Career Transitions for Graduate Students and Others

10 tips for switching to a new career field.

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Welcome graduate students (and others in career transition). My previous blog posts have focused on the chaos of career development for graduate students generally as well as emotional factors in the transition from academia to other career fields. This post deals with starting a job search when you’re leaving your current field for a new one—even when you don’t know what that new field will be. The best way to proceed with career transition is to determine the skills and expertise you have to offer an employer as well as “what's out there”: the places you might want to investigate for employment.

As we go through this process I encourage you to keep two phrases in mind: “Hell in the Hallway” and “Pull Back the Curtain.” Let me explain:

Hell in the Hallway: This phrase refers to that trite saying “when one door closes, another door opens...” or something to that effect. As I once heard a minister say, “Nobody talks about the hell in the hallway while you're waiting for that other door to open.” When you're in that period where certain career paths have closed, and you haven’t found a new path, it can be very helpful to remember this. Trust me: new opportunities will arise; ones which you likely can't even see right now.

And this leads to the other phrase:

Pull Back the Curtain. I learned this phrase from Jackie Kelm, author of Appreciative Living. Most of us live in a narrow world and have limited vision when we think about our futures. As a graduate student you were likely so committed to becoming a professor, you didn't really think about other careers, and perhaps began to think that it was the only career that could make you happy. You might have artificially inflated the value of academia-- and deflated other kinds of work. The same can be true for anyone who thought they had the “perfect” job-- until for whatever reason that job was no longer available. "Pull back the curtain" is a reminder that we need to look at the bigger picture, and expand our knowledge and understanding of a situation.

If you are a graduate student, you may have been living in the narrow world of a university. For others, think about the environment you've been in. How much of a "cocoon" had it become? Picture a set of stage curtains where only a 12-inch gap is visible. Now pull back those curtains to see the wide variety of career opportunities out there.

So, for instance, if you're thinking of leaving the academic world, here is a quick list of places to apply your talents. Think about whether you want to work directly in the field, are interested in consulting or developing a product which could be used by that field, or want to set up a related entrepreneurial venture. This economy has fostered more entrepreneurial growth than any previous period in time. A great resource to start learning more about careers and opportunities
in these fields is the Occupational Outlook Handbook.

- **Nonprofit Organizations**: cultural/arts; environmental; libraries; foundations; religious; social services/human services; think tanks/public policy, etc.
- **Education**: preschool; K-12: public and private; college/university administration; assorted private services related to education from tutoring centers to college admissions counseling; government agencies; education policy; continuing education; online education; education research, etc.
- **Government**: City/State/Federal; public policy institutes; think tanks; research agencies; translation/language services, etc.
- **Law**: criminal justice; law enforcement; security; national security; legal professions, etc.
- **Health Care**: hospitals; private rehab facilities; clinics; government agencies; research, etc.
- **Corporations and small businesses**: human resources; social responsibility/philanthropy initiatives; public relations (damage control); marketing; management/administration; research; organizational development, etc.
- **Communications/Technology**: technical writing; editing; web design; programming; social media; online education; publishing; journalism; advertising; entertainment industry, etc.

But it's not just about "what's out there"-- it's what's in you.

If your transition is not of your choosing, you're going to have to find the meaning in it. No one is telling you that you have to be 100% positive, but starting to focus on the positive elements, like your strengths, can help you develop the resiliency needed for the process. Mostly you don't want to tell a victim story for the rest of your life and career transition situations can inspire victim stories. What is a better story you can create? By asking yourself better questions, you can create a story that will serve you well.

So let's start a simple question: why are you leaving your present field? Perhaps more importantly, why are you now seeking the particular position you're seeking? That's where you want to have a new story of what's possible in your new world. Whatever organization you're interviewing with will want to know why you want to work for them and they don't want to be your second choice.

Here are 10 tips for starting your transition:

1. What gives you energy? How might you apply that? The Department of Labor's website, **ONET** offers lots of information about careers in a variety of industries. Particularly helpful is a section called "My Next Move" where you can take a career interests survey which will help you translate your interests and skills into potential careers.

2. Have you ever been so lost in an activity you lost total track of time? What were you doing? Think of some times when you performed at your all-time best. Maybe it was that great class you taught, or that paper you wrote, or some research you conducted. What skills did you use? What talents did you demonstrate? What put you in the zone?

3. Now start thinking about ways that you could apply those skills/interests in other settings. For instance, if you selected research as one of your strongest interests, describe the types of research you've conducted so far. What techniques did you use? What instruments, statistical programs, etc., did you apply? Does this type of research or information gathering apply to other fields? What industries might need similar research skills? What companies within those industries hire researchers?
Also consider the skills you needed to complete your degree-- not the least of which is perseverance; an ability to handle multiple personalities (committee/advisor) and manage your time well; synthesize copious information into a manageable format, etc.

4. Begin to describe your transferable/marketable skills in terms that apply to another field. If you taught courses, for example, and are now seeking a management career, consider reframing the skills you developed such as: public speaking (rather than lecturing), developing training modules (rather than lesson plans), ability to deal with a range of customers or clients (you adjusted your teaching style for different learners), assessing performance (instead of grading) and responding positively to customer concerns (you changed your syllabus based on course evaluations). How could you describe your skills to fit the language of other fields?

5. Not sure what your strengths are? Try taking the *Values in Action* (VIA) assessment (it's free, but registration is required) at Dr. Martin Seligman's Authentic Happiness site. While you're there, look around and try out other assessments-- it's a very valuable resource.

6. Make the move from image to action. It's easy to get caught in "thinking" about what you might do. Once you suspect or know you need to broaden your job search, do it. Now. Are you making the most of your time right now? What could you do tomorrow to start broadening your experience? Are you networking and reaching out to people in your new field of interest? Have you converted your CV to a resume?

7. Keep a learner's mindset: constantly seek new information and think about what you've learned. This mindset will serve you well in the job search. Strive to be interested and curious about what you might find. The antithesis of this is the judging mindset: the one that says "this won't work." Stick with the learning mindset as much as possible.

8. Learn to develop an appreciative eye. This comes from the field of art where the audience is encouraged to find what is interesting, unique, or good in a work of art. Can you develop an appreciative eye about the opportunities you're finding?

9. Use a SWOT analysis to identify your strengths and weaknesses related to possible career fields.

10. As you sort this process out, keep in mind one of my favorite Tolkien quotes, "Not all those who wander are lost." Give yourself permission to explore and wander.

Want to learn more? Here are the links to my series of posts related to helping graduate students find jobs outside academia:

- The Graduate Student Job Search: Welcome to the Chaos
- Leaving Academia: The Transition Begins
- Career Transitions for Graduate Students and Others
- Writing Effective CV's and Resumes
- 10 Tips for Developing an Alternate Career While in Graduate School
- Social Media and the Grad Student Job Search

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