Non-Academic Pathways, Part 1: Making the Transition

Considering a non-academic career? You’re not alone. An increasing number of graduate students are opting for careers outside of academia. The academic job market has pushed many to explore additional career possibilities, whereas others have decided to do so for various personal and professional reasons. The key is to find work to which you’re drawn and suited. This handout is the first in a series that will help you explore and prepare for non-academic pathways. The complete series consists of:

- Part 1: Making the Transition
- Part 2: Self-Assessment and Career Exploration
- Part 3: Informational Interviews and Networking
- Part 4: Finding Opportunities
- Part 5: Applying for Jobs (research, resumes, cover letters)
- Part 6: Job Interviews and Negotiations

You may see the terms “non-academic” and “alt-academic” used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. In this chapter, “non-academic” (or, in some cases, “post academic”) means outside academia, whether in business, government, or nonprofits. Alt-academic (short for “alternative academic” and often further shortened as “alt-ac”) refers to non-faculty professional positions within higher education, as well as teaching and research positions in other educational institutions like libraries, museums, and K-12 schools.

MAKING THE TRANSITION

It is not unusual to feel pressure in your department to pursue (tenure-track) careers in academia. However, your department, along with your discipline's national professional organization(s), may be the best place to get information on non-academic careers related to your field. If you feel comfortable, try talking to your advisor about non-academic options. Here are a few articles to help you prepare to approach your advisor:


If you feel uneasy about raising the subject with your advisor, try to find another faculty member in your department who is open to the idea of non-academic careers or meet with a CareerLAB counselor (all counseling is confidential). Regardless of whom you talk to first, start your transition to a career outside of academia by familiarizing yourself with the process and making an action plan.

Getting Started
- The Sheridan Center Non-Academic Career Resources links to helpful general resources for graduate students considering alternatives to academic careers.
- Versatile PhD is a comprehensive site for PhDs and graduate students who want to expand their career options beyond the academy. Students can access the site for free by logging in with their Brown email.

LIMITATIONS OF NON-ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

As you explore non-academic and alt-academic career paths, it is important to keep in mind that they are not necessarily less competitive or more satisfying than academic careers. The following blog posts shed light on some important realities of pursuing non-academic and alt-academic careers:

- Jacqui Shine, “Alt-Ac Isn’t Always the Answer” (2014)
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

All Disciplines
- UC-Berkeley’s Careers Beyond the Academy links to other sites for further exploring career options.
- CHE’s “Leaving Academe” forum hosts ongoing discussions about non-academic and alt-ac careers.
- Gabriela Montell’s article lists where to find information on non-academic careers by discipline.
- Beyond Academia was founded to educate the academic community on non-academic careers.
- Jobs on Toast guides researchers through the process of transitioning into a non-academic profession.
- Life After the PhD features interviews with PhDs who have gone on to non-academic careers.
- PhDs at Work profiles PhDs working across a wide range of industries.
- Vitae publishes many articles on post-academic and alt-ac careers paths.
- Like Vitae, Inside Higher Ed often publishes articles on alt-ac careers.

Humanities & Social Sciences
- Columbia’s Guide to Non-Academic Career Options for PhDs in the Humanities & Social Sciences
- American Philosophical Association’s Guide to a Non-Academic Career
- Modern Language Association’s Developing a Nonacademic Career
- #Alt-academy is a compilation of essays about alt-ac career paths for humanities and social science PhDs.
- Beyond Academe’s advice is tailored to historians but may also be useful to non-historians.
- Career Alternatives for Art Historians profiles professions for which art historians are especially suited.
- From Grad School to Happiness was started by a former graduate student in the social sciences.
- From PhD to Life, by a history PhD-turned-career coach, offers advice on career transitions.
- On The Fence is geared toward “indecisive” academics who are considering non-academic options.
- Sell Out Your Soul, created by an English PhD who became a technical writer, offers advice to other PhDs on finding a fulfilling career.

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)
- Columbia’s Guide to Career Exploration for PhDs in STEM Disciplines
- American Physical Society’s Examples of Alternative Career Paths
- American Psychological Association’s Profiles in Non-academic Careers
- Both Nature (http://blogs.nature.com/naturejobs/category/scientistonthemove-2) and Science (www.sciencemag.org/careers/2016/03/leaving-academia) publish writing on leaving academia.
- Cheeky Scientist focuses on preparing STEM PhDs for industry careers in the medical and life sciences.
- How to Leave Physics recounts the writer’s decision to leave academic research.
- Next Scientist is dedicated to helping graduate students finish their degrees and find careers in industry.
- The Prodigal Academic aggregates sites of interest to those looking for non-academic science careers.
- The Alternative Scientist’s was last updated in 2013 but continues to be relevant and useful.
- Branching Points, also not updated since 2013, helps science graduate students navigate nonacademic career options based on informational interviews by the writer.

Books Relevant to Everyone
- Susan Basalla and Maggie Debelius, So What Are You Going to Do with That? Finding Careers Outside Academia (University of Chicago Press, 2014; 3rd edition)
- M R Nelson, Navigating the Path to Industry: A Hiring Manager’s Advice for Academics Looking for a Job in Industry (Annorlunda Books, 2014)

Updated August 2016