

Toward a Trackless Future: Moving beyond “Alt-Ac” and “Post-Ac”

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Doctoral students, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, have long been groomed for tenure-track faculty careers, whether or not there are enough such positions available for all who go into the job market. Over the last five years, the chatter about alternative career paths for PhDs has grown into a full-scale conversation. Although the pursuit of these different career tracks is not new, two terms—*alt-ac* (referring to non-tenure-track careers in academia) and *post-ac* (referring to careers outside of higher education altogether)—have recently come into widespread use to describe the phenomenon.¹ While the assumption persists that the tenure-track is the gold standard for employment, doctoral students are increasingly aware of the options available to PhDs. Moreover, they are becoming aware of this multiple-choice future at an ever-earlier stage in their graduate programs. Some conversations about alternative careers continue to be centered on the vague idea of a “think tank” or the tenuous connection of research skills to private sector jobs, but a more focused discussion with concrete options has emerged.²

Persistent obstacles make it difficult, if not impossible, to have a conversation about alternative career paths for PhD holders, including “the conservatism of graduate education, the stricken job market, graduate student funding (and with it, the deplorable use

1 The term *alt-ac* was coined by Jason Rhody, of the National Endowment for the Humanities’ Office of Digital Humanities, in 2009 (Nowvskie 2014). According to English professor Marc Bousquet (2003), the number of doctorates earned has consistently exceeded the number of available jobs in his field since 1968.

2 Because many of the conversations about alternative paths take place in the blogosphere, this essay heavily cites blog posts and other online content. Topics often included in these discussions are: taking stock of the skills acquired in humanities training, such as writing and research; lists of general resources available to graduate students; or rudimentary ideas for exploring private sector options, such as joining LinkedIn. See, for example, Bethman and Longstreet 2013, Sanders 2014, and Castro 2014.

of contingent labor in the American university), the increasing time to degree, and the role of collaboration in our individualistic graduate school culture” (Cassuto and Jay 2015, 81). Graduate curricula, especially in the humanities, are not well aligned with career options other than the tenure track.³ Although, as Marc Bousquet asserts, there are actually plenty of jobs for all of the doctoral candidates currently ready to join the job market, more and more of that work is being shunted into low-paying teaching assistantships, lectureships, visiting professorships, laboratory staff roles, and other contract positions (see Bousquet 2002; see also Bousquet in Gee et al. 2010). Colleges and universities have come to depend upon this contingent labor, and because the pool of laborers is plentiful, these institutions have little incentive to change.

Despite increasing awareness of the serious structural challenges within the academy, very little has been done to change the situation; indeed, since the 2008 recession, the problems have accelerated with more and more tenure-track positions being cut in response to shrinking endowments, vanishing state funding, and national conversations about “shovel-ready” job skills. It seems that the structural situation with the higher education labor market is problematic and ultimately unsustainable. In the meantime, however, the alt-ac and post-ac sectors stand to benefit from the skills and expertise held by those with the doctorate. In turn, those of us in these environments can help PhD holders get a better return on the costly material and intangible investments that they have made in the course of their graduate careers.

In light of the number of talented PhDs who will not get tenure-track jobs, we believe there are abundant opportunities to create more programmatic ways to channel good people into other sectors, whether within or outside the academy. The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) Postdoctoral Fellowship Program is one example of such a programmatic approach—in this case, one that matches the skills and expertise of doctorally trained individuals with the needs of academic libraries. Normalizing such programmatic efforts would help define graduate education less by tracks and more by a matching of higher education training with the needs of a variety of sectors.

Context

The National Science Foundation’s *Survey of Earned Doctorates* tells us that 5,662 people graduated with a PhD in the humanities in 2013 (National Science Foundation 2013). According to the survey, 2,074

3 Some critics have called into question the role of the dissertation in perpetuating this disconnect, arguing that a book-length monograph on a single, exhaustively researched subject really prepares individuals only for the books they must write on the tenure track. Broadening the options for a capstone project for the PhD, the arguments suggest, will open pathways for those who want to pursue additional opportunities outside academia. See Smith 2010; Modern Language Association 2014b, 14-15; Cassuto and Jay 2015.

of these graduates found some form of employment; 82.7 percent of these found a position within the academy (whether in a tenure-track position, a postdoc, lectureship, or contingent), and the rest found a home in private sector or government positions. Another 560 made other plans or decided to pursue an additional course of study. Of those who responded to this question, 2,130 graduates were without a job and without definite plans following graduation.⁴ These new graduates joined the previous year’s 2,830 PhDs who did not immediately find a job. In short, there were more people who did not get jobs in the academy than did, even if one includes the positions that are not sustainable in the long term. These data on PhD placement in the humanities, although slim, make it plain that “alternative” career paths to the tenure-track are not—and may never have been—unusual, but are the norm for approximately one-third to one-half of all PhDs.

According to the Association of Departments of English and the Modern Language Association (MLA) surveys of PhD placement rates, the numbers seen in the NSF’s survey are in fact typical.⁵ Between 1977 and 1997, the rate of tenure-track placement for PhDs in English averaged 44 percent in the years surveyed, with a high of 51.1 percent in the 1991–1992 survey and a low of 35 percent in the 1996–1997 survey (Laurence 1998). The MLA’s final report of this kind for the 2006–2007 year showed a rate of 49.2 percent (Modern Language Association 2011).

