

# Doctoral Student Career Planning

**MAY 2017**

A Guide for PhD Programs and  
Faculty Members in English  
and Other Modern Languages  
from the MLA's Connected  
Academics Initiative

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## INTRODUCTION

# Toward a More Sustainable Model of Humanities Graduate Education

This tool kit offers faculty members and departments strategies and resources to help students understand the versatility of doctoral training and the broad range of occupations available to PhDs in the humanities. It takes as its premise that faculty mentors and advisers want their doctoral students to succeed and to put their learning and experience to work in satisfying, rewarding, and meaningful careers. For many students, this will be in tenure-line faculty appointments. For other students, it will be in occupations outside postsecondary teaching. Students whose doctoral programs impart a lively sense of the broad reach of humanistic study and whose experience of doctoral education builds a secure confidence in the value of the intellectual work they have done will have a significant advantage, and more options, in a competitive job market both inside and outside the academy.

The idea of humanities PhDs working outside the academy has drawn some controversy. But the facts are undeniable: humanities PhDs work outside the academy and will no doubt continue to do so. Although the reality of PhDs finding their way to employment outside the academy has a long history, the issue has taken on particular urgency since 2008, given the depressed state of the academic job market, the adjunctification of the academic labor force, and the persistent undervaluing of humanistic study and scholarship. Programs that successfully support the diverse career ambitions and outcomes of all their students and that can articulate the broad contributions of doctoral study will be demonstrating the public value of humanistic study and contributing to the creation of a more sustainable model of humanities graduate education.

This tool kit is a product of [Connected Academics](#), an MLA initiative funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to help prepare doctoral students to use their humanistic training in a broader range of occupations than doctoral programs have, up to now, typically acknowledged and valued. It is motivated by the knowledge that PhDs in our fields have always made careers in a wide range of fulfilling, secure, and well-compensated occupations and by the belief that people with humanities PhDs are national assets who apply their specialized expertise in significant ways that benefit our society and economy.

## Humanities Doctoral Education by the Numbers

It will come as a surprise to few that the academic job market in English and other modern languages has suffered since the financial crisis of 2008. At the same time, the number of

PhDs graduating from humanities doctoral programs in the United States has continued to rise. Figure 1 below shows the **2015 Survey of Earned Doctorates** (SED) counts for PhD recipients in English and other modern languages from 2005 to 2015 against the trend lines for ads for full-time assistant professors in the *MLA Job Information List* over the same years.

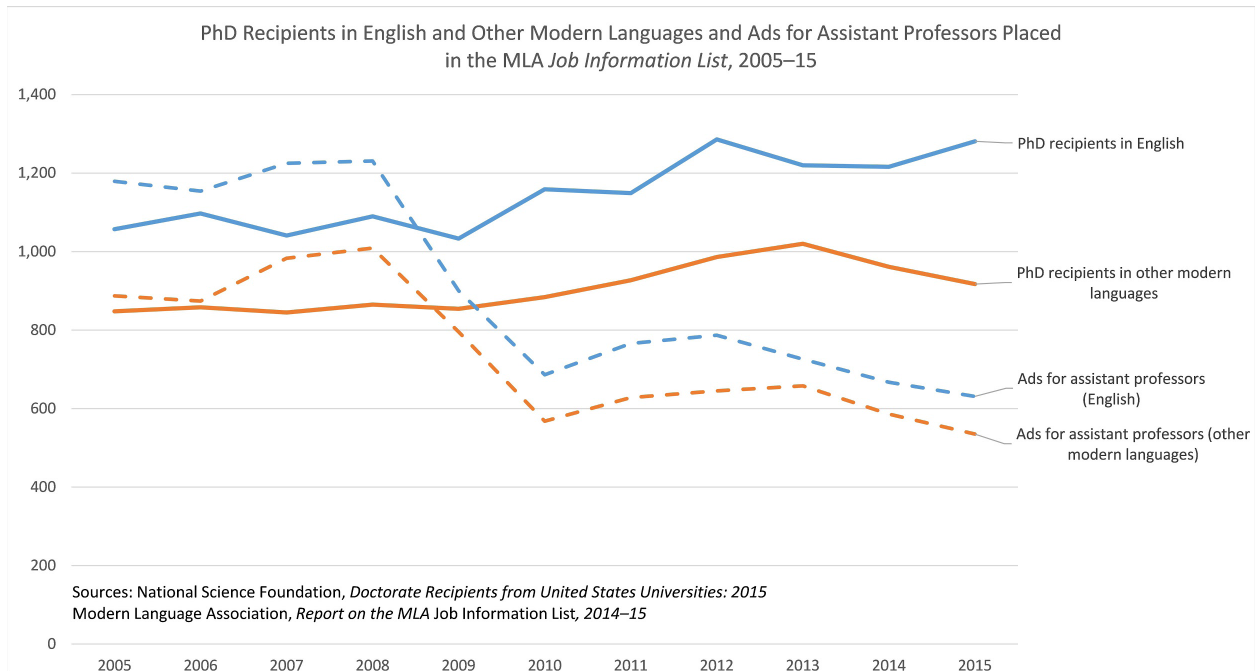


FIG. 1<sup>1</sup>

But these numbers do not tell the entire story. Figure 2 presents findings from an MLA study of employment outcomes for 2,214 modern language PhDs who received their degrees between 1996 and 2011. The study found that half hold positions as tenured or tenure-track faculty members or as deans, provosts, or presidents (who presumably have tenure). Thirty percent hold nonfaculty positions or work outside higher education. The remaining twenty percent hold postsecondary faculty positions, teaching off the tenure track.

1. Laurence, David. "The Upward Trend in Modern Language PhD Production: Findings from the 2015 Survey of Earned Doctorates." *The Trend*, 6 February 2017, [mlaresearch.mla.hcommons.org/2017/02/06/the-upward-trend-in-modern-language-phd-production-findings-from-the-2015-survey-of-earned-doctorates/](http://mlaresearch.mla.hcommons.org/2017/02/06/the-upward-trend-in-modern-language-phd-production-findings-from-the-2015-survey-of-earned-doctorates/).

