

Introduction. Past, Presents, and Futures?

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What I call “academic paths,” or the variety of careers that constitute in full or in part higher education, constitute the subject of this collection of first-person autobiographical essays. “Academic paths” are commonly misunderstood. This is often for understandable reasons. More often than not, it results from the lack of historical understanding of careers both into and out of teaching positions of different kinds.

However contradictorily, higher education past and present is poorly studied and our understandings—*plural*—are dominated by myths and biases. By myths, I do not mean fictions but instead incomplete or stunted comprehension that is circulated and often accepted widely (for interpretation and evidence, see Graff, 2023g, 2023h, 2025 especially).

Incomplete ahistorical perceptions dominate conceptions of academic career paths—tending to focus on only recent “jobs crises,” the disappearance of tenure-track and full-time professorships, “contingent” and sessional appointments, time-limited perspectives based on experiences in only one discipline or sub-discipline, and challenges for women and two-career households. This collection contributes to a larger perspective and seeks to promote chronological and comparative understandings.

Few of the many complaints have comparative or chronological context. Through a series of unique personal accounts of those who developed “alternative” or “non-traditional academic careers” over more than one half century—from the 1960s to the present—this book presents a compelling counter, historically based understanding: both a corrective to general misunderstanding and an “alternative history,” especially when taken as a whole rather than as separate parts. That is one reason for the chronological organization.

This book contributes to the Practices & Possibilities series within the WAC Clearinghouse publishing collaborative. It does not focus on career paths within, into and out of, or out of and into the many different areas of writing studies. Although all the authors in this book taught writing within and across disciplines, at community colleges and high schools, to undergraduates and graduate students, only five were assigned directly or primarily to writing or composition studies (see essays by Civello, Ulman, Berry, Casey, and Brigley Thompson).

On the one hand, these five authors collectively offer a historical and chronological perspective needed to understand writing studies—among other post-postsecondary positions—*over time, place, disciplines, gender, and other life*

statuses. On the other hand, also unusual, they contribute to a *comparative perspective on the vexed questions of contingency and security*. Comparisons with the essays, for example, in edited collections by Kahn, Lalicker, and Lynch-Binieck (2017) and Dorfield (2022) are valuable (see also Doe et al., 2011; Doe & Palmquist 2013)

Whereas Civello, Ulman, Berry, Casey, and Brigley Thompson have had the closest connections to writing studies—from teaching high school, community college classes, and required and optional undergraduate classes to doctoral student supervision, and across specializations and genres—almost all the authors have held at least one contingent appointment, from graduate teaching assistant and preceptor at Princeton (Frisch) to cross-disciplinary senior lecturer (Brigley Thompson). Their experiences and understandings add to our comprehension of changing patterns of career paths, different forms of contingency, security and insecurity, and both continuities and transitions over time.

The essays in this book encourage comparisons that embrace both continuities and changes. Non-tenure-track positions have a long history across disciplines, just as “job crises” were experienced in almost every decade of the twentieth century, most emphatically beginning in the 1960s. The experiences of those in every cohort included herein demonstrate this. That is precisely why this original collection is organized by decade. Narratives that over-emphasize the recency of instability and insecurity are ahistorical and out of context (see Graff, 2025).

The power of the perspectives, narratives, arguments, and revisions of the powerful personal accounts brought together here cannot be underestimated. At once, the authors of the essays in this collection speak to the past, present, and plural possible futures of higher education and professional academic career paths. They open many doors toward understanding, and they close others.

Not of least consequence, they speak to the questions and the still developing paths and careers of the young and some not so young students, early-, and mid-career persons. Together, with the contributors, I hope to provide new insights and, when possible, hope and inspiration.

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Consider these titles of recent articles on academic careers in the higher education press. All lack historical perspective. All perpetuate myths of “unprecedented crises” of undefined “academic” positions and promote confusions that mislead more than promote understanding. Misuse of terms is a constant among both present and former English instructors and professors. They perpetuate dangerous mythologies and misunderstandings that negatively impact the shaping of future generations of scholars and professors.