The story is similar across the humanities. One analysis of data compiled by the American Historical Association (AHA) suggested that only 29–55 percent of graduates from the 20 largest history departments in the United States went to tenure-track positions between 1989 and 1998, while graduates from smaller departments fared less well (Margadant 1999). Another, more recent, analysis of 2,500 PhDs who earned doctorates in history between 1998 and 2009 found that only 50.6 percent were employed in tenure-track positions in a four-year institution (Wood and Townsend 2013). These studies support the remark of Anthony Grafton and James Grossman that, since 1972, “the number of openings in history departments has consistently fallen short, sometimes by a very wide margin, of the number of doctorates awarded” (2011). A recent report from the Council of Graduate Schools, *Understanding PhD Career Pathways for Program Improvement*, surveyed the available data across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, to echo these numbers: “Roughly one-half of PhD holders find their first jobs in non-academic sectors such as nonprofits and governmental agencies, corporations, and startups” (Allum, Kent, and McCarthy 2014, iii).⁶

These kinds of statistics lend credibility to the “crisis” talk that

4 Eight hundred ninety-eight respondents did not answer this particular question.

5 According to the 2014 *Report on the MLA Job Information List, 2013-14*, roughly one-third of PhDs end up in non-tenure-track positions with an average of 12 percent landing in what is designated as an “alt-ac” position between 1977 and 1997 (Modern Language Association 2014a).

6 This figure is supported by both the NSF survey and the data collected by the AHA and MLA, cited earlier.

has emerged online and in print, where fears that the academy is producing too many PhDs run rampant.⁷ Although it is clear that structural issues within academia lie at the root of these fears, it is still all too easy to conclude, at least on an unconscious level, that the 50 percent of PhDs who do not end up in tenure-track jobs are failures (see Croxall 2011; Schuman 2014). In this climate, graduate students often feel that discussing the possibility of a non-academic career track is taboo among their colleagues and that actually pursuing non-tenure-track employment is tantamount to quitting, heresy, or both. As both recent and historical data suggest, however, that only half of PhDs end up in tenure-track jobs, the alt-ac and post-ac tracks are not only necessary options, but pathways that a significant portion of all humanities PhDs travel.

Thanks in part to people like Bethany Nowviskie, a thriving online dialog has developed, primarily in the blogosphere, which has attempted to bring the discussion of alt-ac and post-ac into the open and combat the notion that anything short of a tenure-track job means failure. A growing number of websites—#Alt-Academy, for example—provide free, focused alt-ac content, while paid services, such as *The Versatile PhD*, offer general professional advice for PhDs. Costly career counseling services, such as *theprofessorisin.com*, have also proliferated in response to the need for practical advice for job seekers both in and outside the academy. The growing availability of these resources, produced by a recent generation of scholars who have charted new territory, helps make visible the models for success beyond the traditional academic world that have always existed. Moreover, the “mainstream” academy is starting to recognize the importance of alternative trajectories, as evidenced by articles such as “No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History,” written by the prominent historians Anthony Grafton and James Grossman (2011), or the recently released “Report of the Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature” from the MLA (2014b).

Complexities and Limits of the PhD Outside the Academy

Although removing the stigma of pursuing alternate career paths and offering additional training for graduate students will benefit all of academe, there is a danger of promoting the PhD as overly versatile. The rigorous and highly specific training of graduate school is not immediately analogous to the skills typically required outside of the academy. While the larger skills of research, writing, and analysis are valuable in a wide range of occupations, it is not always

7 Crisis-centered narratives, while bleak in tone, are not necessarily inaccurate or misinformed; see Benton 2009, 2010; Flaherty 2012; Covey 2013; Peabody 2014; and Cuthbert and Molla 2015. (Thomas H. Benton is the former pseudonym of William Pannacker, who now tends to write under his own name). Although real, the crisis is also rhetorical, as has been explored by Hamilton and Roach 2003, Schmidt 2013, and Drakeman 2013.

self-evident how to translate those skills for a position outside of the traditional academic environment. For this reason, discussions of alternate careers for PhD holders often begin with a list of jobs that might use the same skills that were acquired in graduate school. For instance, the website *Beyond the Tenure Track* offers a list of the “top 45 jobs for PhDs” in exchange for signing up for the site. The first three, nominally the top choices, are “social impact or social good careers,” “public policy” and “think tanks” (Castro 2014). As is often true with these kinds of lists, these categories are elusive, broad enough to sound plausible as new careers, yet so open that there is often no obvious path to entering this field. Although sites like *Beyond the Tenure Track* work to offer supportive guidance and a broader perspective on the job market outside of the academy, concrete advice is often lacking. Where would one find a job listing for a career in “social good”? What skills would these employers be looking for exactly? What would a compelling resume look like for such a job? In a difficult act of self-translation from academia, where a CV and job letter are matters of formality with a prescribed format, PhDs now have to write materials for an unknown audience with unknown expectations. This step is exactly where many graduate students need the most help, particularly in the humanities, where skill sets are deep but difficult to describe to a non-academic audience.

