job with personal failure.

We want to change this. Our writers show you examples of another life and career, as well as how to get them. In a word, we’re offering hope. Hope that your knowledge and training are broadly useful. Hope that a rich, supportive community awaits you. Hope that, while academia punishes your experience, other fields and industries reward it. And hope that you can build a better, more fulfilling life after leaving academia.

PART I

Reconsidering Academic Careers and Success
Back in 2011, when I decided that I was never going to go on the tenure-track job market, the bountiful career support for PhDs that can be found at the touch of a smartphone did not exist. I found myself scouring the web (between despairing sobs) in search of shreds of hope and help, as there was none to be found in my graduate department or at my university (or so I thought).

Not knowing what I could do with my PhD was anxiety-inducing and painful. Not only was I facing the loss of my identity as an academic, but it also didn’t feel like there was anything better—or anything at all—waiting for me on the other side.

I found what information on graduate career development I could, and I went on with my usual PhD pursuits—teaching, research, writing—although with considerably more anxiety, and less motivation, than before. Then the Faculty of Graduate Studies at my university went looking to buy out someone’s teaching assistantship so that person could write a white paper on graduate professional and career development. Still hedging my bets on the academic job market, I was nervous about giving up a year of teaching. I applied anyway and offered up what I knew in an interview. I got the job and then spent a year researching what was available at my university, and across North America, to help PhDs move into what we now call alt-ac (alternative-academic, or non-faculty, or post-ac, or just plain old) careers.

At the end of the year, I presented my white paper to the more than fifty graduate department chairs at my university with the aim of getting buy-in for creating an institution-wide professional and career development program. I recommended, as a start, that
the university create a core professional and career development program open to all graduate students and a task force of students, faculty, and staff dedicated to coming up with ways to better support the majority of graduate students who would not become faculty.

Their response? “Our students don’t need a graduate professional development program. They don’t need career support. They’re all going to become professors.”

Sigh.

I went back to my research and writing, but with a much better grasp of what was actually available on campus for graduate job seekers—far more than I had thought in my despairing days—and a much better idea of what I wanted my career to look like. Through my white paper research, I’d found some models of what an amazing post-PhD career could look like: an English major who did user experience design for Google, a sociologist who had started his own market research firm, a biochemist who helped fund tech startup companies, and so on. I’d also found tools and resources—self-assessments in the books So What Are You Going to Do with That? and Strengthsfinder 2.0, the myIDP tool, stories about the paths others had taken told in the forums on Versatile PhD—that were helping me figure out what I was good at doing, what I liked doing, and the kinds of careers that contained lots of both.

On Facebook one day shortly after that project ended, a friend shared a posting for a role in the faculty I had just left, managing graduate research funding and coordinating the few professional development workshops the Faculty of Graduate Studies then offered. My self-assessments had taught me that I valued supporting lots of research more than focusing only on my own, that I was great at coordinating activities and people, and that I would do best in jobs where I would have opportunities to both write and teach. This job offered all of that.

But the posting was closing the next day. And I didn’t have a résumé because I hadn’t been planning to start job hunting for at least another year. In a mad scramble, I put together an application. Over the next few weeks, I interviewed and then was offered the job.

(I should pause here for a moment. I hate to disappoint you, but my pathway into a nonfaculty career isn’t at all typical—we don’t have great research on this, but what we do have suggests that it takes on average about five years to settle into a post-PhD career. Promise me you won’t compare your career trajectory with mine and feel like you’re doing it wrong!)
A year later, I launched the university-wide graduate and postdoctoral professional skills program I had started to build by writing that first white paper, a program that continues to serve more than 6,500 students and postdocs.

I’ve since moved on to run the professional and career development program at a medical research institute affiliated with the University of Toronto, the largest university in Canada. I know a lot more about science, and about the specific challenges that STEM students face, than I did before. I’ve also had half a decade to watch my students and fellows move into—and flourish in—all kinds of careers: policy analysis, communications, pharmaceutical research, management consulting, project management, research administration, event planning, finance, human resources, journalism, publishing, and just about anything else you can think of.

A significant part of my job is helping students and fellows like you—along with the graduate-trained job seekers who read my writing online or work with me on their job applications—understand the academic and nonacademic job markets, learn how to be strategic about their professional and career development, and give themselves the best options and odds for finding a career that rewards them personally and financially.

Basically, I do for them what I wish someone had done for me during my own PhD.

This is advice that you might also find useful, whatever stage of graduate or post-PhD life you’re in. So, I’m going to share with you the ten key things I wish I had known when I decided not to become a professor, the ten key things—from learning what being a professor is really like to making room for serendipity—that all graduate students should do during their degrees to prepare themselves for awesome post-PhD lives. It’s the advice I wish I’d gotten before embarking on my own PhD, despite having muddled my way to a great career anyway.

