

Chapter 8. Wayfinding Across the Academic Landscape: Braided Careers

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H. Lewis Ulman experienced several distinct journeys in and out of universities. His paths included time in rural Canada before returning to Pennsylvania and completing a PhD in English that met his developing interests and needs. That led him to distinctive work in digital humanities and composition, especially in creating texts and textual editing. He continues his current journey, even in retirement, with environmental work and environmental humanities.

A path is a prior interpretation of the best way to traverse a landscape, and to follow a route is to accept an interpretation.

- *Rebecca Solnit, Wanderlust: A History of Walking, 2000*

It's call wayfinding, Princess. It's not just sails and knots, it's seeing where you're going in your mind. Knowing where you are, by knowing where you've been.

- *Jared Bush, Moana, 2016*

When I retired at age 62, my department held a reception. In conversations over refreshments after the formal sendoff, several colleagues commiserated with me over the circumstances that might have led me to retire when I did—a change in the pension rules that would mean if I worked another two years I would actually end up with a slightly smaller pension (true) and the lack of any program allowing a faculty or staff member to taper their workload (and compensation) as they approached retirement (also true). Others simply wished me well, assuming that I was looking forward to a change in the landscape of life (again, true).

Along with a thoughtful gift, my colleagues gave me a “memory box” containing cards, letters, photos, and videos on thumb drives wishing me well and reflecting on our work together over the years. That was for the most part. One card from a good friend contained a hint of perplexity: “Have a wonderful retirement, although I think it is oddly early.”

What stands out to me ten years later about these undercurrents of concern and perplexity is the presence of a linear, normative model of academic careers bound to milestones associated with hiring, tenure, and promotion, a continuous progression along a well-marked path with a clear destination. From that perspective, my academic career looks like a river coursing down a single channel: I was retiring as a tenured associate professor after 28 years on the faculty and, prior to

that, six years earning my keep and learning my trade as a graduate teaching associate responsible for my own classes while pursuing my master's and doctorate degrees. That was followed by another year as a full-time postdoc instructor and research assistant. But an overview of that sort simply connects generic organizational stages of careers in higher education, charts progress along a prescribed course with no personal, historical, or social context.

Moreover, writing about a life in—or passing through—academia involves making some assumptions about what constitutes being “in” academia and “out” of it. We usually define being “in” academia as preparing for and working in a faculty position primarily responsible for teaching, research, and service at a post-secondary college or university. Of course, that definition leaves out, or doesn't neatly fit, a great deal of what constitutes academic work in colleges and universities. That includes part-time teaching and research as well as academic support positions, not to mention all the non-academic labor that keeps universities running. Working in “administration” introduces a liminal space fraught with ambiguity. But more on that later.

My own story of academic life feels less like following institutional tracks (though it certainly involved those tracks) than like wayfinding in, out, and across complex academic and personal landscapes, circling back, starting over, frequently redefining goals and destinations while navigating the complex channels of a braided stream shaped by individual experiences and circumstances.



Figure 8.1. Braided Glacial Outflow. Akshayuk Pass, Baffin Island, 1977 (Pat Claeys)

From the start, my career in higher education proceeded in fits and starts. After gaining early acceptance to Brown University, I enrolled instead at Ohio Wesleyan University, following my high school girlfriend, after taking the opportunity to spend the summer before my freshman year studying German at the University of Salzburg, Austria. I did well at Ohio Wesleyan, but a disagreement with the college at the end of my sophomore year about tuition and early graduation led me to transfer to a small college in my hometown. After finishing my bachelor's degree in December of my senior year with a major in English and the idea that I would like to pursue an MFA in poetry, I took a job as an "orderly" at a local hospital to bide my time while applying to grad schools for the fall.

A nurse-administrator who had been a mentor at work offered me an opportunity to train as a dialysis technician with a path to an administrative role in the program. I cringe as I recall how I declined the offer: "Medicine helps people stay alive," I said, "but literature and the arts give them reasons to live." I see now that I was conflating career choices with broad outlooks on life, but the young need a star to steer by as well as a rudder, so in the fall I stuck to my plan and began an MFA program in poetry at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

I had been awarded a graduate assistantship, but despite repeated inquiries on my part, no one ever asked me to do anything other than write poetry. This sounds ideal, but I would have benefitted from more structure. Tellingly, I wasn't writing poetry beyond assignments dutifully completed for my writing workshop.