Advice from potential employers can be the most helpful in charting a new career. One of the few studies to collect data from employers of PhDs outside the academy is Katina Rogers’s 2013 report “Humanities Unbound: Supporting Careers and Scholarship Beyond the Tenure Track” for the Scholarly Communication Institute (SCI). Rogers drew on existing scholarship on alt-ac positions, but also collected new data through two phases. The first was a public-facing [questionnaire](#) that solicited information from self-identified alt-ac professionals, while the second phase collected confidential reports from the employers of these same professionals (Rogers 2013, 3). These surveys offer insight into how the PhD and those who hold it are perceived outside the walls of the academy. Because the collection of employer information was confidential, the responses are frank in a way that would be difficult to obtain through other means. Although Rogers’s report represents a small sample set of employers in an undefined population, it is some of the only data available on this topic and can at least provide an inroad for further exploration.

The SCI team received employee responses to their survey far beyond their expectations. They had planned for 200 responses and received nearly 800, suggesting that those in alt-ac positions are eager to talk about their experiences. The numbers reveal a deep dissatisfaction with graduate training. The response rate may also signify an impulse to make a positive change for those who might follow them. Even for those surveyed—people who already had found employment in an alt-ac position and were, therefore, successful in the job market—38 percent of the 773 respondents were “not satisfied at all” and another 18 percent marked “not very satisfied” with the career advice they had received as a graduate student. A mere six

percent reported being “very satisfied” with the advice they had received (Rogers 2013, 13). These data suggest that many on the alt-ac track had to forge a path on their own with little guidance or input from advisors or institutions. This is a key theme in any conversation of alt-ac jobs and one that needs to be continually addressed as more and more graduate students move in this direction.

Perhaps the most intriguing result of this survey was the discrepancy found between an employee’s perception of the importance of certain skills or competencies and that of the employer (figure 1). These competencies are valuable in nearly any position, but the survey revealed the priorities of the employer as well as the gaps in graduate school training. For example, although 61 percent of the employees surveyed thought project management was the most important competency, only 37 percent of employers agreed, instead giving more weight to collaboration.⁸ Employees may have put a high value on this skill because it seemed the most out of reach or difficult to attain. From the employer’s perspective, it is a lower-level priority, yet it is where 85 percent said that they will have to invest the most time and energy into training an alt-ac employee (Rogers 2013, 15).

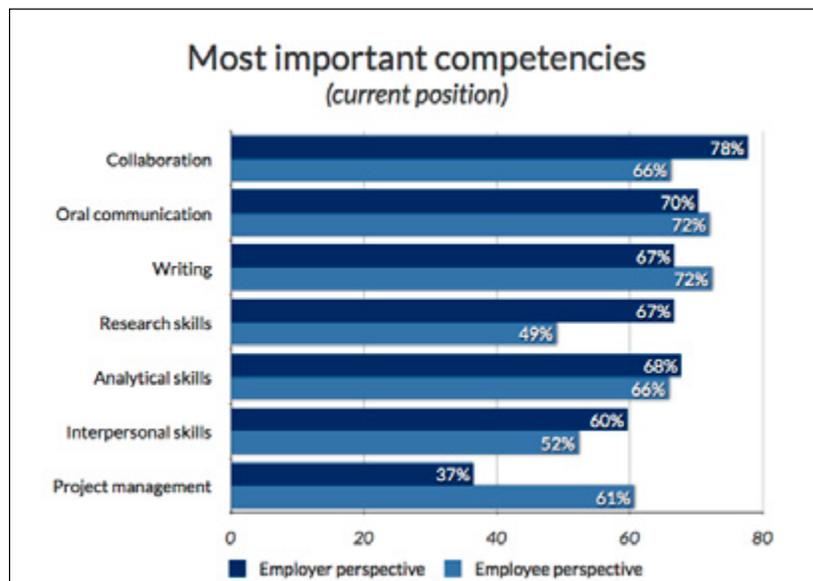


Fig. 1: Most important competencies of the current position (reproduced from Rogers 2013, 14)

When the space between need and required investment is large, the employer takes a greater risk in bringing an employee into the organization. The most effective way to address this gap and reduce the risk level is for the potential employee to confront these issues head on and assuage the concerns of the employer. For a graduate student, however, it can be difficult to know exactly where these issues lie and how to address them effectively. Despite the need for

⁸ There were only 73 completed surveys on the employer side, a number approximately one-tenth the number of employee respondents, which may account for some of this discrepancy.

more specific information regarding a transition from the academic world to the private sector, there is little available beyond generalized suggestions. Departments are beginning to keep better records on the placement of all of their graduates, but this information is still difficult to find in a single location or is not readily available to the public. When only the tenure-track placements are visible or accessible, potential networking opportunities are lost and it reinforces the notion that other employment is inferior or not worth noting. Other notions that networking, commercial writing, or shifting focus to private sector jobs constitute “selling out” or are acts contrary to the vocational idea of a PhD sometimes contribute to the lack of information as well. For some, the pursuit of knowledge is the highest goal (an idea likely to be fostered by those already in tenured positions). When advisors or department heads hold these notions of the academy, it can be hard for graduate students to ask for help or have these conversations in the open; they often must find resources on their own.

