Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job

UCLA Masters and Ph.D. Careers Conference

Dr. Karen Kelsky
of The Professor Is In
A Word of Self-Introduction

I was in the academy (UO, UIUC)
Got tenure; became Department Head
Left the academy in 2009
Started a small jewelry business in 2009
In 2010 I started The Professor Is In (theprofessorisin.com)
What I do for a living: I work directly with clients (almost 4000 so far) on academic documents—cover letters, CVs, teaching statements, postdoc applications, job talks, book proposals, grants, etc.; also Interview Preparation and Offer Negotiation Help; I lead online webinars; I write a weekly advice column for Chronicle Vitae, I speak on campuses; I run a post-academic wing with a team of post-ac advisors, and I have written a book, and am at work on another.
Core Requirement of Turning Your Ph.D. Into Job

Job-focused state of mind

Just say no to denial

Ignore advisors who peddle false hope

Start job prep from day one: both ac and non-ac
Adjunctification and You

Tenure track faculty are a minority on most campuses; adjuncts and other NTT comprise 75% of university instructors. (Learn more at New Faculty Majority)

“Vocation” and “calling” language is dangerous. In brutal conditions you must calculate ROI in all things.

See my Ph.D. Debt Survey.

Idealism → Pragmatism
How To Think Like a Search Committee

Shrinking departments means more service and teaching burden on remaining faculty.

Desperate job market means each job gets 200-900 applications.

Bottom Line: Search Committee members are stressed, exhausted, and distracted.
How To Not Get Rejected

BEFORE the market, while still in graduate school:

• Get grants—preferably national
• Be active in high prestige conferences
• Publish sole/first author in high status refereed journals
• Cultivate well-known recommenders
• Make your materials/presentation flawless
Graduate School As a Means To a Job

Write your dissertation with an eye to the publications that it will become. Plan out which chapters you can publish immediately. At least one refereed journal article while you are still A.B.D. is now required for shortlisting.

Remember that the best dissertation is a finished dissertation.

Strategize publications! Publications that date from before you accept your tenure-track job usually do not count toward tenure.

If you are in a book field, have a book plan. Presses won’t publish a book more than half published in article form. In a five-chapter dissertation, publish no more than two chapters as refereed journal articles.
Graduate School As a Means To a Job

Be the sole instructor of at least one course but not more than about three (if you can help it). After about three, the benefit of additional teaching experience diminishes.

In the year before you go on the job market, organize and propose a high-profile panel for your national conference that is made up of young, up-and-coming assistant professors. Ask a well-known scholar to serve as discussant.

Cultivate a letter writer who is not from your Ph.D.-granting institution. Having all your recommendation letters come from your own committee or department is the sign of a relatively immature candidate.

Apply for all grants you can, especially national ones; in sciences have a 5-year grant plan.
The Qualities of Successful Candidates

• Intensive productivity, looking forward not back

• Total professionalization

• Autonomy and self-respect

• Effective self-promotion/entrepreneurialism

• Affable collegiality

Note: These qualities apply equally to ABD candidates
Move From Peon to Peer

• You have spent 5-10 years as a graduate student, which means---subordinate, supplicant, peon, inferior

• Suddenly, on the job market, you must comport yourself like a confident authority, expert in your field, and professional scholar.

• You must jettison every graduate student mannerism and habit.
Behave Like a Professional

• Appropriate dress and grooming
• Steady, level eye contact and firm handshake
• Professorial, fully adult speech patterns
• Prepared, concise answers to all major questions re teaching and research
• Strong but brief statement of your contribution to your field(s)
• Self-presentation as peer, not peon.
The Skepticism Principle

You think you will sell yourself on your “passion”

Passion (on the job market) is trite, hackneyed, and ineffective.

Academics—whether in Classics or Chemistry – are skeptical. They expect, and respond to, reliable evidence and careful argumentation.

The same principle applies in job docs and interviews as applies in scholarly work, seminars and conferences.
Post-Ac Transition is Brutally Hard

Academia is more than a job; it’s a way of life
Academia is also an identity
Academia is also a **cult-like environment**

The value judgments are rigid and unyielding

Leaving the cult means cutting deep roots and community
The Non-Academic Job Search

From early days in graduate school:

• Nurture relationships with non-academic mentors in your field
• Find internships or volunteer opportunities
• Conduct informational interviews
• Set aside time for additional training (Udemy, MOOCs, local courses-Chamber of Commerce, library, Youtube)
• Constantly ask: what real-life questions do my experience and skills speak to?
Identity → Skills

Employers are not (usually) looking for:

- Philosopher
- Physicist
- Academic
- Medieval Italian Literature Specialist
- Expert in abjection and the body in the works of Basquiat

Don’t overinvest in a singular academic identity
Why do academics feel we have no skills?*

We’re identified by our narrow knowledge (expertise) rather than our broad competencies
Our skills are obscured by CV categories
We spend all our time with people who have similar skills
Feedback focuses on critique, not affirmation
Surrounded by know-it-alls.