Instead, I spent a great deal of time hiking and rock climbing with the outing club. I took a leave of absence before the end of my first semester, returned to my hometown, and took a job at a startup outdoor equipment store. This involved a great deal of teamwork under pressure to make the new endeavor succeed. I fondly remember driving a truck through the hills of Pennsylvania looking for old, preferably falling-down barns to buy from farmers grateful to get the mess off their property. We used the weathered boards to line the walls of the store.

While visiting my father in the winter of 1974, I read an article about the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). It offered expedition-style courses in every aspect of wilderness travel, from sea kayaking and winter ski touring to leave-no-trace camping and wilderness first aid. I decided to quit my job in the spring and enroll in both a summer semester in Alaska and a fall semester in the Rockies, spending nearly all of the next eight months out in the field.

When the eight months with NOLS ended, I returned to Greensboro. This time I pursued a master's degree in English, and I began an independent study in translating poetry from German to English. That didn't take. Again, I dropped out before the end of the spring semester, returned to work at the outdoor equipment company in my hometown, and helped them start an outdoor education school. I was once again in the outdoor education and wilderness travel channel of my braided career.

During the summer of 1977, the woman I'd fallen in love with at NOLS, Pat, and I joined my brother Jim and his son on an expedition to the brand new

Auyuituq National Park on Baffin Island. We flew there in Jim's single-engine, four-seater Cessna 172, with the goal of hiking up Akshayuk Pass to the point where the Arctic Circle crossed the Cumberland Peninsula (see Figure 8.1).

Several months after that trip, I quit my job and joined Pat in northern Manitoba, where she was teaching elementary school, 500 miles north of the U.S. border. I spent the next few months or so hiking and canoeing the backcountry of northern Manitoba while Pat completed the year teaching elementary school for the Frontier School Division, and we pondered our next step. I had begun to feel less enthusiastic about the recreational side of outdoor education, drawn again to what the humanities had to contribute to environmental issues.

Eventually, we concluded that opportunities for both of us to live and work in the same place were more likely in the United States. After marrying in the spring of 1978, Pat became a permanent U.S. resident, and we moved to State College, Pennsylvania, where Pat enrolled in a BA program in education at Penn State (to re-certify to teach in the United States), and I—again—began a master's degree in English.

The master's program did not offer much opportunity for specialization beyond choosing a thesis topic. Because it also offered financial support through teaching assistantships, the program provided a deep dive into the field of composition studies. I wrote my thesis on American nonfiction nature writing (working with a scholar of British Romanticism because ecocriticism was not a "field" yet), but I was interested and engaged in the composition program. The sense of teamwork among the faculty and graduate teaching assistants drew me into that community, and the composition program's theoretical and pedagogical focus on the processes of writing provided a framework that helped me imagine university teaching as a profession.

Both environmental humanities and composition had roots in the soil of English studies and were poised for rapid growth in the 1980s. Another influence that profoundly shaped my career and the field entered my graduate training like a sleeper agent. At some point in 1978, John B. Smith, at the time an associate professor in the department of English at Penn State, who had worked for the previous seven years as a research consultant in the Penn State Computation Center and had worked closely with the World Shakespeare Bibliography, offered a non-credit workshop, open to graduate students and faculty.

Smith's course focused on using the university's mainframe computer for word processing and managing bibliographic data. For the word processing component of the workshop, we learned Waterloo SCRIPT using remote terminals to access a mainframe computer on campus. At the time, the terminals could edit only one line of text at a time, and we had to pick up printouts from the computer center on the other side of the campus.

As I recall, about a dozen graduate students and faculty attended the workshop on the first day, and in short order all the faculty dropped out. Soon they were followed by all but a handful of graduate students. I stayed.

The computers were slow and the interface arcane, but you never had to retype an entire essay to edit your prose! I was hooked—an appropriate metaphor for something that drops into your life seemingly out of nowhere and, once you bite, draws you toward the unknown. With an irony that I didn't appreciate at the time, I wrote my master's thesis on American nonfiction nature writing entirely on a mainframe computer.

While I completed the final academic term of my master's program, Pat was called home to Manitoba for her father's funeral. Before she returned to Pennsylvania, she received a letter from her sister in Ottawa containing an ad for a teaching job in Povungnituk (now Puvirnituk), Quebec, an Inuit village of 900 in the eastern arctic, 500 miles north of tree line.