Adding to this difficulty is the fact that there is little guidance on how to gain experience in these competencies, from the practical skills such as project management and leadership to the less tangible factors such as interpersonal skills, communication, and adjustment to a 9–5, 12-months-a-year schedule with external deadlines. Many graduate students leave school with little or no job experience outside of academia and may never even have applied for a private sector job, making it particularly difficult for them to anticipate employer expectations.

The SCI report offers a glimpse at some of the risks employers see in taking on PhDs. In addition to the quantitative data collected, there are two questions at the end of the employer survey whose free-form responses reveal key employer anxieties that affect hiring decisions: (1) How are PhDs valued at your workplace? and (2) What recommendations would you make? Although this sample set is small and the responses are anonymous, several consistent threads emerge in these comments that are useful for grad students in the job market.

First, the more closely affiliated to academia the position, the higher the value of the PhD. The most common reason for placing a high value on a PhD is that the PhD holder can be an effective liaison between faculty members and the organization. (In this survey, academic administration and libraries were the most common organizations.) The “cultural capital” that the PhD holds is most useful in a setting where that particular degree and the deep research that it represents is understood. The PhD holder can anticipate the needs of faculty in terms of both research and pedagogy, and faculty often offer a greater degree of respect to employees with a PhD. If the position is in a specific field, the deep subject or content knowledge of the PhD holder also increases the value of the degree in the specific position. This cultural capital is a key difference between an alt-ac position and a post-ac one.

A post-ac job, or a job post-academy, is a new category that has emerged in this discussion. No longer a position housed within the greater body of a college or university, a post-ac job is a departure

from that world. Those pursuing a post-ac career must recognize that this move constitutes not just a change in direction or purpose, but a career change that may require additional training or a new start from an entry-level position. For those transitioning to an alt-ac career, CLIR functions as a bridge from graduate school, providing additional practical training to augment the PhD and hands-on experience during the fellowship. The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Public Fellows program functions in a similar manner for those looking to move out of the academy entirely. Funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the program “aims to expand the reach of doctoral education in the U.S. by demonstrating that the capacities developed in the advanced study of the humanities have wide application, both within and beyond the academy” (American Council of Learned Societies 2015). Whereas CLIR offers positions primarily in academic libraries and archives, ACLS Public Fellows receive two-year placements in nonprofit organizations and government agencies. Programs like this, though rare, help to identify the space between the classroom and the workplace. Helping graduate students understand what employers in the wider job market are looking for and how they can best describe their own skills in a way that is comprehensible to private sector employers helps them to launch a successful career outside of the academy.

Second, outside of the academy, an employer may see an applicant with a PhD as overprivileged and underqualified in a way that may be surprising to some recent graduates. The isolating, singular mode of research most common in the humanities results in an individual who has little experience in working on a team or reporting to others. One employer summarizes the general sense across those surveyed that the PhD “has high prestige value, but many of the PhD students have spent too long in school, become too narrowly specialized, and been trained to write for a very narrow audience” (Rogers 2013). When an employee approaches a private sector job as if it is an extension of graduate school, focusing on personal research and operating in isolation, that approach can often seem disconnected from the shared goals of the organization and may suggest a lack of investment in the job itself. One commenter went so far as to say that a PhD was detrimental to hiring, describing the candidates as “too interested in research” to be able to accomplish the project-based goals of the position. Employers need people who can step into their new role, learn new tools and processes quickly, and work well within the pre-existing structures of the company or organization. Collaboration and teamwork are more highly valued here than any individual course of study.

Simply recognizing this perception of PhDs can affect an interview. Instead of spending time talking about the specific details of their dissertation, candidates would do well to directly address the nature of graduate study and how it has prepared them to meet the new challenges of the position for which they are applying. If an applicant lacks specific training or experience in project management or collaboration, it is better to address this lack directly and discuss an

interest in working on these skills on the job. Demonstrating a willingness to be a team player can alleviate employer concerns before they become an issue. Identifying such needs is the first critical step in repositioning an academic career for a post-ac position.

The most difficult work for a humanities graduate student is often translating the skills intrinsic to research and writing into practical skills. Research, analytical skills, and writing are often heralded as qualifications that can enable scholars to transition out of the academy. These broad categories are helpful, but only to a point. When not attached to specific examples, projects, or results, these terms lose their strength. Many of the employer respondents in the SCI survey acknowledged the talents of PhD holders in these areas, but were quick to note that those employees in their organizations who held master’s degrees or had experience in the field were often just as proficient at research and writing as their PhD peers and had the advantage of needing less training in the more practical aspects of the job. A hiring committee for a position that typically requires only a bachelor’s or master’s degree will have to be persuaded that the PhD can bring something new and valuable to the table and is truly invested in the work. To best confront these obstacles and to most clearly identify employers’ needs, more studies like the SCI survey would be helpful.