- “After Learning Her TA Would Be Paid More Than She Was, This Lecturer Quit” (Lu, 2024). They were not paid on comparable terms.
- *Academic Failure and Success Redefined: New career trajectories, including those for scholars interested in leaving a tenure-track position, need to*

be normalized and valued (Dorr, 2024). None of the contributors to this book considered “leaving a tenure track position” to be “failure.” At least one did it by choice—successfully and happily (Civello). Others did not receive tenure (Brigley Thompson). After 18 years on contract with union protection, Elizabeth Cohen gained a tenure-track position, followed by promotion to associate professor with tenure, and then full professor.

- “Leaving Academe? You Need More than ‘Transferable Skills.’ To be a viable candidate beyond the campus, you have to get over your academic self” (Pannacker, 2023). Nowhere does the author pause to define “academic self.” Similarly, “transferable skills” are highly variable and context-dependent. All of the essays in this book speak to that issue.
- “How to Pilot a Postacademic Career: Two PhDs who left academe and now run their own businesses offer advice on professional transitions” (Pannacker & Polk, 2024). Neither of these authors “left academe”; they moved *within* its broad domains. None “got over their ‘academic self.’” They utilized their learning and skills in different professional contexts. In other words, they “transferred skills,” so to speak. That is so often missed, resulting in distortion. The essays in this collection may be read in that context. (See, in particular, Frisch, Mattingly, Civello, Herrington, Drucker, Schroedel, Ulman, Leyva, Berry.)
- “PhD students need better advice about non-academic career option” (Walsh, 2023). Writing this in 2023 underscores the depth of long-standing problems and the domination of both self-serving and negative mythologies. The experiences of the contributors to this collection contradict this critique from the 1960s forward.

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The plural worlds of higher education drown in a swamp of ahistorical myths and misconceptions. We have little useful historical memory. Thus, since 2000, and especially since 2008 with the “great recession,” and with better collection of data on posted jobs and job searches, all twists and turns, overwhelmingly negative, are characterized as “unprecedented,” regardless of evidence to the contrary. Plural, complicated, contradictory pasts that are potentially useful for learning and responding to current situations knowledgeably and constructively are ignored. They are neither remembered nor reconstructed factually. The essays in this book speak to different patterns and call for a different understanding over time, from Frisch to Thompson. That is, from the 1960s to the present.

Standing high among the many dangerously misleading myths and misconceptions are notions that *only* in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have established “traditional” academic career paths been shattered from a regular progression from undergraduate to graduate studies with solid financial support to tenure-track assistant professorships and then tenure and promotion.

By myths, I underscore, I do not mean fictions but conceptions that accord at least in small part with different persons' incomplete or partial sense of realities. As Antonio Gramsci, in particular, taught us, this sense of familiarity, however inaccurate, provides the foundation for cultural hegemony (see Graff, 2022d, 2024a, 2025). For example, the omnipresence of the hegemony of the "traditional" academic career especially for middle and upper-middle class white men erases historical memories. In fact, there has been a "job crisis" in every decade since the 1960s, long before the 1990s and especially the early 2010s when regular numerical records began.

In addition, there have always been "contingent" instructors. That is, nontenure-track appointments, full- and part-time lectureships, and adjuncts are not novel. These varied positions have a long history. In fact, if the *longue durée* of the history of higher education is considered, both tenure and tenure track have relatively short durations. Along with "academic freedom," they are developments of the 20th century (for an introduction, see Scott, 2019, and essays in this book).

In addition, while gender, race, and ethnicity are enormously important, there is a history of "trailing male spouses" in nontenure-track positions. So-called "spousal/partner hiring" merits its own study. The essays by the Cohens, Herrington, and Brigley Thompson, in particular, address this. We also forget that the struggles for Affirmative Action in admissions, support, and faculty hiring began actively in the 1960s and grew out of the civil rights movement, long before Diversity Equity Inclusivity (DEI) initiatives and notions of "quotas" dominated the media, politics, and the courts. The history of gender in universities since the 1960s is a prominent topic in this book, as well.

