Chapter 14. Alternative to Nothing: Rejecting "Alt-Ac" Success Stories and Acknowledging Failure

Daniel S. Brown
Lincoln Memorial University

I've made a huge mistake.

– Recurring catchphrase uttered by several Arrested Development *characters*

I must preface this essay by stating that I am quite happy with my current line of work—in fact, much happier than I was with any of the positions I obtained in the years following my completion of a Ph.D. in English. After many years, I have mostly made my peace with the path my career has taken, and if it weren't for the massive debt that I have been saddled with, I might have nothing left to complain about. But what a debt it is—taken on in the naïve hope that it would be liberating, but instead proving much the opposite. No one should be saddled with that.

In short, the problem is that there are simply more people earning doctoral degrees than there are positions that require these degrees. This is especially the case with the liberal arts and humanities. For many of these degrees, the only jobs for which they are truly required are professorships, and there simply aren't enough of those positions for the number of those credentialed. Of course, people with doctoral degrees in all sorts of fields find employment. These success stories often are held up as examples of the type of work available in an "alternative academic" or "alt-ac" job market. Yet, the supposed success of the "alt-ac" market leaves unaddressed whether doctoral degrees were needed for these jobs in the first place, and, more importantly, whether they were worth the investment of time, effort, and money.

My current work as an academic librarian is, by all definitions, an "alt-ac" position, even though my doctoral degree was in no way necessary for entry. In fact, as I will discuss in this essay, getting onto this career path meant "giving up" and "starting over" after several years of trying and failing to get into a tenure-track professorship. Moreover, this original goal was one that I honestly believed would suit me, and not—as some "alt-ac" proponents such as Rebeca Schuman argue—one imposed on me by hidebound faculty mentors ("Alt-Ac Talk"). Thus, I would be loath for anyone to associate my professional success with the "alt-ac" market, as such a move would only serve to perpetuate deep-seated problems with the academic system.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2022.1589.2.14

My Story

I was raised with a very grim approach to work. It was simply a necessity for life, and, despite high academic achievements, I was not to set high goals for myself or view myself as too good for any occupation. My mother frequently advised me—apparently without irony—that I could always resort to ditch digging if necessary. Work meant an endless tedium, a soul-crushing obligation to keep oneself afloat no matter what else. Even after completing an undergraduate degree, some part of me accepted that I could get by with the dish washing that I had been doing as a source of pocket money.

However, my father, after changing careers several times, was a librarian, and, having spent much time with him at his job, I thought this might be something I also could do. So, I applied for graduate programs in library science, and I was accepted into a good program, although my performance in that program was admittedly not very good. I finished that program and obtained a job at a small, local liberal arts college. I decided I might like academic librarianship and, realizing that would require a second graduate degree, enrolled in a broad-based master's degree in liberal arts.

A number of factors then conspired to lead me into seeking a doctoral degree in English. Some of it was the result of therapy, in which I was encouraged to seek out better opportunities for myself and to embrace my interests more enthusiastically. Some of it was also the influence of a professor who saw potential in me and encouraged me to go farther with my studies. I had hoped this would be a path that might liberate me from an otherwise bleak perception of the future and the working world. My pursuit of a doctoral degree thus came in earnest, with a genuine belief—supported by people whose opinions I trusted and valued—that it would be a good move not just professionally but also for my overall wellbeing.

Although it came with its frustrations, particularly towards the end, graduate school proved to be a respite. Being young and intellectually curious, I could spend time reading, writing, and reflecting on abstract concepts, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I liked the community of intellectuals and the exchange of ideas. I imagined the possibility of a career in which I might continue to enjoy this lifestyle.

My first academic job after graduation was as a visiting instructor, a three-year, contracted gig teaching technical writing to business and engineering students. This was a long way from Victorian literature, which had been the focus of my dissertation, but I had some experience teaching this subject as a graduate assistant, and the job at least kept me in the academic pipeline. The salary was not especially good, and I didn't much care for the teaching, but I figured I was paying my dues.

While working this gig, I spent considerable time on professional development. I worked on converting my dissertation into a book, which I hoped would confer an advantage on the job market. I attended conferences, workshops and

even a month-long NEH symposium. And I applied for jobs—literally hundreds of them. I applied, of course, to tenure-track positions in my specialty, but also to generalist positions and positions teaching composition and technical writing, no matter how poor the pay or the workload. I was raised, after all, to be not very selective when it came to work, and I figured my malleability would put me in good stead. Unfortunately, this would be the highest-paying, most secure position I would ever hold in any sort of professorial capacity.