The Recruit UT program at the University of Texas at Austin offers its graduate students interested in non-academic positions a wealth of resources, including events like a Graduate Professional Development Week and recruiting events with UT alumni. They also offer access to the Liberal Arts Career Services, which provides specifically alt-ac career advice, including information on how to convert a CV to a resume and how to market a graduate student’s skill set (Recruit UT 2015). Other institutions, including Emory University, UCLA, Stanford University, and Syracuse University, offer similar programs, inviting their graduate students to networking events that typically include guest speakers or panelists who are degree holders working in non-academic or non-teaching academic jobs.

For those not at one of these schools, graduate students can seek out information on their own by working through alumni networks or career services, and more generally by being open to refocusing their own perceptions of their work, skills, and abilities. The ability to communicate and explain their work outside the community of scholarly experts in a particular field is helpful not only in shifting a career trajectory, but also in shifting the conversation about the humanities in general. The work PhDs do is valuable and the skills they have are transferable, as long as they can articulate that work and those skills clearly to the professional world.

One Response: the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program

One program that has successfully mapped the knowledge and expertise that PhD holders acquire to the needs of academic libraries is the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program. Now in its twelfth year, the program places recent PhDs from all disciplines into academic libraries across North America, where they use their field-specific expertise to “develop research tools, resources, and services while exploring new career opportunities.”⁹ The program aims to match fellows’ subject-based knowledge with institutions and projects where it will be well valued and used. Since 2004, 130 fellows have been awarded fellowships of one to three years in academic libraries, where the recipients have engaged in collaborative digital humanities projects, done subject- or language-specific collection development and archival processing projects, created research tools and resources, overseen special libraries, built digital scholarship centers, edited and contributed to significant library publication projects, established data curation practices, and expanded instructional technologies.¹⁰ The CLIR fellowship program, however, is not about creating and sustaining an alternative career track or trying to solve the problem of PhD glut; rather, it is a model that succeeds on the premise that PhD holders have valuable skills and competencies from which host institutions can genuinely benefit (CLIR 2014c).

The CLIR program directly addresses the graduate students’ need to acclimate to a new kind of working environment by bridging the gap between individualistic, focused study and the collaborative, project-based nature of an academic library position. From the initial meeting of the new fellows at intensive summer training sessions on the Bryn Mawr College campus, the focus is on building a cohort and fostering collaboration. There, fellows are introduced to library culture and learn about some of the challenges, expectations, and tasks that they will face on the job. Moreover, fellows participate in yearly meetings and cross-cohort collaborations, such as the writing project that produced this volume. Overall, the program is designed not only to provide temporary postdoctoral employment in libraries, but also to equip fellows with additional skills that will help them establish long-term careers well beyond the limits of the fellowship.

The goals of the CLIR program and other alt-ac training programs (e.g., the ACLS Public Fellows Program) are not to establish the PhD as the base criterion for hiring in these alternative fields or to place more value on the PhD than on experience, but instead to help graduate students find a way to put their degree to good use. When the CLIR program was founded, the notion of taking PhDs into academic libraries that have traditionally been run by

9 Although the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program initially placed humanities PhDs in academic libraries, the program expanded to formally include scientists and social scientists in 2012; for a complete program description, see CLIR 2014a.

10 For a more complete list of CLIR postdoctoral fellows’ work descriptions, see CLIR 2014b.

professional librarians with MLIS degrees was a risky proposition. The inclusion of PhDs ratcheted up fears of credential creep that would dilute the value of the MLIS degree, forcing MLIS holders to pursue an extra degree in order to obtain jobs that were being given to, in this perspective, PhD holders desperate for employment. Moreover, there was concern that, although PhDs were well versed in a narrowly defined field of study, they had not sufficiently demonstrated a commitment to librarianship or trained in the functions of a library and job skills of a librarian. Some of the employers in the SCI survey shared these concerns. Although CLIR can help train PhDs to investigate alternate career paths, it remains critical that the degree holders themselves learn to articulate their value in a way that is productive, illustrating their willingness not just to retrain and refocus their goals, but also to be an active and committed participant in their new workplace. Fears about the program have receded and will continue to abate as the fellows add to the culture of the library without threatening its core foundations.

Much of the work that CLIR postdoctoral fellows do is related in some way to expanding digital research and tools within libraries and, more generally, in the academy. At the 2014 Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) meeting, CNI Director Clifford Lynch specifically cited CLIR fellows as a significant influence in moving digital scholarship forward in academic libraries. The connection that Lynch made between digital scholarship and libraries is crucial. Paralleling the increasing awareness of non-tenure-track careers for PhDs, there is a growing number of opportunities within the alt-ac stream for digital humanists, whose technical skills and interest in innovative research and pedagogical methods have not only helped open doors, but have also created the opportunities. As Miriam Posner (2013) has noted:

Alt-acs need not be digital humanists, but digital humanists have found the term to be particularly congenial, since many of us happen to hold these hybrid jobs, and since a founding principle of digital humanities work—that one can think through and articulate humanistic principles in unconventional ways—complements the nontraditional, praxis-based scholarship that many alt-acs perform.

The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program is an example of how CLIR is carving out new opportunities for PhDs that simultaneously complement their highly specific subject training, while arming them with innovative professional tools.