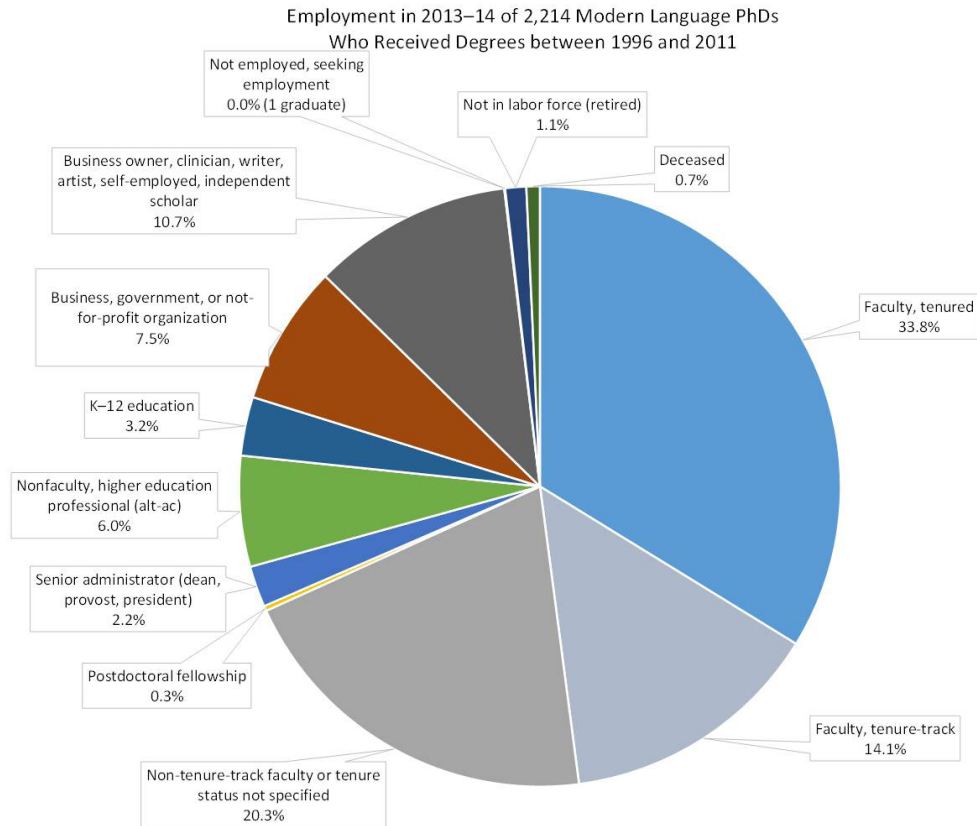


FIG. 2<sup>2</sup>

People who earn PhDs in the humanities find jobs. Though the data make clear the strong orientation for working in higher education in some capacity, they also document how PhD recipients in English and other modern languages are dispersed across many parts of the economy. Doctoral education in the humanities leads to careers of many different kinds and success in many different forms.

Most programs still fall well short of making sure doctoral candidates understand the range of occupations their studies might lead to or prepare them for. Many graduates who land outside the academy struggle through the transition in isolation, cut off from their programs and their peers. The idea behind this tool kit is that this need not—indeed, should not—be the case.

2. Laurence, David. "Where Are They Now? Occupations of 1996–2011 PhD Recipients in 2013." *The Trend*, 17 February 2015, [mlaresearch.mla.hcommons.org/2015/02/17/where-are-they-now-occupations-of-1996-2011-phd-recipients-in-2013-2/](http://mlaresearch.mla.hcommons.org/2015/02/17/where-are-they-now-occupations-of-1996-2011-phd-recipients-in-2013-2/).

# The Value of Humanistic Expertise

The numbers tell a story of humanities PhDs finding careers in and outside the academy. Programs should acknowledge the social value that accrues from having professionally trained humanists making use of their expertise in a variety of workplaces.

Since 2008, with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies has placed humanities and humanistic social science PhDs in nonprofit and government organizations through their [public fellows program](#). In 2017 the ACLS convened a panel of supervisors of ACLS public fellows at the MLA convention. Several of these supervisors said that the PhDs they had hired through ACLS were not only excellent writers and communicators but they had actually *transformed* their organizations. One such supervisor said that his organization's ACLS public fellows had come in, "read" the organization, and made recommendations that fundamentally changed the organization for the better.

PhDs bring to their careers more than a set of skills related to their academic work (although those skills are important); they also bring perspectives and insight characteristic of humanistic modes of thinking. These forms of expertise are undervalued when presumed to be of use and value only inside the academy. When PhD career paths are tracked we discover just how valuable humanistically trained intelligence is in settings outside the academy. There is yet work to be done in defining this humanistic expertise and specifying how it contributes to careers outside the academy. The value of humanistic training would seem to stem, at least in part, from humanists' ability to work with written documents and other language events rapidly and at a high level of integration and differentiated detail, as both forms of social action and repositories of meanings.

Implicit in the assumption that a humanities PhD can and should lead only to an academic career are a number of other assumptions: that the expertise students develop in the course of their educations will not be valued elsewhere, that any work humanities scholars find outside the academy must hold little intellectual interest and betray their values and their training, and that humanities scholarship has little or no public value.

In contrast, Connected Academics affirms that humanities expertise is valuable and desirable outside the academy and that humanists are well suited to move between and among organizations and sectors. If the field is to argue for its own durability and relevance, then it must take seriously the range of work that those who hold its most advanced degree are doing in the world.

## Overview of the Tool Kit

This tool kit is designed to help you advise your students, speak to your colleagues and administration, and, over time, change the culture in your department around career preparation for doctoral students. It recognizes that while no one faculty member can do everything, actions taken by a single faculty member can have a ripple effect.

The first module, **Mapping Your Resources**, asks you to take stock of what resources are available to you locally, both on campus and off. There are many wheels that you need not reinvent, and this module will help guide you to them.

The second module, **Engaging Your Most Valuable Resource: Alumni**, contains suggestions for tracking and leveraging your program's alumni. Although many PhDs who leave the academy lose touch with their departments, this module will help programs keep alumni engaged.

The third module, **Starting the Conversation with Students**, contains concrete suggestions and sample language for starting and sustaining a conversation with your students about their career path, from recruitment day to the dissertation and graduation.

The fourth module, **Starting the Conversation with Faculty Members and Administration**, tackles the critical task of beginning a conversation about PhD careers with colleagues and contains suggestions for managing conversations with deans and other administrators.

The fifth and final module, **Changing Departmental Culture through Curriculum**, addresses larger issues around long-term change, including admissions practices, current course offerings, and the dissertation.