When that gig ended, I moved into my parents' two-bedroom apartment and stitched together a meager living from several part-time jobs. Some, such as scoring SAT English tests, I could work remotely from their apartment. Others required two- to three-hour round-trip drives to community colleges spread out across two states to teach English composition and technical writing courses for around $2,000 for an entire semester. Some nights I would book a hotel room so that I didn't have to commute back to my parents' place.

While I did all of this temporary work, I continued to apply for academic jobs and develop myself professionally. I even completed the book and got it published. Sadly, none of this helped me in getting tenure-track employment. I had one interview at an MLA convention, and that was it. Eventually, I decided this would not work and started to ask myself what else I might do.

Thus began the process of surrender and rebuilding. I had the library science degree to fall back on but hadn't worked in a library for over a decade. I applied for a few library jobs, but no one responded. I needed to find a way, no matter how small, to get back into the industry. So, I applied for and received a part-time job through a temp agency doing what was essentially data entry for a company that created library products. Much of my time was spent reviewing transcripts of Holocaust survivor testimonies—fascinating but bleak. For a while, I worked this job and also taught several English courses as an adjunct, continuing on as a "freeway warrior."

However, when the company offered me a full-time position in a different department, I quit the adjunct teaching positions altogether. I was given an annual salary of $44,000, which was the most I had ever received in my life. I was part of a team of five new hires—two of us had doctoral degrees in humanities subjects, and two of us had master's degrees in library science. None of us needed these degrees to do the work we did, which was trolling the internet for content to supply to a database. After a year, two of the team members quit, and I quit shortly after they did. In all, I worked nearly three years for this company, doing the sort of monotonous, data-entry work from which I had hoped a doctoral degree would spare me.

When I left, it was for a librarian position at an academic library in a developing nation. Because of my experience with this company, the staff at my new job put me in charge of electronic resources. This was an aspect of library work that I had not considered before—in fact, I had not even really heard of it before. Yet, I found that I enjoyed it. It suited my analytic, introverted nature. After several

years there, and with the help of a professional resume-writing company, I applied for similar jobs in the US. The results have been surprising. When applying for academic jobs previously, I would get three or four interview requests out of 100 applications. Now, I was getting interview requests for about three out of every four jobs that I applied for. I seemed to have finally found a line of work that I was suited for.

I am currently in a good position as head of a technical services department at a university library in the US. I can't complain about that at all. But the path to get there has been a long one, filled with uncertainty and emotional hardship. And the Ph.D. in English, with all of its resulting career moves, was a long diversion on the way to get here. What I did to get here was what most people do to advance in a line of work—I began at an entry-level position and worked my way up by demonstrating a good work ethic and taking advantage of opportunities when they arose. No Ph.D. required.

What I am doing now is not an alternative to anything other than being unemployed, and I refuse to use my career path to celebrate the success of an "alt-ac" marketplace. It is a job that I came to after years of struggle and failures. "Alt-ac" is a term that only serves to protect a sector of the academy that over-produces doctoral degrees. It needs to stop being used.

What Is Meant by the Term "Alt-Ac"?

The term "alt-ac" has been criticized as a buzzword both too capacious to have any concrete meaning and yet still somehow not inclusive enough. Nonetheless, although its use may have declined some in the past few years, it remains familiar enough that most understand it roughly to mean jobs for Ph.D. holders other than a tenure-track professorship. As Bethany Nowviskie explains, she first coined the term in a Twitter post in 2010 ("#alt-ac"). From what I can gather, its uses generally fall into two categories: as career advice, and as a form of "face saving." The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although proponents of the latter occasionally characterize the former as overly narrow and mercenary. Perhaps because it was a term born digitally, most of the discourse surrounding it appears online.