As an organization, CLIR has been a leading advocate for the twenty-first century research library, where digital scholarship and pedagogy are central.¹¹ The postdoctoral fellowship program is one of the ways that the organization builds interdisciplinary and

¹¹ For more information on this vision for libraries, see “Changing and Expanding Libraries” in this volume.

cross-institutional collaborations situated “at the nexus of libraries, scholarship, and technology” (Henry and Smith 2013, 64). With their extensive subject expertise related to research and teaching, PhDs help strengthen the connection between scholars and the library as a research institution, providing new insight into the latter’s role in the academy. Many of the current fellows are focused on developing specific digital projects at their host institutions. Others are working on broader projects aimed at strengthening the presence of digital humanities initiatives on their campuses, while data curation and digital pedagogy are two other important areas in which the fellows are working.

A significant number of host institutions have regularly indicated that CLIR fellows are a valuable asset to their libraries by offering permanent positions to fellows. At least 11 CLIR fellows—approximately 15 percent of those who have finished the program—took permanent positions at their host institutions upon completion of the fellowship. Coauthors Marta Brunner and Brian Croxall, for example, both worked at the institutions that hosted their fellowships—UCLA and Emory University, respectively. Brunner’s recent appointment as the new college librarian at Skidmore College suggests that her experience in the CLIR program, as well as her subsequent time at the UCLA Library, positioned her to succeed in a library environment. Similarly, former CLIR fellows have indicated that the program is generally a successful bridge between completing their doctoral work and full-time employment.

It should be noted, however, that 36 of the 130 CLIR postdoctoral fellows are current fellows. Although there is a small number unaccounted for, most former fellows—82 percent—are employed in full-time careers.¹² Approximately half of former CLIR fellows have continued to work in libraries or digital humanities centers, and the other half generally returned to their academic field, most landing tenure-track jobs (CLIR 2014b). With respect to the traditional academic job market, many fellows reported that the CLIR program was beneficial. In her 2009 report, Marta Brunner notes that, of the fellows she interviewed, several found their CLIR postdoctoral experience key to tenure-track employment because it provided them with concrete skills, such as grant writing and scholarly communication expertise, to which they did not have exposure in graduate school (Brunner 2009, 172).

Regardless of where they ended up, former fellows credit the program with deepening their understanding of the way information and research are organized and curated. The importance of good data curation as a research practice prompted CLIR to initiate a new track of fellowships devoted to data curation in the sciences and social sciences in 2012; the program has been recently expanded to data curation in the humanities and the visual arts. These postdoctoral positions, in particular, highlight data management as crucial in the era of digital scholarship, not simply a storage and preservation issue facing libraries.

12 At the time of writing, we were unable to find the current job positions of 13 former CLIR fellows.

Perhaps more compelling than the statistics about the fellows' career paths is the anecdotal evidence provided by fellows about their experiences. Current and former CLIR fellows were attracted to the program for a number of reasons, but frustration and lack of offers on the tenure-track job market are common factors that motivate applicants.¹³ Andrew Asher, an anthropologist and CLIR fellow from the 2010 cohort, said that he initially felt that his first year on the academic job market was a "failed search" and that he only reluctantly applied to the CLIR program (Asher 2014). His fellowship, however, made him realize that he could treat libraries as a kind of "field site," engaging his ethnographic training to ask "anthropological questions about the nature of information use and its interrelationships with other cultural processes" (Asher 2014). He now occupies the hybrid role of an anthropologist-librarian at Indiana University. Similarly, Brian Croxall initially applied only for tenure-track jobs in his final year as doctoral student in English at Emory University. As a graduate fellow in Emory's Center for Interactive Teaching, however, his vision of academic work expanded, and he began applying for both traditional teaching positions and alt-ac jobs. With a PhD in hand, he landed interviews for every alt-ac job that he applied to, securing a CLIR fellowship at Emory in 2010 (Croxall 2011). Other fellows have noted that the CLIR postdoctoral positions immediately appealed to them as a good match for their expertise and interests. Marta Brunner's survey of the program suggested that former fellows were especially attracted to placements on very specific, bounded projects (2009, 167). Likewise, current CLIR fellow and coauthor of this essay, Meridith Beck Sayre, was delighted to see a position announcement at Indiana University on the Chymistry of Isaac Newton project; as a historian of science with a strong interest in book history and experience working in a rare book library, Beck Sayre could not have envisioned a more suitable postdoctoral opportunity.

Regardless of how they initially came to the program, CLIR fellows generally report that they used various aspects of their academic training in their fellowships, including their research skills, ability to communicate effectively with faculty, and teaching expertise, and that they gained additional experience leveraging digital and administrative skills. Moreover, CLIR fellows report that they gained valuable experience that helped them secure jobs in both academic libraries and on the tenure-track market. As noted, about half of all previous CLIR fellows are now employed in libraries. Obviously, the program does a good job of training PhDs for this kind of work by giving them hands-on experience in the library environment.

Although there has been some controversy over whether this type of fellowship can replace a traditional library degree, most CLIR fellows reported in Brunner's study that they did not assume the program provided adequate training to pursue a career as a librarian (2009, 173). Patricia Hswe was a fellow at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the Slavic and East European Library between

13 The following section draws on both formal reports and published remarks that have appeared in print and online by former and current CLIR fellows.