As I have argued elsewhere, historically most students were poor and most collegiate study was vocational. The dichotomies we encounter in higher education today developed in the second half of the 19th and especially the 20th centuries with the emergence of the liberal arts colleges and the modern American university (see Graff, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; compare with Mattingly, 2017; Veysey, 1965, 1981).

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A personal example and perspective:

I introduce many of this volume's major themes and reinterpretations by leading with a personal example (see Graff, 2024a). I discuss my own experience in detail in *My Life With Literacy: The Continuing Education of a Historian. Intersections of the Personal, the Political, the Academic, and Place*. When I entered graduate school at the University of Toronto in 1970, as a new Bachelor of Arts graduate in History and Sociology from Northwestern University, there were very few tenure-track positions on the so-called "academic job market," which never operated like either a "free" or a regulated "marketplace." Both my undergraduate advisor and graduate advisors mentioned this to me.

The opportunities that arose first in the post-World War Two expansion of public, especially state-based, higher education systems, followed by the proliferation of private universities, ended by the late 1960s and early 1970s. Faculty

positions ebbed and flowed with enrollment changes, state and external funding, and budgets. All function in relationship to the large political economy. After more than 100 years, astonishingly, Thorstein Veblen's 1918 *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (2015) remains the best guide. It is repeatedly rediscovered and then forgotten.

In fact, every decade of the 20th century after the 1920s was punctuated by regular "academic job crises." This is absent from what passes for "historical memory" (see Graff, 2023c, 2025).

With the support first of a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, I chose to study in Canada. The program there offered a combination of intended fields of study (which changed), reasonable living costs, and sources of support including universal health care, and it enabled an alternate to the Vietnam War draft. Had I remained in my intended field of British history, I almost certainly would never have found a tenure-track position in the 1970s. My graduate school peers did not. Shifting to comparative social and cultural history of North America and Western Europe with training in "new social history" (i.e., new at the time) greatly enhanced my job prospects.

In 1975, when I received my PhD in history and history of education from the University of Toronto, there were almost no positions in Canada, my first choice of geographic location. This was especially true for Americans. In the United States, too, there were few jobs until the late 1970s and early 1980s (Graff, 2024a, 2024b, 2025).

The most attractive positions at that time were at the new University of Texas at Dallas. A research center founded by Texas Instruments expanded first into a graduate university in the sciences, and then in 1975 into an upper division so-called "interdisciplinary" university. As a result, more than 120 faculty—overwhelmingly assistant professors with no more than one or two years of previous nontenure-track teaching experience, if that—were hired to begin that fall semester. Few of us saw the campus before moving. I was hired following an interview at a Toronto airport hotel.

Only a handful of incoming faculty began with tenure, and most of these professors had been denied promotion in their previous positions at traditional institutions. Their contrast with the younger, "newly minted" assistant professors was striking. One Princeton-educated political economist quipped, more accurately than not, about his peers, "Aren't we all someone famous' best student?" There were also nontenure-track appointees including spouses. The latter was also true in my years at the also new, suburban University of Texas at San Antonio, 1998-2004 (the site of my brief administrative "career"), and the huge, now 150-year-old Ohio State University, 2004-2017.

We gathered from around North America and beyond in August 1975 at a suburban campus still under construction with little leadership, organization, and preparation, and almost no knowledge of its initial student population. I received no guidance from my "senior" colleagues. Major collegial advice came from somewhat older untenured faculty with previous full-time teaching experience.

“Interdisciplinarity,” we learned quickly, translated into a marketing slogan and major cost-saving. That is, there were no departments with offices and staff of their own. This framing motivated the new colleges of arts and humanities, social sciences, education and human development, and general education to join the science departments in UTD’s effort to gain approval for public university status and funding from the State of Texas. With no self-awareness or acknowledgement of the contradictions, the new colleges all operated degree programs in traditional disciplinary majors at the undergraduate level. The sciences continued as distinct departments as if in a different university (on interdisciplinarity, see Graff, 2015, 2024a, 2025).

