

Podcast: Escape the Ivory Tower
Episode: 2
Title: Tips for grad students
Host: Julie Clarenbach

Intro

Welcome to episode 2 of Escape the Ivory Tower - the podcast about leaving academia.

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This podcast is brought to you by University Affairs magazine. My name is Julie Clarenbach and I help people like you explore career options outside of academe. This podcast series features interviews with academics who have chosen to pursue a non-academic career or are helping others pursue that path.

In this episode I speak with Susan Molnar, a graduate career counsellor at McGill University. We talk about the challenges that grad students face when looking for a non-academic job, how the process is different between academic and non-academic job searches, as well as what skills grad students have that they may not even know about....

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Julie: You work primarily with grad students helping them imagine career options and develop career materials. What would say are the biggest challenges for students looking at non-academic career options?

Susan: There are a few. I think one challenge would be that they feel somewhat discouraged by their lack of knowledge about non-academic career options, where they might fit in, and the non-academic job search in general. I think what usually reassures them is that I remind them that the key skill they need is research, and asking good questions. So once you wrap your mind around understanding the market, so: what are the salary ranges like, when are peak hiring seasons, what are typical entry-level positions that I might begin with. All of these are great research questions. Once they see it as a research project, I think they can get excited about the process. I think the other key challenge is embracing the idea that a career outside of academia will in fact be challenging, and letting go of this perception that the PhD was a waste of time. I think that sometimes that lack of enthusiasm for the job and the process and in some cases the interview is one of the bigger obstacles.

I think applying exclusively for advertised positions is probably another key challenge, because so many are not advertised. Not viewing internships as an option for PhDs, or insisting that the PhD be a requirement for the job.

One more: It's very hard to ask for help. And I think that the academic culture sort of reinforces this notion that independence and appearing knowledgeable is key. And so asking for

help tends to bring on this fear that you will appear incompetent. I think that if you want to be helped, you will have to ask for some. And so receiving help is somehow very difficult, and when you are starting a new career path it is important to reach out and ask for advice and mentorship. And this assumption that most people don't want to help you is a big mistake, because most do, if they can. As long as you are not asking them for a job, per se, and are just looking for advice, or sharing their own career stories, then they are more than happy to talk about themselves and give advice.

Julie: How would you describe the differences between academic and non-academic applications – what is different about the process, and what's different about the execution?

Susan: The process and execution of an academic job search is much longer, and much more labour intensive. It takes years to prepare an academic application package properly, and it takes days to get through an academic interview. A non-academic job search might involve a prolonged self-assessment period, where you are asking yourself, "where do I fit in", "what job titles suit me", "what can I get excited about". Understand what your target is will take much longer, because you have been groomed for an academic position, so you know what you are applying for. And you also have many mentors around you who can help guide you, and I think that is extremely important to use faculty and your advisor or supervisor to help navigate that career path, because they are experts in that. One major difference is you don't have the kind of guidance and mentorship when you are looking for a non-academic position. But also, most positions in industry are not advertised, academic positions are. So while networking is always important, it is particularly important in the non-academic search. I would say you have fewer openings in the academic market, so you have many more choices in the non-academic market. So you could be applying for many different types of positions, so you will be needing more than one type of CV, and rewriting the cover letter to tailor it each time. So, more options, more openings, but not advertised as much.

Academic careers often imply relocations, whereas non-academic careers they usually hire locally. They like that people live in the city. For example, I was thinking about the saturated North American and European academic market and what to do about it and I saw that they were hiring in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf region. So I put on a panel called "Teaching in the Middle East." So really thinking out of the geographic box will help you in your academic job search. In a non-academic job search, once the target has been made, the process is very quick. So it could be a couple of weeks from the time that you apply, you could be hired. So it's simpler than the academic job search.

Julie: What kind of skills do graduate students have coming out of the PhD, but don't know that they have?

Susan: Typically, most of the skills developed by grad students are research and information management, project management and organization, analysis and problem solving, written and oral communication, interpersonal and leadership skills. But one of the ones that I find is taken for granted is the skill of public speaking. It is one of the greatest skills known to mankind and to have mastered this is a huge asset for all career progression – especially in an interview. And

I think that is huge. Writing and research skills are essential, not only for the job process, but also for communication careers and research careers outside of academia. There's so much you can do: grant writing skills can easily translate into a lucrative fundraising career. They are especially useful when you are trying to get into challenging industries, like international development or the arts. But I think my favourite transferable skill is passion, because many students enter grad school purely for interest, and when you are willing to dedicate that much time and energy to pursue an interest, there's incredible power there that you can certainly share with the organization or business that you are going to be working for. And I think that kind of enthusiasm and energy is very much appreciated by anyone. When I think about grad students, especially those in the hard sciences doing experiments in the lab that sometimes fail – you need a level of perseverance and humour that are very precious.

Julie: Give us one success story of someone getting a non-academic career, coming out of academia?

Susan: I have two. There's a postdoc in history, who ended up channelling her interests in communication and research into fundraising. She started off at university doing university fundraising, as a development officer, and ended up working in a small museum where she is starting up their foundation and working on their communication materials, which is even a better fit for her, because it gets her back into her earliest passion which is history. And I think what's interesting about that story, is that she came in (I was her adviser) very open-minded and really wasn't sure what she was going to do next, and I suggest fundraising and grant writing often to grad students, because they have the perfect skillset for that kind of work, and she had that bubbly personality on top of it. And she decided to help me set up a panel, where she was recruiting speakers, and consequently networking with people in the field, and had met several fundraisers and was encouraged to apply. So in this story, it is the networking component, having an open mind and letting someone guide her. That makes it a success. And she said that on the day that she had gotten a job offer from a university, she had also gotten an offer from a think-tank and she was going to be paid \$20,000 more working for the think-tank. But she decided that fundraising sounded more fun. And I think that is a good thing, that she chose fun over money.

The second example is of a student who had finished a PhD in computer science and he had done a very interesting job search. He compiled a list of all of the PhDs who had graduated from McGill in the past 10 years to an online database of PhD thesis: computer science, computer engineering and electrical engineering to get an idea of where he should apply, based on where these people were already working, which he identified through LinkedIn and that gave him a strategy. But in the end, he ended up using our job listings database which he had filtered by who wanted candidates with a doctoral degree. In the end, he applied for two jobs: one at Google and one at Facebook, and he got offers from both and one was offering about \$10,000 more than the other. But he ended up choosing the one that he thought he would have the greatest impact in. That is a really interesting way to make a decision. He is at Facebook now.

Goodbye

That's it for this episode. Let me know what you're thinking by posting a comment at the bottom of this podcast's page at [University Affairs dot CA](http://UniversityAffairs dot CA). Until next time, I'm Julie Clarenbach.