

PREFACE



In writing this book, I have drawn on my research on career pathways and graduate education reform as well as personal experience. My academic and professional route has taken me from a PhD in comparative literature, through education-focused positions at foundations and nonprofits, to my current position at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, where I serve as codirector for the Futures Initiative and director of programs and administration for the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC). That pathway serves as a personal case study for the key tenet of this book: that even in this challenging time for higher education, a PhD in the humanities is worth pursuing for the training it offers, the doors it opens, and the value it provides to society. Informed by extensive research, interviews, and practical advice from dozens of sources, *Putting the Humanities PhD to Work* provides graduate students, faculty members, and administrators concrete examples of how this kind of pathway is possible, how it can be pursued, and where it can lead.

The message I offer in this book differs from the one I first received when I began my own graduate career. In my first year as a graduate student in comparative literature, I learned that the humanities were in crisis. More precisely, I was told that the humanities both *were presently* and *had always been* in crisis—that in an abstract sense, and quite apart from the very real problems in academic labor structures, crisis was one of the fundamental ways the field understood and continually redefined itself. As the first in my immediate family to pursue a PhD, I absorbed that message from my first-year seminar course without being dissuaded by it. In retrospect, I often think about the ways that framing could have derailed what has since become a meaningful and rewarding career. After nearly twenty years working in and around graduate education, I have had countless occasions to see the ways that the lens of perpetual crisis is both lamented and,

in some ways, revered in the humanities. I am glad to be able to circle back and think more critically about the pervasiveness and problematic nature of that framing—not only in my program, but in much of the writing about humanities research and doctoral study. One motivation in writing this book is to provide balanced research and practical advice both to those who, like me, come to graduate education without the social grounding to contextualize these issues, as well as to those who already have a framework for understanding the challenges of academe and want to go deeper.

I have made decisions about my own career path based on a complex set of needs, desires, circumstances, and experience, as everyone does. I completed my own PhD in 2010 in Comparative Literature at the University of Colorado, Boulder. “Quit Lit” wasn’t yet a thing, or if it was, I didn’t know about it. I had never heard of “alt-ac,” the playful neologism coined a year prior in a Twitter conversation between Jason Rhody, digital culture program director at the Social Science Research Council, and Bethany Nowviskie, Dean of Libraries and Professor of English at James Madison University, as they tried to find the best way to characterize their own unusual, hybrid, not-faculty-but-still-scholarly jobs. As Nowviskie puts it, the use of the term was a means of “gesturing at an alternative academia” in the way that writers create speculative fiction or works of alternative history.¹ “Alt” as a modifier was also reminiscent of the early days of the internet, hearkening back to the hierarchies of Usenet forums, and perhaps struck a chord with the digital humanities community for that reason.² It was a lighthearted term, never meant to be used in an authoritative way, and yet it stuck around as employment patterns continued to change in and around the academy.

Within this world of hybrid scholarly careers, specific roles are varied and unique, which can make it challenging to know what kinds of opportunities are available. This has certainly been true for me; there was no clear pathway set before me. At each decision point in my career, I found it difficult to predict where I might be a few years later, and where a particular decision might lead. I share my story here as a single example of one possible trajectory—one that I personally have found exciting and satisfying. Though the details differ, there are many, many stories like mine. The work I have been able to do along this path has offered unexpected opportunities to think systematically about higher education, and to be a part of conversations and projects that have real impact beyond my own discipline. As a graduate student, I could not have anticipated that I would one day work on major, multi-institutional grants connecting graduate education and community college teaching, or that I would field questions from journalists at the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher*

Education about the implications of my work, or that I would have opportunities to review projects and proposals far outside my disciplinary background.

The job that I consider to be the first significant step in my career initially came about as a means of hedging my bets. I had moved cross-country while working on my dissertation, so I no longer had institutional funding and needed an income while I continued to research and write. I started working with a temp agency whose clients were primarily foundations and nonprofits. The work was not very interesting in itself, at least at first; I sought temp work because I thought it would leave me enough brain space at the end of the day and on weekends to do research, and it did. But over time, learning about the inner workings of grantmaking organizations began to fascinate me. A few of my short-term jobs were with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which funds research in science and technology. I established strong relationships with a number of the foundation's staff members, and when a full-time position opened, they invited me to apply.

As I see it, this first opportunity worked out for a number of reasons: for one thing, Sloan is an institution that places a high value on scholarship. Though I was trained in a different field than most of my science-minded colleagues, they respected the discipline and deep curiosity that graduate study entails. In addition, my résumé showed that I was an effective translator, both in terms of language and also, more figuratively, in terms of articulating ideas across different groups of people or disciplines. As a graduate student, I had worked part-time at another science organization, the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics, where I had been hired for my fluency in French, one of the organization's official languages. I certainly didn't expect that job to have anything to do with my future career path, but looking back, I'm convinced it made me a more appealing candidate at Sloan. A final and important factor in securing the role at Sloan was that I had a foot in the door through the temp jobs. The staff had had a chance to get to know me and my work in a way they wouldn't have been able to know through simply an application and an interview.