Most students were “nontraditional.” They transferred from community colleges for their junior and senior years, often after military service. Many women students returned to college after their children were in school. They were among my best undergraduate and graduate students. The average student, to our surprise, was older than many of the new PhDs, including me.

These students had little or no idea about what “interdisciplinary” meant. Thus, many courses, in folklore and musicology, for example, where too many faculty—especially women—were hired initially, failed to “make.” That is, these classes didn’t attract the required minimum enrollment to be run. Many talented young professors, along with some of their peers, were terminated before the end of their third year without a full review. None of us were informed about that feature of the employment and tenure procedures at the University of Texas. Indeed, procedures like these are among the missing elements in writing about changing academic career paths and represent an underexplored form of contingency and insecurity.

Tenure-track faculty, contrary to common assumptions, were then as disposable as adjuncts and lecturers. We have no longitudinal data on numbers or rates of faculty leaving full-time positions either before or after tenure. “Academic couples” were treated unequally. Long-term professors recognize that “career changes” were never unusual. The essays by Frisch, Mattingly, Civello, Herrington, Drucker, Schroedel, Ulman, Leyva, and Berry all reflect this in different ways and different contexts.

Other outstanding new PhDs resigned after one or two years of full-time teaching. One gave a full year’s notice at the end of their first year. A university professorship, especially at the brand-new University of Texas at Dallas, was not what most of us had envisioned, prepared for, or desired. Importantly, in the cases with which I am familiar, these early career scholars were able to use—I will not write “transfer,” which I consider inappropriate—their knowledge and skills for fully productive, satisfying professional careers. This is a very important element of academic career paths that remains largely unrecognized and unstudied. See the essays by Civello, Herrington, for example, and for “late” movements toward academic positions, see the Civello, Drucker, Ulman, Schroedel, Leyva, Wilson, and Berry chapters (see also Graff publications in References, below).

In the University of Texas system, as in most four-year and graduate universities and systems, a faculty member’s fourth year requires a full review of “progress

toward tenure.” At some institutions, this is an exploratory diagnostic predictive or prognostic procedure or process with a supportive guidance function; at others, it is more critical, sometimes aimed at fault-finding and termination (see Graff, 2022b, 2022c, 2023a).

The circumstances at UTD foreshadowed today’s programs with insufficient numbers of tenured faculty, many of whom either or both lacked relevant prior experience in collegial evaluations or were scarred by their own personal experiences. This was especially a problem for the first cohort of new assistant professors. For example, one extremely well-qualified political scientist was denied tenure because his publications and teaching achievement exceeded that of his tenured colleagues. Using his knowledge and skills, he next led a Congressional subcommittee and then national political rights organizations. Personality clashes as well as jealousy and inferiority mixed inappropriately and unethically with academic protocols. In the end, most faculty concluded that the combination of the third- and fourth-year reviews of new faculty genuinely constituted (in the traditionally demeaning rhetoric) a “junior faculty massacre” (see Graff, 2022b, 2022c, 2024a, 2025).

Regarding my own experience, I was “put up,” or considered, for “early tenure.” My first book was under contract and moving into production, a colleague and I had an edited collection of essays from a conference under contract, and I had received a national competitive fellowship for the next year. In short, I was a strong candidate. Yet, British antisemitic faculty, who had been denied tenure at their previous institutions, led a dishonest, unprofessional, and unethical assault on me. Despite broad faculty pushback, I was denied early tenure because of “doubts about my collegiality,” as the university president’s official letter expressed it. Collegiality, it turns out, was not a stated condition for promotion and tenure.

When I was re-reviewed three years later—after National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and Spencer Foundation fellowship years “in exile” at The Newberry Library—campus-wide support as well as my record of achievement ensured my relatively straight-forward process toward tenure and promotion. Antisemitism, among other forms of racial, gender, and ethnic prejudice, has always been common in higher education institutions. In fact, admissions “quotas” persisted well into the 1960s.