## MODULE 1

# Mapping Your Resources

## Introduction

Map the resources and allies available to you—on campus and off, locally and nationally. A university's diverse services and resources supporting the professional development of students are often housed in different places within the university. In addition, there will be people at your university—such as PhDs working in administrative roles—willing or even eager to help.

The wider infrastructure that supports humanistic inquiry—what may be called the humanities ecosystem—is vast and extends well beyond academic departments and institutions. It too can serve as a valuable source of information, ideas, resources, funding, and jobs.

Every institution is different. Review the mission statements of both your university and your department as well as your university's strategic plan (if it has one) and any other guiding documents. What are the overall principles or values espoused in these documents? It is especially useful to know if your university or department has a mandate to engage the public or contribute to the greater good.

## Questions to Consider before Getting Started

- What kinds of authority and how much autonomy do academic departments have within your institution? To whom must a department answer?
- How and by whom are disciplinary norms for success defined at your institution? (*For example, where and how would you make the case that the hiring of one of your doctoral students as a program officer at the NEH should be equivalent, in terms of your department's reputation and rewards, to the hiring of a student in a tenure-line position at a Research 1 institution?*)
- What sources of support are available for your department to experiment with models of student funding, curricular innovations, career workshops, alumni tracking, etc.? Are there any university-wide efforts in this area? (*If you are unsure, this section contains some suggestions for finding out.*)

- What are your peer institutions doing around the issue of humanities careers? (*To get an idea of this, take a look at their career services Web sites and their departmental Web pages—especially their alumni or placement pages—or speak directly with colleagues at these institutions.*)

## On-Campus Resources

Find out if someone on your campus has already developed a structured guide to the campus resources and services that are in place to help students with professional development. It might be a simple graphic like Baylor University's **Grad Tracks**, or an organized list with commentary like the University of California, Berkeley's **Resources for PhDs**, or a full-blown interactive Web site like Stanford's **Graduate Professional Development Framework**.

If something similar is not available on your campus, two good places to begin mapping your resources are career services and the graduate school or division.

## The Career Services Center

Career services centers vary significantly in philosophy and in services offered. Ideally, career services will be your strongest ally on campus when it comes to graduate student professional development.

To find out exactly what the situation is on your campus, contact career services directly. They are usually very happy to hear from departments. Here are some questions you could ask:

- Is there a career services professional dedicated to working with graduate students? Is there a counselor who works specifically with graduate students from humanities departments?
- What kinds of services or events does the career center offer? (*Sometimes there is a calendar available online.*)
- How does the staff who work with humanities graduate students view humanities graduate students? What can you do or what might you need to do to educate career services staff about the skills, intellectual habits, and forms of expertise cultivated in humanities doctoral study?
- In the view of career services, what can departments do to help better prepare students for a variety of careers?
- How could the department and career services collaborate to offer discipline-specific programming for graduate students?

If you discover that your career center does not work with graduate students (or that it works primarily with STEM students), you will want to advocate for better career services for your students. Specifically, many institutions have found that hiring PhDs to work with PhDs, even

if they are in different fields, is remarkably effective. The needs of PhD students are not the same as those of undergraduates, and fellow PhDs are in the best position to recognize that.

If you find out that your career services center offers robust resources for humanities PhD students, invite the staff into the department to give a presentation about career pathways for humanities PhDs. Encourage both students and faculty members to attend. Let your students know directly about career center events by forwarding e-mails and posting flyers outside your office.

Finally, be aware of the implicit messages you send regarding career center events. If you enthusiastically encourage or even require attendance at departmental lectures but forward career center events with a tepid "FYI," graduate students will be less likely to attend the career center events.

## The Graduate School or Division

The graduate school or division is often a clearinghouse for all events and resources related to graduate students on campus. Staff at the graduate school usually have a strong network across the university—both in departments and in other administrative units—of people who support graduate education. If there is no map of resources already available, they may be able to create one.

If your career center either underserves graduate students or does not serve them at all, the graduate school may be taking up the slack. You can probably find out a lot about what it offers from its Web site, but it is worth contacting the graduate school directly to find out more. As the administrative unit dedicated to serving graduate students across the university, the graduate school will have access to people and information. Some questions to ask include:

- What are other departments (either in the humanities or more broadly) already doing to help their graduate students prepare for a variety of careers?
- What kinds of university-wide professional development initiatives (e.g., internships, fellowships, etc.) should I be aware of? Are humanities graduate students applying for and participating in university-wide professional development initiatives?
- What kinds of opportunities exist for students to gain work experience here at the university? What are the policies around graduate students working?
- Are there staff dedicated to working with international students? How can I support my international graduate students who want to stay in the United States after graduating?
- What else can departments do to help graduate students prepare for a variety of careers?
- Do humanities doctoral students have specific professional development needs?

- Could I have a short list of university staff who hold humanities PhDs?

## People as Resources

At most universities, there is a plethora of humanities PhDs working as staff members in administrative units. A valuable and usually untapped resource, identifying them is critical to building your network of allies. PhDs are employed in many areas of a university but most likely in the following places:

- Library or special collections
- Undergraduate advising
- Center for teaching and learning
- Research centers, including the humanities center
- Educational technology
- Writing and language center administration

One low-cost way to start a conversation in your department is to invite two or three of these PhDs to give a lunchtime talk in your department about their career paths and what they do. Again, strongly encourage both faculty and students to attend. For sample questions to ask during such an event, consult the section on [sample questions for alumni panels](#).

## Other On-Campus Resources

Your university's humanities center may also be interested in the question of humanities careers. In fact, it may be willing to host events or provide some funding for workshops or speakers. This is especially likely if you approach the issue from a public humanities perspective, because many humanities centers have public engagement as part of their mission.

Graduate students themselves are another significant resource. They often have a lot of energy around this issue but are sometimes hesitant to speak up because of departmental hierarchies. If your department has a graduate student council, its leadership may be a good place to begin looking for allies. It may surprise you to find out how much departmental culture can be influenced by a supportive faculty member who joins forces with a vocal graduate student.

# Off-Campus Resources

## Your Local Humanities Ecosystem

The humanities ecosystem is a vibrant place, full of interesting organizations and smart, capable people doing important work.