The career advice strand of "alt-ac" discourse is relatively innocuous, focusing mainly on practical advice for the holder of a Ph.D. who is struggling to find work. Brenda Bethman and Shaun Longstreet's "Defining Terms" is the quintessential career advice essay, suggesting Ph.D. holders go into other academic fields, such as advising, libraries, grant writing, administration, etc. Some readers might notice that the piece is dated; however, Maria LaMonaca Wisdom's 2020 "Getting past 'Alt-Ac'" fits into the same line of thought. Although Wisdom begins with a caveat that the nebulous term makes her "cringe," she nonetheless uses it to launch into a piece on career advice for Ph.D. holders. Such advice usually falls into the lines of identifying one's skills and passions, networking, and using other general

job search strategies. Oftentimes, career advice continues a line of argument used to defend undergraduate degrees in the humanities, presenting the Ph.D. as a sort of super-sized helping of "soft skills" or as evidence of the graduate's intelligence and work ethic. The goal of these essays seems to be to help their audiences make the best of bad situations rather than aim to reform a system that has produced Ph.D. holders without any discernable plan for employing them.

What I call the "face saving" essays tend to reject the idea of "alt-ac" as practical advice, focusing instead on redeeming the image of those who find employment outside of tenure-track professorships. To Nowviskie's 2010 blog post in which she explains the origin of the term, she appended a statement in 2013 emphasizing her original use of the term as a "pushback" against the prevailing discourse, which she "felt . . . diminished humanities scholars who continued to use their skills in and around the academy." In a post that this update links to, she clarifies that, "by 'alt-ac,' a growing community speaks not of 'alternatives to academic employment,' but rather of 'alternative academics'" ("Lunaticks"). She is also disparaging towards those who have "co-opted" the movement, "selling 'coaching' services to under-employed academics . . . and a brain-dead brand of jobs-crisis 'solutionism'" ("#alt-ac").

Another good example of a face-saving use of "alt-ac" comes from Rebecca Schuman's 2014 *Slate* essay, "'Alt-Ac' to the Rescue?" in which she pushes against "the shame that is drilled into many doctoral candidates at the very notion of working outside the academy." Schuman is similarly dismissive of "alt-ac" as career advice, boiling hers down to "serendipitous encounters, making fortuitous connections, or taking on small, part-time contract work and proving yourself—like a normal person." For both Nowviskie and Schuman, "alt-ac" is much more about recovering one's dignity than about finding work.

In contrast to the banality of "alt-ac" career advice, "alt-ac" face-saving is more rhetorically sophisticated but also more seductive in maintaining the status quo. Celebrating accomplishments might soothe wounded egos —as Schuman encourages us to think, "Not 'I got a doctorate *but* all I do is teach high school.' 'I got a doctorate *and* I teach high school'" ("Alt-Ac Talk")—but it leaves unanswered the question of whether the investment into the Ph.D. was in any way equal to the rewards. In attempting to save face, "alt-ac" champions may be refusing to examine whether the investment into the Ph.D. was, in fact, a mistake.

If earning a Ph.D. was a mistake, it is important to face that fact without being burdened by a sense of shame or failure. Schuman speaks of the pursuer of a Ph.D. as a person somehow incapable of grasping the concept of finding "normal" work in the "real" world ("'Alt-Ac' to the Rescue"), but this doesn't ring true for me. I understood how to find work, but professorship sounded like something I would enjoy. I never was motivated by fears that I would disappoint my faculty advisor or be shunned in the eyes of the academy. Any sense of failure came from the dashing of my own hopes and expectations. I can view the whole experience as a growth opportunity, but that doesn't get me out of financial debt. Ph.D. over-

production is a broader social problem that needs to be rectified regardless of how we feel about what we did with our degrees.

What's to be Done?

I can imagine a number of solutions to this problem—most of which seem fairly obvious yet still somehow fail to be implemented. University departments could accept fewer graduate students. Universities could stop hiring contingent faculty. Or the cost of graduate education simply could be made affordable, with existing student loan debt more easily forgiven. I lack the ability to address the feasibility of any of these solutions but would like to offer a few thoughts on what each might do to rectify the situation.

University departments could accept fewer graduate students. Everyone hears the horror stories about job prospects post-graduation, but that does not seem to stop students from applying to graduate school. It didn't stop me. I applied to maybe ten graduate programs, many of which only accepted one or two candidates in a cohort. The best program that accepted me had cohorts of 12 or more. I cannot speculate on why this department saw fit to accept so many graduate students, but it seems unethical to allow so many to invest in a program that only prepares them for jobs that do not exist. Admitting fewer students into graduate programs could save many from making grave mistakes. It would also, unfortunately, bar many from intellectual exploration and restrict Ph.D. holders to an even narrower pool of elite, over-represented groups.