Of continuing relevance is the fact that I actively sought other positions for two years, 1979–1981, all university based but some in administration rather than teaching and research. More than a few posts were unacceptable on almost all grounds. Toward the end of that period, I was offered an excellent tenure-track position at the University of Massachusetts at Boston as head of an interdisciplinary program. Just before I sent my letter of resignation to UTD, the state of Massachusetts announced its Spring 1981 fiscal bankruptcy. The attractive position was canceled. Both public and private university economic perils are not novel (see Graff, 2024a, 2024b, 2025).

My career—as *My Life with Literacy*, my hybrid autobiography, explains—took me in and out of administrative positions and a series of joint and

cross-departmental and disciplinary academic career paths at three public universities. Two of these institutions were new. The third was the huge main campus of a long-established state university. My paths were multiple, not singular, constant, or consistent. All the contributors to this collection shed needed light on questions that have long shaped the experiences of faculty who seek to pursue meaningful and rewarding academic career paths.

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In the essays that follow, several key themes emerge. These themes are taken up in varying ways and combinations. They all speak to the wide range of paths followed by their authors and, by extension, by scholars more generally.

Theme 1. Field Changes

Unlike many peers then or later, I was educated and developed further as a comparative and interdisciplinary scholar, teacher, and program developer. I held appointments in history; humanities; social science; education; literacy, languages, and culture; and comparative studies. I earned tenure in history, humanities, and English. I supervised doctoral students in arts and humanities; English; history; literacy, language, and culture; education; art; and dance. I sought flexibility and new opportunities, their relationships, and their challenges. I learned with ever-expanding networks of colleges and students at every point.

Theme 2. The Advantages and Challenges of Interdisciplinarity

Often but far from always, my interdisciplinarity was a career advantage. Sometimes, however, I was asked, “Well, what are you?” “Where do you belong?” Knowing that my doctoral dissertation was based in part on quantitative and demographic analysis, one of the British antisemites in my department actually asked, “Do you speak in numbers?”

A social and cultural historian, I ended my career based in an English department (with a joint appointment) because the endowed inaugural Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies Chair was awarded to the department of English. Some members of that department never accepted a historian among their ranks. Of course, faculty in literary history, criticism, rhetoric and composition, and creative writing often clashed with each other, as well. Given the quantity of whining essays by English and other humanities instructors, silence on that issue is telling.

On questions of interdisciplinarity, see Drucker and Herrington among other chapters below. Compare with chapters by Frisch, Mattingly, Civello, Levya, Pooley, Berry, and Brigley Thompson.

Theme 3. The Enduring Reality of Contingent Positions

Along the way, at every university with which I was associated from 1967 to the present, there was always a wide and widening variety of nontenure-track positions, such as adjuncts and lecturers. Doctoral students long taught a number of undergraduate classes. In fact, I was a teaching assistant—compensated with course credit, not payment—as a college junior, I and taught graduate students at both Northwestern University (summer 1973) and the University of Toronto (1974) while a doctoral student myself.

In the first case, I took the place of graduate TAs who were conducting dissertation research abroad. In the latter two examples, I substituted for a professor away for the summer and a professor who had moved universities and was not replaced with a specialist in his field of expertise. Tenure-track faculty never dominated. Frisch, Elizabeth Cohen, Civello, Drucker, and Brigley Thompson illustrate these experiences.

Contemporary handwringing about the novelty and recency of professional academic employment crises and loss of a firm base in tenure-track positions is uninformed. There is a long, important history that is valuable to all parties, especially present and prospective graduate students.

On the always vexed issues associated with contingent positions, including “academic couples,” “spousal hires,” and “trailing spouses,” see chapters by Cohens, Herrington, Brigley Thompson.

Theme 4. The Enduring Myth of the Jobs Crisis

As the pages of *Inside Higher Ed*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Times Higher Education*, and professional society bulletin boards confirm daily, the question of the present and the future of academic positions attracts considerable attention. Almost tragically, little of that attention is accurate or useful. In part, that stems from historical and comparative neglect (see Graff, 2025). This book represents a step toward a remedy.

Almost all discussions and comments about academic career patterns focus on the present and very recent past, women and gender, and “job crises” of doctoral students and new PhDs. Focus falls overwhelmingly on the arts and humanities, despite the fact that the social and natural sciences share the same negative trends and impacts. In the sciences, in particular, paths are complicated—often but not always enhanced—by post-doctoral fellowships which sometimes but not always include teaching obligations.