We decided that it would be a great opportunity for Pat to continue her teaching career in Indigenous communities; she had previously taught for two years at a First Nation school in Manitoba. For us to return to the arctic, she arranged to interview with the principal at the Toronto airport on her way home from Manitoba. She got the job, and while there was no prospect of me finding employment in Puvirnituk, I was determined to join her as soon as I submitted my master's thesis in mid-October 1980.

I was happy to take a break from academic work and support Pat's unique job opportunity. Life in Puvirnituk provided many opportunities to learn about Inuit culture and the arctic environment. We rode along on snowmobiles with Inuit hunting and fishing parties; met regularly with Inuit elders charged with introducing the anglophone and francophone teaching staff to their culture; and took Inuit language classes with a teacher who spoke no English during the class (to approximate the experience of the Inuit children, whose classes were held in English or French from the fourth grade on).

Outside of these formal interactions, I was able to use my amateur radio license (another interest flowing in the same channel as computing) to set up phone "patches" that allowed residents to talk with family members in the "south" (Montreal, Ottawa, etc.) for school or medical care. (The village had satellite phone service, but it was expensive.)

The most unexpected turn of events presented me with another path in my academic life. When a seventh-grade teacher unexpectedly adopted a child, she took a ten-week leave of absence, which left the school in need of filling a gap in the staff. While Canadian law at the time stipulated that the school should first seek Canadian applicants, it was difficult to find someone on short notice who would move to the eastern arctic for a ten-week position. To make matters more complicated, the village had nowhere to house a new teacher (housing was provided to the teaching staff).

I must have been the only unemployed person in town with teaching experience and a graduate degree. I was certainly the only potential candidate who already had a place to live in the village. The principal and school board approached me about taking on a seventh-grade class (all subjects except Inuit culture and physical education) as a substitute teacher, and I accepted.

It was a fascinating and humbling experience, unlike anything I experienced teaching first-year composition at Penn State. Teachers did not assign grades. Instead, we visited with parents and children in their homes to discuss the children's learning. I had to put extra effort into learning a bit of Inuktitut because, while my classroom instruction was conducted in English, the children spoke casually with one another in Inuktitut and appreciated teachers speaking informally with them in their native language, even if haltingly. And maintaining a modicum of classroom decorum was a problem entirely new to me, especially given the students' age.

At the end of my teaching stint, it was clear that there was no continuing teaching slot that I could apply to for the following year, and even if there were, it was unlikely that I would be selected in an open search that included Canadian citizens. While Pat would have liked to return to Puvirnituk, it was clear to both of us that we didn't want to live separately, especially given the remoteness of Puvirnituk. To find the best opportunity for both of us to pursue work in the same location, we returned to the United States.

I came away from our year in the arctic ready to return to Penn State to pursue my PhD in English and, hopefully, a faculty career in higher education. Pat hoped to continue teaching. So, I spent the next four years completing my PhD, and a year after that splitting my time between a post-doc instructorship and a research assistantship. Pat worked in early-childhood education, and we started a family mid-way through my PhD program at Penn State.

When it came time to focus on an area for my dissertation, I had to stray off the beaten path. In the early eighties, Penn State's graduate program was still built on a "broad coverage" model. We all began our coursework with an introductory course on bibliography and textual editing, and at the PhD level we prepared for and took comprehensive exams in five areas. I chose Old and Middle English literature, nineteenth century English literature, nineteenth century American literature, twentieth century American literature, and rhetoric and composition (the new kid on the graduate curriculum).

However, when it came time to focus my work toward writing a dissertation, I had to find a new channel. I had gravitated toward the history of rhetorical theory, only to discover that much of the coursework in that area was taught at the time in the department of speech communication, and when I settled on a dissertation focused on language theory in the work of 18th-century British rhetorician George Campbell, it turned out that the faculty member whose background best fit the project was also in speech communication. No one knew if a student was permitted to write a dissertation directed by an advisor outside one's own department. It turned out that there was no rule against it. With a committee comprised of faculty from both speech communication and English, I became the first PhD graduate from what would become a leading program in the field of rhetoric and composition.

Before submitting my dissertation, however, I got a short lesson in the territoriality of academe. I applied for a faculty position that, in retrospect, I realize

was not a good fit for, a fact that the search committee made abundantly clear. So I spent the following year at Penn State on a split appointment, 50 percent as an instructor and 50 percent as a research assistant to Professor Robert N. Hudspeth, who was working on his multivolume edition of the letters of Margaret Fuller.