1. Understand Why You’re Doing a PhD and Choose Your Graduate Program Wisely

Why are you doing a PhD? And how might that “why” influence where you choose to do it?

I’ll be blunt: if you’re going to graduate school because you want to become a professor, make sure that you only accept admission to an elite
University (on full funding), as your chances of getting a tenure-track role if you study anywhere else are vanishingly small.¹

But if you’re doing a PhD for another reason—you want to spend five to eight years exploring a topic you find fascinating, you’re treating your PhD like a limited-term job that doesn’t pay terribly well, you’re interested in a nonfaculty career in which PhDs are valued—you’ve got some other choices to make.

One of them is whether or not you should do a PhD at all—I’d say *don’t* unless most of the above is true. But if those things are true, and you’re really committed to doing a PhD, here are some questions you should ask of graduate programs before you accept an offer of admission, and some rules I’d advise all graduate students to follow:

- Is the program fully funded? (Don’t go into debt for a PhD.)
- Does the program recognize and celebrate graduates who have moved into nonfaculty jobs? (Don’t go somewhere you’ll be considered a second-class citizen.)
- Will you have a variety of opportunities to develop skills that will be useful outside the academy? (Don’t limit your learning to the classroom.)
- Is your prospective supervisor supportive of a range of career goals? (Don’t hide what you want.)
- Will there be other students in your cohort who are also aiming at (or at least open to) a career in something other than the professoriate? (Don’t go it alone.)
- Is this the best place to learn what you want to about your dissertation topic, even if it’s not the best place to become a professor? (Don’t settle.)
- Is this somewhere you (your partner? your kids?) want to live for the next five to eight years? (Don’t forget about the rest of your life.)

If you want to keep your career options open after a PhD and pursue both academic and nonacademic jobs, you’re going to be looking for an elite program that supports a variety of career goals. They do exist! And it’s possible to shift the culture of a less open program once you get there. But if you’re not interested in the professoriate, you have a

whole world of options when choosing where to spend the next years of your career.

2. Understand the Reality of What Comes after Grad School

Research shows that more than 80 percent of graduate students start their PhDs expecting to become tenure-track professors.²

Guess what?

Nowhere near 80 percent of PhDs actually end up in tenure-track jobs. Most estimates suggest that fewer than 50 percent of PhDs end up in any kind of academic job (that includes contract teaching) and only 15–25 percent ever secure tenure-track positions.³ That is, sadly, the reality. I very much hope that this doesn’t come as a shock and that the graduate programs you applied to, and the one to which you accepted an offer of admission, shared its alumni placement information with you at an early stage.

Even if you chose a graduate program because it was going to help you become something other than a professor, it’s really easy to forget what you came for. The culture of many graduate departments is such that regardless of what people want when they start the PhD, they end up absorbing—often unconsciously—the idea that they’re working toward (and capable of) becoming one thing and one thing only: a tenured professor. That wasn’t what I was aiming for when I started—I just wanted to hang out and


learn things for a few years—but I totally absorbed the message that that was what I should want.

Don’t do what I did.

You need to prepare for, and embrace, the multitude of possibilities open to you after you complete your degree. And you need to remember that being an academic is just a job, and that there are tons of interesting, fulfilling jobs doing an infinite number of things. Otherwise, you may end up disillusioned and disappointed when you don’t get the thing you didn’t even want in the first place. You may also end up making decisions—to take low-paid, low-security work as a way to stay in the academy, for example—that aren’t in your best interest in the long term.

3. Think about What You Really Want to Do

If you want to become a professor, answer a question for me: When you made the decision to go to graduate school, how much did you really know about the life of a professor? How much about it do you really know now?

That life is almost never what people think it is. And their decision to pursue that career is based on incomplete information.

Parts of the academic life match up closely with the starry-eyed dream I had as a young graduate student—engaged students, exciting research discoveries, time to read and write—but others definitely don’t. I had to make the effort to figure out what those parts were, what the reality of being a professor is actually like. Meetings are endless and often frustrating. Grading is a slog. The pressure to publish, win grants, and get stellar teaching evaluations can be debilitating. Tenure denials happen. Students are disengaged. Service takes up far more time than people realize. Academic and administrative priorities clash. There’s never enough time for research and reflection. Departmental and university politics can be fierce. Grants can run out and jobs disappear along with them.

Is that really what you want? Or just what you think you want?

Regardless of what you want to do after your PhD, you should be using your degree to figure out what you really love about academia and thinking about jobs that will let you do those things most of the time. The perfect job is one in which you get to do the things you’re good at most of the time for reasons you can get behind and for a salary that makes you feel secure.

That might be an academic job. Or it might not.

The other important part of this process is to talk to people you know