Margy Horton, editor, founder ScholarShape; in Targeting Your Skills for a Post-Ac Career (TPII webinar); image from Ph.D. Comics
Tallying Your Skills

**Skills** Differentiator (statistics, languages, writing, public speaking, qualitative data analysis, etc.)

**Knowledge** Differentiator (area of expertise, discipline, contextual knowledge)

**Achievement** Differentiator (ran a program, managed a lab, got a grant, wrote a book)

Point: Stop taking achievements for granted.
Finding Your Skills

Mine Research, Teaching, Service, Prior Life Experiences, Hobbies, Interests, Obsessions

Quantify!

Research: How many pages can you read per day? How many sources did you consult? How much money did you raise? How many pages do you write per week?

Teaching: How many students did you teach? How many courses did you manage at once? How many activities did you develop per course? How many student outcomes can you report?

Service: How many committees did you serve on/lead? How much budget did you manage? How did you navigate bureaucracy?

Other: How many novels? How many yoga classes? What personal attributes?
Re-Interpret Where Necessary

Flaws can be reinterpreted as strengths

Example:

Resistant to rigid external structure $\rightarrow$ self-motivated and adaptable

*Margy Horton, “Targeting Your Skills for a Post-Ac Career.” (TPII Webinar)*
Translating Your Skills*

Ph.D.s don’t always have the best reputation.

Applications and interviews must show:

• **Ability to work with others**: show you are collaborative and likeable

• **Communication skills**: show you have communicated with many types of people in accessible language

• **Intellectual ability**: Not the grad school kind! Demonstrate problem-solving, data analysis, etc.

• **Adaptability and perseverance**: show you overcome adversity; troubleshoot problems; take different viewpoints

*Maggie Gover, Director of Graduate Professional Development, UC Riverside*
“The DIY Career”*

“Good jobs” are going extinct. Consider the DIY/Entrepreneur route.

Think of your interests/hobbies/obsessions that make time disappear. Reach back into past. What work have you done that can be refashioned and applied to other fields? Don’t censor.

What real-life problems do these skills solve? 

Can you monetize these skills?

Manage risk by starting small: a side gig during evenings and weekends.

*Josh Boldt, Chronicle Vitae
From Identity to Skills: My Case

Skills (partial list):
Japanese language Writing
Japanese cultural expertise Editing
Analysis Public speaking
Ethnography Social media

But Also Hobbies: Japanese paper crafting

And Weird Obsessions: The job market and professionalization
My Jewelry Business
Trust Your Gut

My jewelry business didn’t make much money. But….It freed my mind from the academic cult. It gave me great joy. It taught me:

• How to build a website
• How to run Paypal
• How to set rates and deal with money
• How to market and advertise
• How to think like an entrepreneur
Post-Ac is Multi-Directional

It is not linear like the academy; you can move in various directions simultaneously

Real-World Problem: The jobs crisis in academia
Another Skill (Obsession since my grad school days): Graduate student professionalization and the job search
Linkage: Business offering job market help
Acquired Skill: Running an online business
What’s Stopping You?

Boldt: What is keeping you from breaking out on your own? Fear? Procrastination? Time?

Karen: Academics are risk-averse and tied to institutional validation; validate yourself.

"If you can only conceive of yourself as a professor, then you have condemned your labor to the mercy and whims of others" (Nate Kreuter, Inside Higher Ed)

Beware shame--your own and others’ shaming based on the rigid value judgments of the academy
“When You Go on the Non-Academic Job Market”

But, it doesn’t have to be this way…
An Escapee Speaks

I was eventually offered a position editing search-engine optimized (SEO) content for professionals and small businesses. It paid almost 30% more than I had been making. I’d always thought of myself as a writer at heart, so I leapt at the chance. Now that I’m in the non-academic world, I find it interesting that I was intimidated by it for so long.

Having spent years cultivating an inferiority complex, I’m now surrounded by people who find my academic credential rare and impressive. My skill set is considered unique and valuable -- and when I say valuable, I mean there’s an appropriate dollar amount associated with it!

Honey Smith (pseud), Rhet/Comp Ph.D., writer for Get Rich Slowly blog.
My Book


Pre-Purchase the book, and I'll enter you into a drawing for free TPII job/grant application services. Just email me the proof-of purchase at gettenure@gmail.com.
Thank You!

And best of luck in your job search....