Like my time spent in outdoor education before returning to academe and the appearance of John Smith and word-processing during the first year of my master's degree program, my work with Bob Hudspeth on the Fuller letters altered the landscape of my career in ways I did not plan or realize at the time. Deep dives into the library to research footnotes and research trips to archives to check transcriptions of primary materials caught my imagination and fit my habits of mind.

The following year, I accepted a tenure-track faculty position at The Ohio State University, which was developing its graduate program in rhetoric and composition. At the interview stage, a senior faculty member on the search committee whose research and teaching focused on Renaissance literature asked me whether I was focused on rhetoric or composition—not an unreasonable question from someone outside the field trying to help his department build and balance its faculty, but another reminder that junior faculty at a research university not only enter a fairly well-defined tenure track toward promotion but also fill a particular niche. The consequences of veering off the tenure track are spelled out in official promotion and tenure documents, but the consequences of wandering out of your area are largely left for new appointees to discover.

Of course, I had no clear intention at that point of wandering out of bounds: nearly all my conference presentations and publications while on the tenure track focused squarely on 18th-century rhetorical theory. But looking back, there were signs that I might go astray.

First, building on my experience working on the Margaret Fuller letters, I put a great deal of effort into a textual edition of the records of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, an 18th-century Scottish scholarly society to which my dissertation subject, George Campbell, along with other luminaries of the time, belonged. I included the published volume in my fourth-year review packet, and during my meeting with the department chair, he was careful to remind me that it was “not your tenure book.”

Fair enough. The edition was more a reference volume than a critical edition of a literary or historical work of interest, and, in any case, the days of earning tenure for edited volumes of any sort had largely faded into the past. Still, it was clearly a warning to get back on course with single-authored publishing of books and articles, and on schedule. I waited until I was tenured to publish a textual edition of one of the Philosophical Society members' presentations on language.

Little did my chair know about a publication I never put on my CV or mentioned in an annual review. I had purchased a TRS-80 Model 100 “laptop” back at Penn State, so I could log into the mainframe from home. At some point, I realized I could program in BASIC on it. I had no need to do so, but out of sheer curiosity born out of my work on the mainframe for word processing at Penn

State, I wrote a simple program for price comparisons quoted in different measures (e.g., pounds and ounces), and I published the code along with a description in *PCM* magazine, a trade publication for portable computing enthusiasts—and they actually paid me a small sum for the article!

Fast forward, and I did publish my book on debates about language in 18th-century British rhetorical theory, and I earned tenure and promotion. Once promoted to associate professor, my university and national service commitments increased, including a growing number of committees and program directorships focused on the expanding role of instructional and research computing in the humanities.

I began a series of collaborations and took on service roles that kept me shifting channels in the braided stream of mid-career, finding, along the way, that diverse streams had flowed together. Working with colleagues in other areas, I coordinated a colloquium on “English Studies in the Late Age of Print” with a colleague in Renaissance studies; organized a works-in-progress symposium on “The Greening of English Studies” with a college administrator; secured a National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Humanities Start-up Grant for a project on “Reliable Witnesses: Integrating Multimedia, Distributed Electronic Textual Editions into Library Collections and Preservation Efforts,” collaborating with a university librarian; and, in collaboration with a colleague from the geography department, developed an interdisciplinary course on environmental citizenship.

I served as chair of the Modern Language Association’s committee on computers and emerging technology, and when the volunteer bibliographer for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) stepped down, I developed and ran an online bibliography that allowed members to submit and consult entries via the web.

In the midst of these projects, the wind at my back changed direction dramatically and I had to reassess the course of my career. In the early 2000s, it was becoming clear that computer systems were a necessary support for teaching and research across higher education, but there was no direct faculty oversight of those systems in our college of humanities. Probably because I had spent four years in the late 1990s as director of the English department’s computers in composition and literature program and two years as chair of a faculty oversight committee that advised the college about its information systems, the dean of the college asked me to fill the new position of Assistant Dean for Research and Instructional Computing.

I quickly became immersed in developing, managing, and defending budgets; hiring, supervising, and advocating for technical and instructional support staff; consulting with faculty and departments across the college to make sure we were meeting their needs; writing grants large and small; and representing the college’s interests to the university on matters that ranged from building projects to computer security. And I continued to teach and conduct research, though at a much-reduced rate.

The job strained my sense of professional identity in ways I hadn't anticipated. Perhaps because the position and title were so new and focused on computing in a college of humanities, the university couldn't seem to figure out whether I was staff or faculty: my email inbox made this abundantly clear.