Universities could stop hiring contingent faculty. University administrators will likely argue that hiring contingent faculty is the only affordable option, but universities are notorious enough for wage inequalities and financial waste to make such an argument incredible.[1] However, this solution would also likely require compromise on the part of graduate programs. Much has been written already about offering secure contracts that offer living wages to academic instructors who are expected to teach overwhelming loads of introductory courses. But reducing the number of contingent faculty might also require shrinking the size of graduate school admissions or reducing the number of courses offered. At the very least, it would require a reform of graduate school curricula, with more focus on developing skills in classroom instruction and less emphasis on specialized research so that graduates could be hired into full-time positions that involve enough teaching to cover the load of current contingent faculty members. Although more practical, this could undermine the appeal of graduate school to those—myself included—who were more interested in research than teaching.

Finally, the cost of graduate education could be made affordable, with existing student loan debt more easily forgiven. This is the option that I favor the most,

1. One excellent work that explores this is Benjamin Ginsberg's *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters.*

even if it is also the least likely to occur. Affordable higher education would encourage more people to engage in intellectual inquiry and exploration without the fear of crippling debt. It would also allow the pursuit of a doctoral degrees to be an experience of personal growth without needing to be a gateway into the professoriate. Unfortunately, this possibility seems unlikely to gain much traction beyond that of talking points and wishful thinking.

While many potential solutions to the problem exist, the current scene appears to be one of gridlock. Those who could make decisions to change or reform the current system seem unwilling to make any compromises. In the meantime, the holders of doctoral degrees suffer, having spent a considerable portion of their lives in pursuit of something that has left them with little other than crippling debt. A doctoral degree undoubtedly offers personal enrichment, but $150,000 is a steep price to pay for personal growth. For that kind of money, one might have easily travelled the world several times over, which sounds like more fun to me.

Conclusion

Whether the problem stems from a glut of doctoral degrees or the stinginess of university administrations, what does not help is celebrating any instance of a Ph.D. holder finding work as a sign of success for an "alternative" market. Most people find work. Whether that work is enjoyable or personally rewarding is another matter, and, unfortunately, not something everyone can afford to consider. Many of us, however, sought something more rewarding through the pursuit of higher education. Sadly, under the current climate, to follow such a pursuit is to make a costly mistake. It should not be this way, but if celebrating an "alternative" market causes us to gloss over this harsh reality, then doing so creates a barrier to reform.

If we acknowledge our doctoral degrees as failures, we can view the credentialing system as one that sets up its participants to fail. I can think of no reason why anyone would voluntarily, rationally participate in such a system. Don't go into a graduate program that offers more long-term burdens than advantages. Don't accept ridiculously underpaid teaching positions. And if you have done either of these, quit now. If we do not contribute to the system, we do not feed the system. And starving the system—depriving it of graduate students and instructors—may well be the only way to force it into the shock that will necessitate some sort of change.

Works Cited

Arrested Development, created by Mitchell Hurwitz, Fox Broadcasting/Netflix, 2003-2006/2013-2019.

Bethman, Brenda, and Shaun Longstreet. "Defining Terms." *Inside Higher Ed*, 22 May 2013, https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/05/22/essay-defining-alt-ac-new-phd-job-searches.

Ginsberg, Benjamin. *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. Oxford UP, 2013.
Nowviskie, Bethany. "#alt-ac: alternate academic careers for humanities scholars." *Bethany Nowiskie*, 3 Jan. 2010, http://nowviskie.org/2010/alt-ac/.
---. "two and a half cheers for the lunaticks." *Bethany Nowiskie*, 8 Jan. 2012, http://nowviskie.org/2012/lunaticks/.
Schuman, Rebecca. "Alt-Ac Talk." *Pan Kisses Kafka*, 19 Sept. 2014. *Pan Kisses Kafka*, 2014, https://pankisseskafka.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/alt-ac-talk-final.pdf.
---. "'Alt-Ac' to the Rescue?" *Slate*, 18 Sept. 2014, https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/09/a-changing-view-of-alt-ac-jobs-in-which-ph-d-s-work-outside-of-academia.html.
Wisdom, Maria LaMonaca. "Getting past 'Alt-Ac'." *Blog*, Duke Versatile Humanists, 12 Oct. 2020, https://versatilehumanists.duke.edu/2020/10/12/getting-past-alt-ac/.