Figure 3 below is a map of this ecosystem, somewhat narrowly defined; humanities PhDs take jobs outside this ecosystem all the time in places like the federal government and management consulting firms. In these areas of the ecosystem, however, the humanities and the value of a humanities PhD are, by and large, already understood. They are good options for graduate students who want to translate academic work into other types of work.

## The Humanities Ecosystem

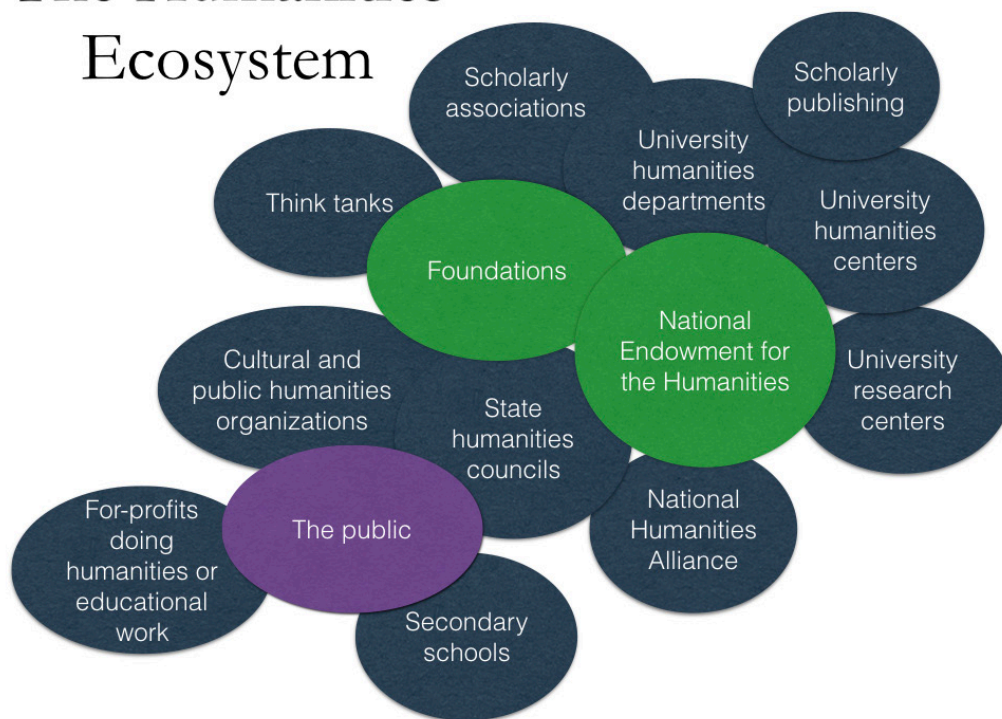


FIG. 3

There is much valuable and intellectually challenging humanities work taking place in parts of the humanities ecosystem that the academic humanities rarely touch. Most graduate students are unaware that this ecosystem exists at all. This disconnect can make it difficult to transition into jobs in these sectors later on.

Bridging the gap between graduate students and the humanities ecosystem can benefit both students and the organizations. Departments can seek out organizations for mutual

collaboration and expertise, students can seek them out for internship and job opportunities, and the organizations can seek out departments and students to fill positions for which a PhD would be well suited.

Exploring your local humanities ecosystem can take time and energy, and it might be worth hiring graduate students to do it. This work will also benefit the students' understanding of the ecosystem and grow their network. In addition to Web searches, you should consider finding out where your **alumni** have worked and consulting the list of **organizations** across the country that have hosted ACLS public fellows. Although you do not need to limit your search to organizations that have already hired PhDs, it can be helpful for getting a foot in the door.

Once you have found some of these organizations, consider contacting them to ask if you might arrange a site visit for a small group of students to visit their offices and meet with their staff for a group informational interview. Alumni are great points of contact for setting up site visits. Career services may be able to help you with this.

## National Organizations and Programs

There is a national conversation happening around PhD careers. As you make changes on your campus, be they large or small, reach out to other organizations and programs that are making changes. Here are some organizations and programs that are leading the conversation.

The Modern Language Association's **Connected Academics**, funded by the Mellon Foundation. Connected Academics sponsors a range of programming at the MLA Annual Convention, from panels to workshops to an annual Showcase of PhD Career Diversity.

American Historical Association's **Career Diversity for Historians** (especially their **faculty resources**)

The Mellon Foundation / American Council of Learned Societies' **Postdoctoral Public Fellows Program**

**Council of Graduate Schools**

**Graduate Career Consortium**

**Versatile PhD** (Find out if your institution subscribes.)

The National Endowment for the Humanities Next Generation Challenge Grants. From the NEH Web site:

Next Generation Humanities PhD Planning Grants support universities in preparing to institute wide-ranging changes in humanities doctoral programs. Humanities knowledge and methods can make an even more substantial impact on society if students

are able to translate what they learn in doctoral programs into a multitude of careers. Next Generation PhD Planning Grants are designed to bring together various important constituencies to discuss and strategize, and then to produce plans that will transform scholarly preparation in the humanities at the doctoral level. Students will be prepared to undertake various kinds of careers, and humanities PhD programs will increase their relevance for the twenty-first century.

The NEH offers two kinds of Next Gen grants: **planning** and **implementation**. If your department is still in the early stages of this conversation, a planning grant is probably most appropriate. Receiving an NEH grant means that a department or institution becomes part of a national network of organizations that are deeply invested in this question. The deadline for the 2017 competition is 29 November 2017.

## Recommended Reading

Basalla, Susan, and Maggie Debelius. "So What Are You Going to Do with That? Finding Careers Outside Academia." Revised ed., U of Chicago P, 2007.

Lay, Jenna. "Job-Market Advice—For Faculty." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 Oct. 2015, [www.chronicle.com/article/Job-Market-Advice-for/233724](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Job-Market-Advice-for/233724).

Marcus, Sharon. "Scenes from the Life of a Graduate Advisor." *Vitae: For Your Academic Life*, 11 Sept. 2015, [chroniclevitae.com/news/1120-scenes-from-the-life-of-a-graduate-adviser](http://chroniclevitae.com/news/1120-scenes-from-the-life-of-a-graduate-adviser).

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*. Modern Language Association, 2014. *Modern Language Association*, [www.mla.org/Resources/Research/Surveys-Reports-and-Other-Documents/Staffing-Salaries-and-Other-Professional-Issues/Report-of-the-Task-Force-on-Doctoral-Study-in-Modern-Language-and-Literature-2014](http://www.mla.org/Resources/Research/Surveys-Reports-and-Other-Documents/Staffing-Salaries-and-Other-Professional-Issues/Report-of-the-Task-Force-on-Doctoral-Study-in-Modern-Language-and-Literature-2014).