While at Sloan, my responsibilities steadily increased, and by the end of my employment I was actively contributing to the strategic development of an entirely new program area, called digital information technology, under the direction of Joshua M. Greenberg. Though rooted in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, the new program had much in common with the digital humanities and the changing terrain of scholarly communication across all academic disciplines. I contributed to the strategic planning process of identifying pressing questions, leading thinkers, and opportunities for meaningful grantmaking. At the same time, I was gaining invaluable un-

derstanding about the grant evaluation process, as well as the nuts and bolts of organizational structures and operations—things I certainly hadn't learned as a graduate student.

Another thing that my work at Sloan taught me was that some of the most interesting conversations about higher education were happening in open online environments, like Twitter. This is old news now, but it was new to me at the time. As I began looking for new opportunities for growth, I made a pointed effort to develop a more visible professional online presence than I had previously done. I connected with people on Twitter, blogged about issues in higher education, and listened in to online conversations to get a feel for who was doing the kind of work I wanted to do and what kinds of positions might interest me. This was how I eventually connected with Bethany Nowviskie, who later hired me as a researcher with the Scholarly Communication Institute (SCI), which was then based in the University of Virginia Libraries. The institute is a Mellon-funded humanities think tank that, at the time I was hired, had dedicated ten years to investigating the changing environment of scholarly communication and graduate education. Without the work I had done at Sloan and my exploration of Twitter and blogging, I doubt that I even would have caught wind of the work that SCI was doing. I was also fortunate in that Sloan carries a significant amount of prestige in academic circles, which made it easier for me to make connections and earn credibility.

When I began my position at SCI, new challenges awaited me. Part of my job was to design and administer a survey of people with advanced humanities degrees who had pursued career paths beyond the tenure track. But I had no prior background in survey methodology or analysis, and so I knew I would have to learn and apply a complex set of new skills quickly, albeit with a great deal of support and insight from the university's research librarians.³ To have opportunities for continued growth was deeply exciting, and I think that in my case, such opportunities have been possible precisely because I have applied my deep academic training to a nonfaculty job.

My work at SCI led to new networking opportunities, deeper experience in the changing world of graduate education, and a clearer sense of how important the nuances of scholarly communication systems (publishers, libraries, formal and informal online platforms, and so on—all the ways scholars share their research) are to the entire academic enterprise. When my eighteen-month employment term at SCI had run its course, I began working at the Modern Language Association (MLA) under Kathleen Fitzpatrick, then the director of scholarly communication, whom I had met while at Sloan and worked with

at SCI. At the MLA, I worked with Fitzpatrick and other colleagues to think through similar questions of how researchers share their work in an online networked environment on a broader scale, with nationwide and international impact. While the role was very different from any of my previous positions, it was while working at the MLA that, for the first time, I sensed a certain cohesiveness in the direction that my career was taking.

As I write this, I am in my sixth year with the Futures Initiative, a program located within the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). At the Futures Initiative, my colleagues and I work toward institutional change in higher education through a dual focus on equity and innovation. I hadn't expected my path to lead back to the university, but I'm delighted that it has. While I don't regularly teach in a classroom, as codirector I find myself applying so many skills, methods, and insights that I gained during my graduate studies—as well as many that I have learned experientially. Together with Cathy N. Davidson, the Futures Initiative's founding director and a steadfast mentor, I work on our program's strategy, mission, and programming; write and implement grants; guide and mentor our team of graduate fellows; manage our program's budgets; and more, all while continuing to research and write. It has been an exciting and exhilarating place to work. With over 500,000 students, CUNY is the largest public, urban university system in the United States, and it is deeply woven into the fabric of New York City.⁴ Working with students, faculty, and administrators here has opened my eyes to a wide range of stories and experiences, centering on the power of education and the importance of access to it. Understanding education as a public good in the context of a huge public university system in the heart of a thriving city that is also home to massive income inequality means that engaging with a broader community is critical to what we do. I am constantly learning, and I have the distinct joy of knowing that our work matters.

Getting to this point has had many challenges, but there are also many ways that my path has been smoothed both by privilege and by luck. I worked with an advisor who supported and respected my decisions and who didn't pressure me to pursue a particular type of career. My partner has stable employment, which reduced the anxiety of my own job search and kept me in health insurance through temporary jobs and times of uncertainty. Along the way, some opportunities turned out to be more important than I anticipated, and served as unexpected stepping-stones in new directions. Plus, importantly, as a straight white woman, I do not typically face bias for my race, ethnicity, or sexuality, and so I move through the world with significant privilege. I detail

these attributes of my own academic career and personal experience to signal a range of factors that most discussions of the state of the humanities do not address as part of the larger narrative.