2004 and 2006, where her work on creating digital resources led her to complete an MLIS at the same institution. Hswe is now the digital content strategist and head of [ScholarSphere](#) User Services at the Penn State University Libraries.¹⁴ Similarly, Amanda Watson completed a library degree after her postdoctoral fellowship and is now a humanities subject specialist librarian at the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library at New York University. For Brunner, who has not pursued a library degree, the CLIR fellowship experience gave her not only on-the-job experience with collection development, outreach, instruction, reference, and other professional functions, but also a higher-level perspective on academic libraries. This tandem expertise prepared her to take on leadership roles at the UCLA Library and to become the college librarian at a liberal arts college.

Increasingly, there is a need for people who can inhabit the traditional roles of the scholar as teacher and researcher, as well as that of the information professional. As the space and place of libraries change with a greater focus on digital knowledge production and dissemination, and as centers of digital scholarship emerge, CLIR fellows are well positioned to occupy hybrid positions as scholars who have a deep understanding of how to preserve, access, curate, and circulate information. Of course, PhDs in the humanities and social sciences are only one potential source of this kind of expertise, but their abundance can be a valuable resource for libraries. Over the last two years, the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program has grown significantly, granting new fellowships to more than 40 recent PhDs. The program's growth is evidence of an increased interest in, and need for, graduates with both technical and humanistic skill sets. In other words, the expansion of the program is, itself, evidence that *someone* thinks the program is working.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Clearly, those in higher education and prospective graduate students themselves need more and better data before they can fully grasp the current state of graduate education and determine how best to improve career placement for PhD students across the disciplines (see Pannacker 2013). The Council of Graduate Schools has made a good step in this direction with its recent study, *Understanding PhD Career Pathways for Program Improvement* (Allum, Kent, and McCarthy 2014). In the meantime, we offer the following observations and recommendations.

Cultural Reorientation

One of the reasons that the current state of doctoral education has become a crisis is that the cultural expectations, at least in the humanities, have included an assumption that doctoral training is

¹⁴ Hswe described her CLIR experience, along with former fellows Amanda Watson, Amanda French, and Christa Williford, in Watson et al. 2011.

valuable only if it results in a tenure-track faculty career. Given the success stories of doctorally trained individuals who find meaningful employment outside the tenure track, this assumption is not consistent with reality. Thus, according to Anthony Grafton and James Grossman, “A first step towards adjusting graduate education to occupational realities would be to change our attitudes and our language, to make clear to students entering programs in history that we are offering them education that we believe in, not just as reproductions of ourselves, but also as contributors to public culture and even the private sector” (2011).

There is no failure in graduating with a PhD and going on to an alt-ac career. In fact, as Cassuto and Jay point out, this diversification of “occupational realities” is very much in line with the original mission of the American graduate education system. They observe, “The job of these public universities was, from the beginning, to advance all kinds of professions in utilitarian as well as theoretical ways” (Cassuto and Jay 2015, 87). Although there will still be disappointment for those graduate students who pursued a PhD solely for the purpose of becoming a tenure-track faculty member but did not find such employment, having conversations much earlier in their graduate careers with faculty advisors about a broader range of career options may shift the conversations about graduate study in higher education away from crisis talk.

Acknowledging the broader usefulness and applicability of doctoral training opens the way for fresh thinking about the graduate curriculum and the kinds of culminating work—besides the traditional dissertation—that could produce the skills needed in a variety of jobs besides college-level teaching and research. Cassuto and Jay and others pin a significant portion of the responsibility for ushering in these changes on existing tenured faculty (Cassuto and Jay 2015, Grafton and Grossman 2011, and Pannapacker 2013). Nevertheless, there are things that others can do both to recognize and to take advantage of the incredibly rich pool of talent and expertise that is the unemployed and underemployed PhD holders.

Skills Realignment

The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program has shown that holding a PhD does not make one a librarian or even a valuable library staff member. Skills and knowledge make an individual a valuable addition to the library organization. In the humanities, these skills have traditionally included the ability to teach, do intensive research, think analytically, and distill new knowledge into written form that others can use. But are these the skills that employers outside the tenure track need most? According to Cassuto and Jay, “Any realistic twenty-first-century approach to graduate education in the humanities needs to recognize that such an education involves the teaching of practical, transferable skills that can prepare graduates for a wide range of jobs outside higher education” (2015, 89). Similarly, in his 2012 speech to the Council of Graduate Schools, MLA President

Michael Bérubé suggested that graduate students ought to be taught the practical skill of collaboration, though he acknowledged that “the question will be how it’s valued by future employers” (Flaherty 2012).

Although current tenured faculty may be most responsible for updating graduate curricula, this question of “practical, transferable skills” suggests that libraries and other institutions that seek to draw on the pool of otherwise unemployed and underemployed PhDs ought to take steps to ensure that doctoral programs, especially in the humanities, are *aware* of opportunities outside academia and understand what skills and expertise are most valuable in those settings. Furthermore, if graduate programs are going to overhaul their curricula, potential alt-ac employers should communicate with those in higher education about the skills and expertise that they will be looking for in 5–10 years. At the same time, potential employers ought to find out what PhDs in relevant fields are actually learning and producing these days in order to better understand their value to the organization and the potential for a good match.