*Understanding PhD Career Pathways for Program Improvement*. Council of Graduate Schools, 12 Jan. 2015. *Council of Graduate Schools*, [cgsnet.org/understanding-phd-career-pathways-program-improvement](http://cgsnet.org/understanding-phd-career-pathways-program-improvement). (Member log-in required.)

## MODULE 2

# Engaging Your Most Valuable Resource: Alumni

## Introduction

Traditionally, the success of a PhD program has been measured by the number of its graduates who found tenure-track appointments at postsecondary institutions. Graduates who have not found such appointments are often excluded from a department's statistics and thereby rendered invisible. This is unfortunate for everyone: for alumni, who feel omitted; for current students, who struggle to find positive examples of those who have gone before them; and for programs, which remain cut off from some of their most successful graduates.

Whether you are thinking broadly about the impact of humanistic expertise or providing current students with positive professional role models, your alumni are your most valuable resource. This section outlines ways for you to identify and engage—even celebrate—graduates of your program who use their humanistic training and expertise in a variety of careers.

Engaging alumni serves several purposes. First, it helps you gather data about where and how your graduates are working and how they are using their humanities expertise. Knowing more about them will help you become a stronger advocate for your field in general and for your program in particular. Second, it broadens the imaginations of current students and provides greater transparency about the outcomes of your program. If the only graduates who are visible to your program are the ones with tenure-track or tenured positions, then those are likely to be the only occupational outcomes current students will imagine for themselves.

Finally, when alumni become more engaged the relation between departments and their alumni is strengthened. This has several potential positive results: it allows for fund-raising and development opportunities, builds a professional network that current students can draw on, and signals that the program values a variety of outcomes for graduates.



# Alumni Tracking

The first step toward engaging your graduate alumni is to find them. Graduates with academic positions maintain professional ties with their dissertation advisers and other faculty mentors. Graduates who have found careers outside the academy are often more difficult to locate.

Comprehensive tracking projects can be time-consuming. Your university's office of alumni relations, institutional research, or development probably has information on your graduates, which they may or may not be willing to share. If the information is unavailable or incomplete, the department should consider undertaking the search itself.

One strategy for locating alumni is to hire students to find program graduates online, for example, through *LinkedIn*. This can be effective, though it does require patience and a small budget. Alternatively, departments can leverage already existing professionalization courses, such as **pedagogy and proseminar courses**, to find graduates a few at a time.

Although retroactive tracking projects can be complicated, it is within the reach of all departments to track their PhD graduates going forward. Within five to ten years, you will find yourself with significant data on your program's recent graduates.

## Best Practices for Alumni Tracking

- Collect a *nonuniversity e-mail address* from all students before they graduate. This is a small but absolutely critical piece of tracking alumni.
- Ask graduates about their employment at the time of graduation and again six months later. Most graduates will have found work by then.
- Establish a protocol for contacting graduates subsequently. You do not need to contact everyone every year; every three to five years is probably sufficient. One way of making ongoing tracking more manageable is to do it by graduating cohort (e.g., people who finished in 2010 get contacted in 2015 and 2020, people who finished in 2011 get contacted in 2016 and 2021, etc.).
- Decide who is going to be in charge of the tracking project. It is best for this job to be institutionalized by embedding it in an administrative role, such as the director of graduate studies or a job-placement officer position.
- Keep the surveys brief.
- Follow up with nonrespondents.
- Use the survey as an opportunity to cultivate relationships with graduates in a range of careers. The rest of this module considers ways to do this.

## The Alumni Web Page

A traditional placement Web page for a PhD program lists the academic appointments of its graduates. Unfortunately, this practice elides many graduates of the program who are doing important intellectual and humanistic work outside the academy.

An alternative to the traditional placement page is a more comprehensive PhD alumni page. An alumni page lists all alumni of a program, regardless of the type of career they are in. This creates an honest record for prospective and current graduate students of a particular program's employment outcomes.

### Sample template

Graduation Year	Name	First Job	Current Job

You will notice that this template lists both the first job and the current job—information that you will gather through your survey of graduates. This gives current and prospective students an accurate understanding of how a career trajectory develops over time. Although a graduate may start out in a postsecondary teaching position, they may have transitioned into another type of work five years after graduation.

For the sake of transparency, an alumni page should list all graduates. However, a department can be more selective in whom it decides to highlight or profile. Alumni profiles, based on more in-depth interviews, can include graduates in a variety of academic positions (such as at two-year and four-year institutions) as well as those working outside the professoriate. Current graduate students may benefit from conducting interviews and writing profiles, as they will gain experience in **informational interviewing** and important professional contacts. Alumni profiles can be a way for departments to establish the narrative it wishes to tell about its PhD program.

## Alumni Panels

Alumni panels are a popular way to introduce current graduate students to the career success of program graduates while also strengthening relations between alumni and the department. They can be done in person or virtually, depending on the resources available. Alumni are generally happy to be asked to serve on panels and participate in conversations about humanities careers.

Below are some best-practice recommendations for alumni panels. As with alumni profiles, it can be beneficial to graduate students to organize the panel themselves, with support from the faculty and the department.

## Best Practices for Alumni Panels

- Have graduate student organizers conduct informational interviews with alumni before inviting them to campus. This will allow you to select panel participants who feel overall positively about their graduate school experience.
- Be clear with panel participants about what you are asking them for and what they should prepare. Consider:
  - How much time are you asking them to give?
  - What kinds of questions will you be asking them? (Send questions in advance if possible.)
  - Do you want them to provide other materials, such as a sample résumé or entry-level job description in their field?
- If you want to record the session, ask your panelists well in advance if they are comfortable with it. Recording will allow the information to reach more people, but some participants will be less candid if they are being recorded.
- Encourage faculty members as well as graduate students to come to the panel. The presence of faculty members will signal to students that there is interest in alumni careers, and it will signal to the panel participants that the program values them.
- Consider asking [campus career services](#) to help organize the event. They do these kinds of events regularly and are often happy to partner with departments.

## Sample Questions for Alumni Panels

Below are some sample questions a panel facilitator might ask in an alumni panel.