There is little awareness that throughout the history of colleges and universities, and especially since the 1950s-1960s, variations in career paths have been common, indeed constant. By no means have these developments centered only on “the present” (invoking presentism), gender and marital status, disciplines and departments, or the changing availability of tenure-track positions or even

“dual career” couples. See, for example, chapters by Cohens, Herrington, and Brigley Thompson.

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This collection of 14 original, critical, and contextual autobiographical essays begins to revise the frequently uninformed and misleading commentaries that have shaped our collective perception of higher education career paths. It constitutes both an alternative history from the 1960s on as well as corrective examples, indeed lessons, on the great variety of academic paths. Individually and collectively, the chapters that follow begin to refute stereotypical assumptions of traditional paths, before and after scenarios, and recent crises. Taken together, they begin to pave paths to new understandings, and perhaps parts of solutions.

Reading Changing Academic Paths by Chronological Cohorts, 1960s to the Present

This volume is organized at the first level by cohorts defined by the decades during which they completed their postgraduate studies and entered professional job markets. They demonstrate the presence and the shifting patterns of both persisting and transitional opportunities. Both individual and collective choices and their constraints are revealed over time and in their complexity and contradictions, all in historical context. Compare, for example, the experiences of Frisch, Mattingly, and Thomas Cohen with Drucker, Schroedel, and Ulman, and then with Berry, Casey, Elizabeth Cohen, and Brigley Thompson. Compare time, places, specific institutions with fields of studies and opportunities. Note the roles of chance, changes, and continuities. These original essays explore and illuminate the key roles of personal choices, chance, opportunities, movement across academic positions, movement into and out of academia, gender and relationships, and more in specific historical contexts. Typically ignored but always powerful is the role of chance and luck.

Nothing in the published literature compares to this urgently needed original presentation. Compare this book, for example, with collections and discussions by Ryan and Sackrey (1984), Frost and Taylor (1996), Edgerton et al. (2003), Bowen and Schuster (1986), Blackburn and Lawrence (1993), Ferber and Loeb (1997), and Franklin (2009). For writing studies in particular, see Dorfeld (2022) and Kahn et al. (2017).

Central Themes across Experiences

In this volume, lines are crossed again and again: lines presumed to be fixed in only certain historical periods and lines involving fields of specialization, institutions, life course stages, and geography. The life course paths recounted herein cross time,

space, gender, generation, and the humanities, social sciences, and arts (on life course analysis, see, for example, Elder, 1986). Importantly, this set of autobiographical essays may be read in terms of each of these elements as well as chronologically.

Each essay is revealing, sometimes moving, in itself. As a whole, they are unusually compelling and valuable, a necessary and unprecedented contribution. There are no competing collections of academic lives. There are no comparable volumes. Other, often older books lack the specific focus, historical and contemporary context, timeliness, and combined historical, interdisciplinary, and cross-gender, marital, and generational emphasis. There are a small number of autobiographies, memoirs, and the like, but none based as this one is in comparative or historical contexts (see Graff, 2024a, Introduction).

The paths are revealing and diverse, and all are forms of nontraditional scholarly careers: some move back and forth between universities and other spheres; some move beyond academia and into successful different careers; some shift from success in traditional scholarship to more public involvement and civic engagement; some explore new fields of study; some involve dual career families, spousal or partner hiring, and divorce; some involve leaving academia early in careers, while others start later (see also Graff, 2022a, 2023a, 2023b, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2024a, 2025).

In the fullest expression, the book is global. By that, I refer to the simultaneous profoundly and inescapably interconnectedness of these scholarly lives in transition during a critical but misunderstood three-quarters of a century in the recent history of higher education. Contributors' lives encompass Canada (Cohens), Wales and England (Brigley Thompson), as well as the United States.