Things That Graduate Students Can Do

As for graduate students, one way to ensure that they are more likely to finish their doctorate with “marketable” skills and expertise is to think beyond the limits of their degree program’s discipline. Bérubé suggests that an important way to prepare PhDs for a more diverse set of career options is to encourage interdisciplinarity (Flaherty 2012). Working across disciplines may expose graduate students to a wider range of research and professional contexts, and they may develop a broader, more versatile skill set along the way. Furthermore, the creativity involved in working across established disciplines may help students and their mentors to forge new, unforeseen avenues for the doctorally trained.

In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong (2015) map out a strategy and timeline for graduate students who want to simultaneously pursue both tenure-track and alt-ac job opportunities. Part of their advice regarding the non-academic job market is to “start reaching out to people in fields of interest with whom you might conduct informational interviews” (Vick and Furlong 2015). Many successful applicants to the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program spoke at length with previous fellows to learn more or met with librarians or archivists beforehand to learn more about the profession.¹⁵ In these conversations, it is important to make an effort to really understand the other field’s or profession’s context. What are the burning issues and trends affecting that field or profession? What is the field’s core mission? What are the current and emerging staffing models? Are there brand new, trailblazing or otherwise nontraditional positions being created that might suit a PhD holder, or would a PhD holder be more likely to fit into a traditional role?

15 The authors of this essay have personal experience and anecdotal evidence based on their experiences with subsequent CLIR fellow cohorts to support this claim.

Closing

To sum up, it will take bold action on a number of fronts to unravel the Gordian knot of structural conditions and cultural practices that constitute the so-called crisis of graduate education. In the meantime, though, the pool of PhD holders who have not found tenure-track jobs ought to be considered a resource rather than a liability. After all, as William Pannacker asserts, the tenure track cannot now be understood as the just reward for the excellent few: “I have known too many extraordinarily talented and productive long-term adjuncts to believe that academe is a meritocracy” (Pannacker 2013). We miss great opportunities if we assume that those who do not land tenure-track jobs are damaged goods.

The very talk of tracks—tenure, alt-ac, post-ac—may itself be part of the problem. As the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program has demonstrated, there is not one, or even three, tracks that fellows take from their postdoctoral experience. Instead, there is a productive matching of needs with relevant knowledge and expertise that in most cases benefits both the host institution and the postdoctoral fellow. Indeed, our collective goal should be to make this matching process less serendipitous and more programmatic. Increasing the number of opportunities like the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program could have a significant, positive impact on graduate education and on the sectors in which newly minted PhDs find their first homes. The CLIR program has worked because it recognizes that academic libraries actually benefit from the skills and expertise that doctorally trained individuals bring to library work. The success of the program suggests that we ought to have a broader concept of what a PhD is for. Ideally, we should be collectively working toward a normalization of what are now viewed as alternatives.

Imagine that we have been in a drought situation with a full cistern that is overflowing. The CLIR program has essentially been trying to sponge up that overflow and squeeze that moisture on library crops rather than letting it evaporate. As important as that effort has been, the goal should not be a proliferation of mop-up services. The longer-term goal should be to re-pipe the cistern so that the water flows directly to whichever crops could use the moisture. In other words, successful normalization means that the CLIR program might actively be rendering itself unnecessary over time because more PhDs would be coming out of their programs trained to be library professionals. Programs in other sectors could prompt similar kinds of reforms that, over time, produce PhDs who are ready and able to work in their organizations. Thus, alt-ac or post-ac become regular ac.¹⁶

To be sure, the mere mention of PhD holders emerging from their graduate work “trained to be library professionals” will raise once more an enormous red flag for academic librarians who, as credentialed professionals, have been concerned that (1) the MLS or MLIS would be displaced as the professional degree of choice for librarian positions, resulting in a pool of unemployed library degree holders,

16 Thanks to Peter R. Murray for the cistern metaphor.

and (2) libraries would no longer be staffed and led by library professionals who understand and value the core tenets of librarianship (i.e., information literacy, access, privacy, preservation). However, the CLIR program has demonstrated that an influx of 130 PhD holders into libraries over the past 12 years has not resulted in a marked displacement of MLS or MLIS holders. Institutions that have hosted CLIR fellows may be taking library work in new directions—into data curation, for example—but library schools are also moving in these directions as more courses are being offered in these areas.¹⁷ Not *all* PhD holders need to be qualified to work in libraries; however, those graduate students who view academic library work as a potential career option could work with their advisors to cultivate the skills and expertise needed in libraries *before* they graduate rather than with an additional degree or a postdoctoral program.

Furthermore, the CLIR model should not be limited to the library sector. Employers in a broad range of professions and sectors could and should become more closely connected to higher education, first through structured programs like the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship and then through the normalization process.

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¹⁷ Information Studies programs at the University of Illinois, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Maryland all offer tracks in data curation, for example. See Keralis 2012 for a more detailed description of data curation education.

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