- Describe your path from your PhD to where you are today. What decisions did you make along the way that helped you? Who helped you and how?
- What do you do in your current position? What's your job like day to day? What bigger problems are you trying to solve?
- How does your PhD training or your humanistic expertise (however you define it) serve you in your current field?
- What do you wish you'd known as a PhD student?
- What can current PhD students do to prepare themselves for your field?

- What challenges do you see for PhDs transitioning from academia to working outside the academy?
- What do you miss about academia? Which aspects were you glad to leave behind?

## MODULE 3

# Starting the Conversation with Students

## Introduction

Open and honest conversation around humanities careers is beneficial to students and, ultimately, to the program as well. Many students who enter doctoral study do so with the intention of pursuing tenure-track faculty jobs. Most of them are already aware of the poor academic job market, but many will not be familiar with their program's full placement record. For the sake of transparency, it is important that the record be made available to them as early as possible in their graduate careers. If your department's knowledge of its placement record is incomplete, please see the section on [alumni tracking](#).

As mentors and advisers, it is important that faculty members remain realistic and prompt their students at every stage of their graduate careers to consider all the pathways available to them. Students should be made aware that, rather than being at the mercy of a declining academic labor market, they have options and can exercise agency. This awareness is critical to the development of a confident and secure professional identity no matter what career they pursue.

Furthermore, a student who feels that their department has supported them and is proud of their professional accomplishments after graduation is far more likely to feel positively about their graduate program. This makes them more likely to maintain a relationship with their PhD institution and allows the department to draw upon its [alumni as a valuable resource](#).

This section contains a number of examples of sample language. You will notice that there are no references to "academic" and "nonacademic" careers but rather to "humanities careers." The broad term *humanities careers* helps students avoid thinking of employment options as an either/or situation and also avoids inadvertently denigrating "nonacademic" careers. The label "alt ac" is also avoided—when at least a third of PhD earners go into careers outside the university, they can hardly be considered alternative. Humanities careers covers all jobs, avoiding "non" and "alt" as signifiers.

# Directors of Graduate Studies

The director of graduate studies (DGS) is the faculty member that early-career graduate students are most likely to receive advice from. The DGS has the ability to normalize the conversation about humanities careers, broadly considered, as early as the acceptance letter or recruitment day. In addition to bringing the topic up with students, the DGS can also serve as an advocate and ally by **raising the topic with fellow faculty members**.

This section has suggestions on ways that a DGS can normalize the conversation with graduate students in the first two or three years of their graduate careers, as well as sample language for communicating with students.

## 1. The acceptance letter

Although often much is made of the employment outcomes of program graduates during the period of recruitment, in many departments this record includes only alumni who have found full-time academic employment. As early as the acceptance letter, a broad range of post-PhD employment should be emphasized.

Sample language:

*A PhD from our department prepares you for a range of fulfilling employment. We are very proud of our alumni who have gone on to put their training to work in a range of humanities careers, including as faculty members at teaching colleges and research universities, directors of education at museums, research associates at think tanks, and staff writers at major publications.*

This example is generalized, but the more specific you can be about where people have gone, the more likely it is to influence prospective students.

## 2. Recruitment day

The recruitment visit is another early opportunity to set a positive tone about the diversity of possible career outcomes. Consider organizing an **alumni panel** for recruitment day with alumni who are employed in a variety of sectors (including faculty members at different types of institutions). Include someone from career services to address your potential graduate students.

## 3. Department orientation

The department orientation for new graduate students, while likely to focus primarily on training future faculty members, offers an opportunity to establish broad thinking about career horizons as a normal part of advising conversations. Having someone from the career center describe their services can be useful, and so is providing students with a map of campus and community resources (see the section on **Mapping Your Resources**).

#### 4. Individual meetings

Individual meetings are an opportunity to ask students about their values, skills, and interests—widely considered to be the career-counseling trifecta—as well as their developing career aspirations. This can easily dovetail with talking about developing research and teaching interests. Questions that can be useful for starting a conversation include:

- What are you enjoying about being a graduate student? *(If you get a general answer like “teaching,” you might press further to find out more about what the student really enjoys about it. Does she enjoy working with students? Lesson planning? Being in the classroom? All of these are slightly different aspects of teaching that can lead to different types of careers.)*
- What do you find less enjoyable? *(This may be harder to get students to answer. They may be reluctant to admit they’re not enjoying their teaching—or their research.)*
- Are you involved in activities outside your research and teaching either on or off campus? *(Students sometimes feel they need to hide their outside activities from advisers. You may have to clarify that you feel these activities are an important part of their educations as well.)*

The Connected Academics [transferable skills document](#) can help both you and your graduate students think about typical graduate student activities in terms of different types of work.

Individual meetings are also a good time to remind a student that you encourage them to visit [career services](#) and to keep you informed about those meetings. If there is a staff member at the career center with whom you have a relationship, you can take this opportunity to recommend the staff member to students or even offer to introduce students to the staff member over e-mail.

#### 5. Group meetings

If you convene a group of students regularly, for an informal colloquium or a more formal [proseminar](#), you might periodically set aside a meeting for career exploration and discussion. Here are some suggestions:

- Invite a career-services professional with experience working with graduate students to come in and speak to students about how to prepare for a job search.
- Invite alumni in a variety of careers to either visit in person or by *Skype* to talk about what they do.
- Do a career exploration workshop using the [MLA Career Exploration Activity Packet](#) (written by English PhD Beth Seltzer).
- Structure a discussion around [Preparing for Life Outside the Academy: A Primer and Resource Guide](#) (written by Spanish PhD Sarah Goldberg).

# Dissertation Advisers

Few professional relationships are as important to graduate students as the one they have with their dissertation adviser. Keeping career ambitions a secret from their dissertation adviser can be a huge burden to students. Here are five ways that dissertation advisers can destigmatize this conversation for their students.

## 1. Opening the conversation

Often students are anxious about bringing up broader career ambitions or do not know how to. By broaching the subject directly, perhaps over e-mail before a scheduled appointment, you can help break the ice. Emphasize that you're bringing this up because you want all your students to be aware of the options available to them and because you are supportive of students exploring those options.

## 2. Being explicit in your support

Sometimes a student will beat you to the punch and bring up the issue of careers before you have the opportunity. If a student says they are thinking about jobs outside the academy, a good response is simply to say:

*That's great! Let's think together about how the work you're doing can help you.*

This may seem like a minor intervention, but it can mean a great deal for a graduate student to learn that you are supportive and want to help.