While all of these elements have served to minimize the obstacles I encountered, I have also worked hard to make my own luck, as Sarah Werner, an independent book history and Shakespeare scholar forging her own unique career path, has described.⁵ I share those experiences, too, for the way they can help others in their own career trajectories. During my years as a graduate student, I accumulated job experience that seemed practical but inconsequential until I learned how to translate my skills into a more meaningful narrative. As I approached the end of my dissertation, I was intentional about developing a semiprofessional online presence and meeting people who were doing work that I found interesting and valuable. My research had always been a little bit “meta” and became increasingly so, as slowly my focus shifted from trauma and formal experimentation in twentieth- and twenty-first century French literature to the structures of graduate education itself, with my own career path as a case study in my research. All of these actions helped me to build a strong foundation and to be ready for opportunities when they arose.

Some graduate students worry about the risk of seeming overqualified for positions that don't necessarily require a PhD. What I have found is that the doctoral degree opens up entire pathways, rather than a single job opportunity. The first step in that trajectory may not require the amount of specialized knowledge that doctoral recipients have amassed, but new opportunities for advancement and increased responsibilities often open up quickly. Early on, I did find that the PhD was a slippery credential; in some professional settings it wasn't relevant at all (like reviewing and processing compliance materials for financial and health benefits at Sloan); in others, it led people to trust me to take on difficult tasks even though they were outside my area of expertise (like strategic development at Sloan, survey work at SCI, and leadership and management at CUNY). In almost all cases, though, holding a graduate degree meant that I enjoyed a greater amount of credibility, especially among current and former faculty members or others deeply involved in higher education. A PhD in any field is a strong indicator of dedication, hard work, intellectual stamina, judgment, and an ability to learn quickly and deeply; when that degree is in a humanities field, it also signals exceptional skills in areas such as critical thinking, interpretation, cultural understanding, and communication—especially writing, which is highly valued in nearly every workplace.

Developing new skills has been an important part of my trajectory, and learning the basics of web development, data visualization, and survey analysis

has been crucial to my work. Rapid advances in digital capabilities and deeper connections across the humanities and computational fields—both computational humanities and the critical study and creation of new media—have led to new insight, closer interdisciplinary collaboration, and opportunities for broad impact beyond the university. Learning HTML and CSS, understanding the power of the command line, and beginning to know which kinds of technical problems are easy to solve and which ones are harder all make it easier for humanities scholars to work alongside people from other disciplines and join in projects that push toward new knowledge. But skills like these tend to be most valuable when they are mandated by a particular project, rather than explored as ends in themselves. Pushing all humanities students to learn to code isn't a quick fix to systemic labor issues; however, making it possible for students to pursue the kinds of projects that spark genuine interest, and making it possible for them to learn necessary skills along the way, will likely lead to more creative and interesting research projects while also building up digital literacy and skills that may be transferable to other job contexts.

I hope this book might help others to find their footing on their own individual paths, wherever those may lead. For me, several key factors throughout my trajectory have been to seek and learn from mentors, to open myself up to people and opportunities, to recognize and stay attuned to my changing interests, to communicate widely through different media platforms, and to take steps that seem promising even if I don't know where they'll lead. I've always tried to maintain a sense of growth and progress that help ensure that I'm a competitive candidate for new kinds of roles. The flexibility of my path is, for me, one of its most appealing qualities; I feel a stronger sense of agency in crafting my career than I might have if I had followed a more "traditional" path. It is time—past time—to rethink the expectations that many students and faculty bring to graduate study and its outcomes, especially those that effectively limit students' future potential and the reach of their work. It is time for a broader understanding of what constitutes scholarly excellence.

This book is not only about individual success, but also institutional change. Now more than ever, vocal support for the value of the humanities is essential. The current US political climate leaves our national arts and humanities organizations woefully underfunded and a pen stroke away from total elimination. The problems facing the academy as a whole are real, and serious: the rampant defunding of public higher education, where 80 percent of US students attend college; the disastrous effects on academic labor structures and hiring; the huge amounts of debt that students accrue; the persistent bias against women and nonbinary people of all races and ethnicities, and people

of color of all genders. I acknowledge these problems while also celebrating the positive signs that change might be coming and finding ways to work toward institutional change. Conversations about career pathways, labor structures, and diversity and inclusion all have interrelated dependencies, and trying to isolate a single issue without addressing the others leads to partial solutions at best. Instead, bringing about meaningful and lasting reform means finding a way to both recognize the realities of the current landscape and also push for change in many directions at once.

For me, this work is personal as well as intellectual, a reflection of the pathway and research I have pursued. The connection reminds me constantly that intellectual pursuits are never separate from the many other elements of a person's life and experience. I bring that recognition to the book, with the hope that readers at many stages of their life paths and career paths will find it to be a balanced and useful framework for their own personal, intellectual, and professional circumstances.