

# Preparing for a Career in the Humanities

**By Alexandra Lord, Branch Chief, National Historic Landmarks Program, National Park Service**

Most of us assume, when we start grad school, that our career will be relatively straightforward. We will become tenure-track professors.

But something happens along the way. We have the unfortunate luck to fall in love with a fellow historian who needs a job, too. We find that while the idea of living across the country from our family was deeply appealing when we were entering grad school, it isn't so appealing as we complete grad school eight years later. We have children now and we're worried about college tuition. While we loved the idea of teaching when we were 23, we are no longer so eager to spend the next twenty years teaching 18 year olds. Our research has led us to become interested in broader policy issues and we want a job where we can apply our research.

Even as we struggle with these issues, we recognize that both the academic and non-academic job markets are depressed. Our choices, we fear, may be limited.

But not all is doom and gloom. You can better your odds of finding a job which fits your needs by preparing for a career both in and outside of academia. This approach is more likely to yield multiple offers, enabling you both to have a choice of options and to negotiate any offer from a position of strength. Planning for a career outside of academia can also better prepare you for a career in academia.

Why? Because planning for a career outside the academy expands the skill set you need for an academic job. More importantly, it forces you to think in new ways about the value of an education in the humanities. The job applicant who genuinely understands that an education in the humanities can lead to a variety of careers becomes the faculty member who can effectively argue for the relevance and importance of history in an era of declining budgets. That faculty member is also the best one to assist students in planning for careers in and outside the academy.

So, how can you prepare for a career that will fit your changing needs and desires? Here are five simple steps that can assist you to become a better teacher, a better scholar, and, yes, a better job applicant.

First, take an internship outside the academy. If your program is typical of most graduate programs, you have probably already held an internship (a teaching or research assistantship). These internships provided you with the skills you need to be a teacher and a scholar. Taking a second internship, paid or even unpaid, in a museum, a think tank, a parks department, the National Park Service, or even a state legislature will expand upon the skills needed both in and outside the academy. Helping to prepare a briefing paper on environmental policy will, for example, benefit your scholarship by providing you with a new, and different, understanding of how history informs federal or state policies. This work will also demonstrate

to a non-academic employer that you have a broad range of job experience and that you can effectively accomplish the tasks he or she needs done. Finally, acquiring new skills such as the ability to curate an exhibit will improve your teaching by ensuring that you can provide your students with the skills they will need in the workplace.

Second, take the opportunity to speak to a local organization which deals with environmental issues. This not only ensures that historians' voices are heard in discussions about environmental issues, it also provides you with contacts in the environmental community which you can use to find a job outside the academy. These contacts are beneficial even if you remain in academia. A broadly based network can assist your students in finding internships and engaging in a dialogue with other professionals in the environmental community will benefit your scholarship by pushing you to consider not only new ideas but also the relevance of your scholarship to those working in the field.

Third, publish in a forum intended for the general public. Honing your skills as a writer will enable you to teach your students how to write in different styles and, of course, being a versatile writer means that you can easily market yourself as a writer to employers outside the academy. More importantly, the better your writing skills, the better your ability to market your dissertation to either an academic press or a trade press.

Fourth, promote your scholarship in new forums. Developing and hosting a web exhibit on environmental history will teach you not only how to write museum text but also how to work with web design programs such as Omeka or Dreamweaver. These skills will enable you to develop innovative assignments which encourage your students to reach a broader audience. And, if you do decide to leave academia, you will possess demonstrated experience as a web designer or curator.

Fifth, reach out to academic colleagues in professional schools. Sit in on a law or public health class which deals with environmental issues. Offer to work with these professionals on their projects; this will enable you to situate your scholarship within a broader context. Within the academy, you will also be better positioned to seek academic jobs which are structured as joint appointments. Outside the academy, you will have a broader understanding of environmental issues that will help you to find work with many broadly based organizations working on environmental issues.

Even in a weak economy, these simple steps can mean the difference between a job offer and a polite rejection letter.

**Editor's Note:** Alexandra Lord is the program committee chair for the National Council on Public History, which is meeting simultaneously with ASEH in Portland, Oregon in mid-March 2010. She is organizing a career seminar that will be open to all conference attendees -- check the Portland conference program in December for details.