## 3. Making professional introductions

As useful as such explicit declarations of support are, consider also whether you can go one step further and put your student in touch with either former students or **staff at the university** who might be able to give them more information. An introductory e-mail can go a long way toward helping students take that first step.

Sample e-mail message:

*This e-mail introduces Student X to Graduate Y.*

*Graduate Y, Student X is a current PhD student of mine studying [FIELD]. She has told me that she's interested in [PROFESSION] as a possible career path. I thought you would be a great resource for her.*

*Student X, I sat on Graduate Y's committee when she did her PhD here. She is now the [JOB TITLE] at [ORGANIZATION], where she is doing great work.*

*I'll let the two of you take it from here.*

## 4. Affirming and broadening professional identities

Identity is an often overlooked piece of this equation. PhD students tend to place



much investment in their identities as highly specialized academics or researchers of a particular language or time period. Encourage your graduate students to also recognize themselves as scholars, educators, writers, and humanists. These broader identities travel well among a variety of careers.

#### **5. Sharing your own story**

If you are an academic with a diverse work history, consider sharing your story with your students. Although faculty careers often look linear to graduate students, that is not always the case. It can be educational and reassuring for students to hear about the unexpected places your career has taken you and how valuable those experiences were.

## **Informal Advising Relationships**

If you're vocal about supporting graduate students in their broader career ambitions, you may find yourself speaking with students with whom you have no formal advising relationship. Many departments have faculty members who are known to be the go-to person for career advice. Most of the suggestions in this section apply to these conversations as well.

If you are speaking with multiple students interested in working outside the academy, ask if they are okay with you sharing their names with one another. Having a community of peers with whom to share resources and give and receive support can make a huge difference to graduate students. It will also lessen the advising burden on you and give students valuable experience in peer mentorship.

## MODULE 4

# Starting the Conversation with the Faculty and Administration

## Introduction

Faculty members' attitudes about humanities careers outside the academy vary widely. Some faculty members are very open to the idea or have even had other careers themselves; others believe that the only reason to get a PhD is to become a faculty member, and they are willing to say so to their students and faculty colleagues. Many fall somewhere in the middle.

It is expected and indeed desirable for there to be diverse opinions on this issue, and it is important that everyone be heard. This section is structured around three common faculty concerns you may encounter and some ideas for responding to them.

## A Note for Department Chairs

In addition to providing guidelines for helping students and changing departmental culture, one purpose of this tool kit is to jump-start the conversation among faculty members about career pathways for PhD students. It may take more than simply sharing this tool kit to persuade faculty members to read it. One way to stimulate faculty members to engage with the tool kit is to ask them to read it for discussion at a faculty meeting, perhaps choosing one or two modules to discuss in depth. Opening the conversation and addressing uncertainties and anxieties among your faculty are necessary first steps.

## Common Faculty Concerns

1. **"I don't need this. My field is fine, and my students find academic jobs."**  
It is likely that your colleague is making an inaccurate assumption; there are very few departments—if any—in which all graduate students land tenure-track academic jobs upon graduation. Respond to this with data that is specific to your department about where students have ended up. If data for your department is not available, share the **statistics** provided in the introduction to this tool kit.

Another way to respond to this objection is to shift the focus away from the current state of the academic job market. Even in fields where academic positions are plentiful, such as Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese, postsecondary teaching jobs may not be the best fit for all students—for a variety of reasons. Modern language PhDs have frequently taken employment outside the academy, and indeed students with expertise in emergent languages such as Arabic and Chinese may have even more opportunities outside the academy than their colleagues in French and German.

**2. “The PhD is a research degree, not a professional degree.”**

The PhD is (and has been for a long time) both a research degree and a professional degree. It has always prepared students for a particular profession: the professoriate.

This objection is often a way of expressing concern about maintaining the intellectual value of the PhD. In this case, ask your colleagues if they believe that humanistic research and teaching has value outside the university. You might point out that every PhD who finds work outside the academy demonstrates the public value of the humanistic research space, which, in itself, is an argument in favor of maintaining the advanced study of languages and literatures.

**Alumni panels** can make this point very effectively. Alumni can often speak quite eloquently to how their PhD prepared them for their current careers—and why they are glad they did not go to law school instead.

**3. “I support my students in doing this, but I don’t know how to help them. Isn’t this what career services is for?”**

No one expects faculty members to become career counselors or to develop a whole new area of expertise. Ideally, **career services** will be a strong ally for you, though that is not always the case. But even if your career services center has a robust program for working with humanities PhDs, it is important for departments to take some responsibility. This tool kit is designed to help. Let your colleagues know it is available and that it contains specific strategies for faculty members, mentors, and dissertation advisers working with doctoral students.

## Talking to and Working with Your Dean

Faculty members often remark that it is difficult to advocate for broadened career horizons because university administrators continue to use placement in tenure-track positions in research universities as the measure of program success. There is a concern that calling attention to graduates who pursue careers beyond postsecondary teaching will make their programs vulnerable.

This concern is genuine. However, there is also risk involved in either not knowing or not acknowledging the outcomes of a program. A proactive approach to tracking alumni and redefining positive outcomes for current graduate students will allow you to have a more pro-

ductive and positive conversation with your dean than the one you might have if the office of institutional research collected the data. Your graduates are your best argument.

Here are some questions to consider as you approach a conversation with university administration:

- How are your program's graduates putting their humanistic training and expertise to work, either inside or outside the academy? How is that work serving the mission of your institution?
- Who among your graduates has been particularly successful and might be willing to contribute to the university?
- What are your peer institutions doing around this issue? What are your aspirational peer institutions doing around it?
- To what extent will broadening career horizons for your graduate students affect your curricular and admissions decisions?

Remember that administrators look to departments and departmental faculty members to signal the norms and standards their fields are operating under. Disciplinary norms evolve. The humanities have been singular in the high percentage of doctorates that follow the professorial career path. The [resources section](#) of this tool kit contains several documents, including the [Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study](#), that will be useful to you in conveying to your administration that disciplinary norms are in flux.

## MODULE 5

# Changing Departmental Culture through Curriculum

## Introduction

Changes in departmental culture and curriculum are among the most challenging but also the most necessary. Neither culture nor curriculum can be changed by administrative fiat or by the work of one or even two or three dedicated faculty members. Change in department culture around issues of career outcomes requires convincing both faculty members and graduate students, and curricular changes often must be agreed upon by all faculty members.

