

# Career Opportunities

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**T**HE PARADIGMATIC ACADEMIC CAREER seems so straightforward: get the degree, get a job, get promoted through the ranks. Actual careers seldom follow the model; in particular, the move from graduate school to a permanent position rarely happens without interim steps, if at all. But if that job appears, adapting to it (and the paycheck) is not hard. Certain obvious differences exist between graduate school and tenure-stream work, but none is unusually burdensome. Teaching a full course load is time-consuming, but the shock soon dissipates. The schedule lends structure to weeks and terms, a not unwelcome change from the relatively unstructured and solitary days of thesis writing. Committee work is sometimes onerous, but such obligations are not always unpleasant, nor are they unfamiliar to those who have performed university service at earlier stages of their careers. My own recent entry into the profession—I've been teaching full-time for three years—has been relatively uncomplicated. But one thorny issue, which places the transition from graduate school to the workplace in the broader context of the academic job market, has been consistently taxing: dealing with students who want to become academics themselves.

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I find the material elements of the job easier to manage than the less tangible aspects of the shift from cloistered student to professor with a public role. I don't mean that the job confers celebrity (*if only!*) but, rather, that faculty members represent to students the profession and the institution. New professors find themselves sudden authorities and gatekeepers, embedded in a system that, when it comes to graduate school, is evidently failing. To put it bluntly, the basic requirements of teaching—to generate excitement about the humanities, to make literary studies seem vital and intellectual life attractive—conflict with the need to counsel students about job prospects for those with graduate degrees in English, especially the PHD. The details of the employment crisis in the humanities don't need to be rehashed.<sup>1</sup> It is a truth universally acknowledged, after all, that the profession is scarcely in want of more supremely qualified graduates of excellent doctoral programs who cannot find satisfactory work. And everyone agrees that getting a job requires good fortune—although it is a fiction widely entertained that those who do not secure permanent jobs are somehow less suitable than those who do. The infamous articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* denouncing graduate school as a cult and the life of the mind as a “big lie” have said all that can be said from the pessimist's perspective.<sup>2</sup> But our collective hand-wringings are unknown to each new cohort of students who want to pursue a higher degree: that an employment crisis exists must be explained anew to successive waves of students. In my experience, virtually all graduate students arrive unaware of hiring trends and the differences among types of academic appointment. The others typically fail to grasp the seriousness of the situation. Nor should we expect otherwise—students are justly excited by their recent achievements of convocation and matriculation. Moreover, it seems duplicitous to temper students' enthusiasm immediately: *Welcome to grad school! Too bad you came.*

How then to encourage students without perpetuating false expectations? And how to treat students candidly while meeting departmental needs, particularly when programs aspire to attract top candidates and therefore cannot advise students impartially? Considerable capital, figu-

1 “Crisis” is the common term, but the situation is more accurately the normal, lamentable state of affairs; crises have resolutions, good or bad, while chronic conditions might not. Although the job market has been dismal for three decades, the MLA deemed the 2009–10 season the worst ever.

2 See Thomas Benton's three articles. The profusion of online responses to them illustrates the anxiety and hostility that accompany discussions of the employment crisis.

rative and actual, is at stake in sending students to master's and doctoral programs; departments and individual professors profit from the prestige. Graduate students early in their studies can deflect anxiety about future employment into a gallows humour that fosters camaraderie; into blind faith—many students have only ever known academic success, so ultimate failure, or only partly satisfactory outcomes, can hardly be imagined; or into hard work on research and teaching, the ostensible keys to the lock of employment. But those of us with recent experience of searching for work know that options may well not materialize. It becomes apparent, on the job market, that publications and awards do not guarantee success. And the consequences of a failed search come into view, perhaps for the first time; it's easy not to worry about salaries, pensions, savings, and benefits as a junior graduate student, when genteel poverty is de rigueur. (This is not to say that some students do not encounter genuine financial distress, nor that grad school is universally accessible. But the culture of graduate school encourages, for those who can afford it, a certain blitheness.) New faculty members, because their graduate school experience is recent and because they often seem approachable, attract many students seeking advice. Yet cultivating collegial relationships with students while warning them away from the very profession one represents is at best to send mixed messages. The teacher's obligation is to make literary studies exciting, but by demonstrating passionate commitment to the discipline, we sustain false expectations about university teaching as a viable career. And there you stand, furthermore, living proof that the effort and gamble can pay off. Who are you to discourage when you yourself would have ignored dissuasion? Alice Munro's Miss Hattie hovers over me when I have "the talk" with students: *Who do you think you are?*

One ameliorative measure involves our being less hermetic in our approaches to intellectual life. By indicating that humanistic activity can take place outside the academy, and by recognizing its value, we might expand students' understandings of what counts as important and enjoyable work. I know that many related professions—such as publishing and journalism—are also in dire straits or have credentialing processes, but demonstrating a broad curiosity about the world and the connections between English studies and the wider culture can't possibly hurt our students. This suggestion may seem self-evident, but it is also true that students commonly acquire the impression that we only value academic work. We equally need to remain diligent in reducing the risk of grad school—by advising students that incurring debt must be avoided and that timely completion is essential; by carefully guiding students' professional-

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ization, so that time is not wasted on insubstantial activities; and by funding students generously. But even such modest recommendations bedevil the advice-giver. Some students will find it impossible to finish quickly without incurring debt. What counts as meaningful academic activity is open to debate, despite general agreement that articles, for instance, are worth more than reviews. And of course such counsel ensures nothing. I don't pretend to have solutions to endemic problems. What I hope to have suggested is that professional transitions involve negotiating competing loyalties. The best advice I can offer new faculty members is to make these negotiations a subject of conversation. A more widespread sense of urgency can only be salutary and is essential for change.

## Works Cited

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