Part of the confusion no doubt stemmed from a decision the dean had made about the position, which he established as Assistant Dean for Research and Instructional Computing. There were only two other faculty positions in the college office—the Dean and the Associate Dean for Faculty, who administered the college's promotion and tenure program. Both of those positions were traditionally filled by full professors. The college staff also consisted of several other assistant deans, positions traditionally not filled by faculty. Occasionally, this blurred identity came into sharp focus.

One day, when the dean who hired me was consulting with someone from the university about reallocating space, he stopped by my admittedly spacious office and said to the consultant, "I don't know why we put an associate professor in this office." Now, I had been moved nearly every year as we played our annual game of musical offices, and the dean had recently put me in the space in question that day in order to make it easier for me to consult with others in the college office, but when faced with someone from an office to whom he reported (at least in matters of space allocation), he suddenly became self-conscious about matters of rank.

A few years later, I decided I wanted to return full-time to my faculty position in the department of English, partly because I was eager to spend more time in the classroom and the library, and partly because I had decided that my administrative position was no longer necessary—the people I oversaw had matured in the job and were working seamlessly with faculty, and much of the administrative oversight I had been doing was absorbed by a merger of our college into a federation of colleges.

When I reached this decision, the dean at the time (the third since I joined the college administration) was surprised, remarking, "I thought you would go off somewhere and become CIO" (administrators seem to always be going off somewhere new). I realized that I had indeed wandered beyond my comfort zone, and I felt the need to seek new channels in the braided stream.

For the next seven years, I resumed a full schedule of teaching in three areas: digital media composition, electronic textual editing, and environmental citizenship (an interdisciplinary course I developed with colleagues in geography). I also continued work on a project I had developed with a colleague during my tenure as Assistant Dean, the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (thedaln.org). I participated regularly in the work of Literacy@OSU, an interdisciplinary working group focused on literacy studies.

These efforts were different channels in the braided stream of my career and navigating them kept me very engaged. But I was not working on a "second book." Once, after a teaching observation of a graduate textual editing class, a colleague urged me to "get promoted, it's great on the other side." In short, focus

on writing a book—to get to the other side. However, I already had another “other side” in my sights.

By 2014, Pat and I had been volunteering for our local metro park system and a nonprofit land trust for well over a decade. My volunteer work increasingly focused on photography and videography in support of environmental programming and land acquisition projects. In addition, I was beginning to realize that the six electronic textual editing projects I had worked on with my students in a series of undergraduate and graduate courses from 2003 to 2014 were not going to reach their intended goals if I continued teaching new projects year after year.

The projects, undertaken in collaboration with the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Ohio State, which held the journals and collections of letters that we were editing, involved not only the scholarly work of textual editing but also consideration of models and current options for peer review, publication, and preservation of electronic textual editions, goals we couldn’t see to completion during an academic term.

Pat and I decided it was time to retire; to camp, hike, and travel in the spirit we did when we met, while we still had the ability to do so; to deepen our commitment to volunteering, especially for environmental projects; and for me to see a complex project—the electronic textual editions—to its conclusion. Ten years later, we have together undertaken several months-long camping trips throughout North America, created photos and videos in support of land-preservation projects, and worked to transform our small suburban lot into part of what Douglas Tallamy calls the Homegrown National Park—a loose network devoted to converting lawn to habitat for native plants and wildlife.

I serve on the board of a nonprofit land preservation preserve system, and Pat helps coordinate a biannual series of Women’s Walk in the Woods events for the same nonprofit. Pat also serves on the leadership team of a research garden at OSU’s Waterman Farm. And I finished revising those electronic textual editions and seeing them through peer review, publication, and preservation in a university’s online archive, fulfilling a promise I had made to myself and my students.

I never expected my academic career to turn out the way it did. Of course, I don’t remember extended career trajectories being a source of much speculation among my cohort of PhD students in the early 1980s. Beyond the drama (or what often felt like a lottery) of securing an academic position in one’s chosen field, careers in higher education seemed broadly scripted—longitudinally, for those seeking and fortunate enough to secure tenure-track positions, as a linear progression from assistant to associate and then full professor; and day-to-day, as a mix of teaching, research, and service. The reality has been much more complex, challenging, and interesting. Our colleagues’ unique routes into, through, out of, and beyond academia—whether in deep, straight courses or braided, meandering channels—tell us something valuable about the landscape of higher education and the diversity of human experience.