However, changes to both culture and curriculum are worth working toward because they are likely to be the most influential and long lasting. They will not vanish immediately when a particularly active student graduates nor when a vocal faculty member moves on to other interests. Although every section of this tool kit focuses on changes that, when taken together, will result in culture change, this section focuses specifically on curricular and structural changes that departments can consider making.

## Adapting Current Course Offerings

Graduate seminars—including proseminars and pedagogy courses—offer faculty members the opportunity to change curriculum in small ways that benefit graduate students' learning, thereby contributing to departmental cultural change.

### Graduate Seminars

Take a few minutes of class time and ask students to reflect on how their work in this course is contributing to their professional development and broader identities as humanists. Consider alternatives to the twenty- to twenty-five-page paper (a proto-dissertation chapter) and the twenty-minute in-class presentation (a proto-conference paper). Offering an array of writing assignments creates opportunities for students to develop skills that will be useful to them both in and outside the academy. Such assignments might include:

- An annotated syllabus on a topic related to the course
- A book review of a new work in the field
- A suite of blog posts or journalistic pieces related to the topic
- A proposal for a public humanities project related to the topic
- A proposal for a digital humanities project related to the topic

Consider inviting other faculty or staff members at the university to speak to your students, such as faculty members from creative writing or the journalism department to talk about creative nonfiction, staff members from the university museum to talk about creating exhibitions, and educational technology specialists to talk about the digital humanities. Drawing on outside expertise gives your students the scaffolding they need to be successful in new kinds of assignments and increases their networks within the university.

## Pedagogy Courses and Proseminars

Formal professional training already takes place in departments through pedagogy courses and proseminars, which provide opportunities to introduce activities that prompt students to think more broadly about their identities as humanists and the types of expertise they are developing.

In a pedagogy course, students could be asked to expand their thinking about teaching and classroom life to consider how teaching happens outside classrooms—at the university and beyond. Are there places outside the university where their area of interest is being taught? What audiences are being reached? What pedagogical practices are being used?

In a departmental proseminar, students could be asked to think more broadly about themselves as professional humanists who are part of a humanities workforce that exists across a wide variety of sectors. What are the forms of humanistic expertise and modes of thinking students could be aiming to develop? What is the role of humanistic critique and cultural commentary outside the academy? Where is it happening?

Proseminars also offer spaces where faculty members might invite outside speakers to share their expertise with students. **Alumni** might visit in person or by *Skype*. Faculty members can offer an orientation in collaboration with **career services** for students to recognize their career options and available campus resources. The **Career Exploration Activity Packet** could easily be done in a proseminar with the facilitation of a faculty member.

Module 3 of this tool kit discusses the importance of alumni tracking. Pedagogy courses and proseminar courses offer departments the opportunity to delegate some of the work of tracking down alumni to their graduate students. This is fairly easy to do with a list of names and *Google* and *LinkedIn* ([linkedin.com/alumni](https://www.linkedin.com/alumni)).

In a pedagogy course, students could be asked to track down three alumni of their program who are doing some form of teaching (not limited to those teaching at four-year institutions). In a proseminar course, the assignment could be broader, requiring students to find three alumni who are working across at least two different sectors. In both cases, the assignment can have students contact the alumni and do informational interviews with them—by *Skype* or in person. Students can then present their findings in the proseminar and give the contact information to the department.

Students will gain valuable contacts and insight, and the department will gain knowledge about and contact information for its alumni.

## Helping Students Be Thoughtful and Deliberate about Their Curricular Choices

In [Preparing for Life Outside the Academy: A Primer and Resource Guide](#), Spanish PhD Sarah Goldberg makes a number of recommendations to graduate students about how they can gain a broad array of skills and experiences during their course of study. Many of these opportunities involve simply tweaking or building upon activities they are already engaged in. Among Goldberg's suggestions to graduate students are:

**In teaching:** Create connections with local cultural sites and institutions. Use technology in the classroom. Mentor undergraduates.

**In research:** Develop new technical skills. Manage your dissertation thoughtfully to build project management experience. Apply for grants to build grant-writing skills and demonstrate success in this area.

**In service:** Plan events and lead meetings.

Goldberg also recommends that graduate students make a work schedule for managing their time on a day-to-day basis and create an Individual Development Plan (IDP) for managing the months, semesters, and years allotted to them in graduate school. Working backward from an anticipated date of graduation, students can decide well in advance when they intend to submit an article for consideration in a journal; when they will need to apply for a particular fellowship; when they intend to submit a dissertation prospectus; and what they would like to do during their summers, either funded or unfunded.

An IDP is a valuable tool for helping students define and accomplish their graduate school bucket list. Encouraging your students to make one and to update it with you every quarter or semester will also make advising more efficient and effective for you as their faculty mentor.

## Admissions Practices

The 2014 [report](#) from the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature recommends that “departments should develop admissions practices and policies appropriate to the changing character of doctoral education and the broadened range of career opportunities.” Departments might review their admissions criteria and practices in the light of their alumni employment record, with an eye to diversity in graduate cohorts that matches the career diversity of alumni.

## The Dissertation

Students and faculty members often ask whether the dissertation—the distinguishing requirement of doctoral education—might change in response to a broader understanding of humanities careers. If the dissertation does change, can it remain a deep, sustained, and original piece of scholarship? Can it be driven by the intellectual problems that interest the student and at the same time function as a step to careers beyond postsecondary teaching? Many students, regardless of career ambition, are likely to continue to write dissertations that take the form of proto-monographs. Others may want to pursue projects that incorporate the digital or public humanities, different forms of media, original translation work, or pedagogical research, to name only a few possibilities.

Faculty members should prompt students to reflect on the dissertation process and to ask themselves, In what ways is my dissertation expanding my capacities? How is it requiring me to stretch as a scholar? How is it contributing to the development of my humanistic expertise? And finally, how are the interests and issues informing the dissertation manifested in the wider world?

## Doctoral Experience Is Work Experience

It can be difficult for graduate students and faculty members to remember that graduate students—while they are indeed students—are also professionals. In their research, teaching, and service, they are humanists at work. What they do in graduate school counts as work experience, and through it they develop humanistic expertise, tangible skills, and professional identities that are critically important to their success.



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