The stories of these lives are infrequently heard, but here they are powerfully and originally taken together across time, gender, age, institutional and geographic locations, life circumstances, and disciplines. They contribute to our understanding in numerous ways. This is clear from the chapter highlights below. Indeed, these are powerful life histories by well-published, distinguished scholar-authors. Here, professional experiences are inseparably connected to personal life experiences.

Although the chapters—and the lives—are ordered chronologically, they may be read, understood, and used in classrooms and other discussion settings in different order and arrangements. They may inform reflection about personal and professional experiences. They may help us think differently about time and what is actually new these days.

Organizing Principles and Narrative Approaches

Chronology: change and continuity. Today's new is not unprecedented. Doctoral graduates of the late 1960s, 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s faced job crises and the lack of tenure-track positions in their fields of specialization, too. The contributors to this volume changed fields at times, and several helped to create new ones.

Others shifted careers entirely. Understanding these moves and decisions and the issues underlying them demands historical context. The history of higher education combines change *and* continuity inseparably. Too much is now presumed, erroneously, to be novel.

First-person testimonies. Through a collection of autobiographical essays, this book begins a new history and presents a set of human experiences that reveal both continuities and different kinds of movements or life transitions, individually and collectively.

The essays are arranged in chronological order to present a history and narrative of changes intertwined with continuities. The roles of chance, luck, opportunity, and contradictions appear at every turn. Both opportunities and surprise punctuate these experiences. Almost no career paths support the notion that academic progress was more often linear and regular than not. We need narratives—like these—of new, complicated, and multiple paths.

Recognizing, interrogating, and replacing myths. Myths, especially of crises and novelty, following expected linear patterns, are often more powerful taken in isolation and out of context than in documented realities and the narratives of actual lives. This collection testifies—literally and figuratively—to diversity, change, and a lack of continuity. Each essay explores unexpected and unpredictable, often surprising paths to academic careers. As we should expect, those paths include periods outside higher education as well as engaged with other forms of teaching, such as in high schools and community colleges. They also include mixes of tenure-track and nontenure-track positions and are informed by personal factors including gender and personal relationships.

More specifically, the essays highlight—and may be read with reference to:

- Roles of different kinds of institutions. In particular, this includes secondary schools, community colleges, non- or extra-institutional experiences as well as all forms of public and private, large and small universities.
- Gender and family relationships, and their changes over individuals' lives
- Patterns of hiring, tenure, and promotion or their absence
- Roles of institutional leadership, finances, opportunities, and limits
- Individual preferences and choices
- Institutional and disciplinary similarities and distinctions
- Main paths beyond normative and stereotypical careers
- Paths seldom as novel as typically and uninformatively portrayed
- The power of chance and accident

Take together, these essays highlight and explore the following topics:

- Conceptions of academic career paths are dominated by incomplete ahistorical perceptions that focus largely on jobs crises and challenges for women in particular with no comparative context. This book presents a compelling alternative understanding.

- Questions about the present and the futures of academic positions understandably attract considerable attention today and recently.
- There is little awareness that throughout the history of colleges and universities, and especially since the 1950s-1960s, variations in career paths—nontraditional or alternative—have been common. By no means have common human experiences centered on the present (or presentism), gender and marital status, or the changing availability of tenure-track positions or even dual career couples in isolation from other factors.
- The essays show that from the 1960s the presence and shifting patterns of both persisting and transitional opportunities and choices are revealed over time and in their complexity and contradictions, all in historical context. Nothing in the published literature compares to this urgently needed original presentation.

By way of concluding this introduction, I underscore these points that ring through all the essays: In their own distinct ways, they make the point that most faculty had faculty advisors and colleagues who supported their non-compartmentalized aims. These academics, unlike most administrators, breach the walls to support issues that are not traditional. Even more powerful, indeed inescapably compelling, is the persistence of the contributors across time, fields, space, and place. They all tolerate difficult, usually unexpected, challenges and transformations. They were resilient, listening to their inner drummers. They created the roles that made sense to them, within shifting opportunities and constraints, even when the drivers were outside the walls of academe. Many paths were not linear, were not singular. Together, the authors and editor call for others to join us in presenting exemplary experiences in academia in their own words.

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