

Towards an Inclusive Intellectual Community for Medievalists A Plan of Action for Professional Diversity

I. Defining the medievalist; who belongs and who does not

What makes someone a medievalist? According to the *members* page on the website of the Medieval Academy of America, “[M]embership is open to all persons interested in the Middle Ages.”

A more inclusive definition of “medievalist” could hardly be imagined. Similar classifications are found in the statements of many national and international organizations, all of which conceive of their intellectual communities as open, collaborative, and receptive fora for any person dedicated to the study of the Middle Ages.

However, the stated goals of inclusiveness have yet to be wholly met, despite the good intentions of these organizations and their collective memberships. Many medievalists feel they are not full participants in the field, and for one reason or another, sense that they are excluded from the kinds of meaningful dialogue that drew them to study the Middle Ages in the first instance. Rarely is the exclusion of certain medievalist voices done purposefully; when asked, most people who define themselves as medievalists will readily acknowledge the importance of multiple voices in the discussion and will agree that differing perspectives enrich our study of the Middle Ages and of the human experience more generally.

But good intentions are not enough. Humanities research and its applicability in our everyday lives is now under severe attack. The response to such attacks by researchers, quite naturally, has been to look inwards towards colleagues and peers for strength and solidarity. Yet by turning inwards, we are missing an opportunity—and perhaps also sidestepping our responsibility—to demonstrate how medieval studies is relevant to our everyday lives, not just in the university communities in which medievalists feel most at home. If we can take steps to make our profession more welcoming to a multiplicity of voices and to increase a sense of belonging among all kinds of medievalists and humanities scholars, we as a field and a society will profit enormously. We should strive to promote spaces where an expanded understanding of the medieval world is organically rather than antagonistically (or at times, condescendingly) introduced into the public discourse. Our motivation is not a matter of benevolence, but rather a question of whether our discipline will have a sustainable future.

For many medievalists, a sure sign of group belonging or exclusion resides with one’s professional standing, so that the contributions of medievalists working in traditional academic positions are more readily recognized than the work of those in other kinds of jobs, whether in or out of university settings. Funding structures often bolster this perception, since few jobs outside of long-term university positions, and faculty positions in particular, support the kind of research activities necessary to maintain an active scholarly profile. Understanding that professional standing is but one of the many forms of inclusivity that should be addressed in our field and in humanities scholarship at large, this paper will propose that we acknowledge the need for greater acceptance of professional diversity within medieval studies, confront some of the barriers to full participation in the medievalist community for those in non-traditional professional environments, and recommend some concrete steps towards those ends.

II. Medievalist work outside of the professorate

Since the first days of the discipline, there have been medievalists working outside of the professorate. Examples here abound. In the 18th century, [Elizabeth Elstob](#) created the first Anglo-Saxon grammar written in modern English, but never made it to the university, much less to a full-time faculty position. [Reinhold Röhrich](#), the most prominent German crusades scholar of the mid-nineteenth century, made his living as a high school teacher, not a university professor. Patricia Hochschild Labalme, the doyenne of medieval Venetian studies in the United States, was a prolific scholar and tireless supporter of humanities scholarship in the mid-to-late twentieth century, yet she was never a full-time tenure-track professor. These medievalists transformed the fields in which they worked and in which we *still* work, and whether by personal choice or cultural circumstance, did so from outside of full-time faculty positions. Yet most graduate students and post-graduate medievalists gauge their level of success within our discipline based on the ability to secure one, and only one, kind of job: the tenured professorship.

This remains true even as the landscape of academic labor has changed over the past generation and continues to shift in unexpected ways. It is no longer news that the number of students who complete a program of training in a medieval discipline far outweighs the number of traditionally-conceived jobs where these graduates might find employment. While this presents immediate challenges to the expectations students and instructors maintain about the ultimate goal of graduate education, the profession should rejoice at the continued and bountiful interest that exists in our field. The challenging nature of the job market for trained medievalists is one of the best reasons to take note of the many colleagues who now operate in non-traditional professional settings, and to consciously expand our intellectual communities to include them as a matter of course.

What has been missing to date is an awareness of how many medievalists work happily and productively in a variety of professional settings, and how traditionally- and non-traditionally employed medievalists have worked together in the past. Trained medievalists can be found in many job settings, each with their own vocational norms. Below is a breakdown of possible professional categories for traditionally-trained medievalists:

1. Medievalists who now work in another profession or field (non-academic, non-university), who wish to continue to contribute to the scholarly discussion concerning the topics in which they specialized and trained as medievalists;
2. Medievalists whose work at times intersects with the university setting, although perhaps not exclusively;
3. Medievalists working in a university or academic setting, including museums, archives, study centers, cultural associations, libraries, publishing houses, centers for translation, among others, but not in traditionally-conceived academic positions (this includes adjunct teachers, those on short-term appointments, early career researchers, or other contingent workers);
4. Medievalists working in traditionally-conceived academic roles (faculty members, often tenure track).

To this list should also be added:

5. Medievalists who have not trained in traditionally-conceived university programs, but who would like to find ways to participate in the ongoing medievalist discussion.

Jobs in category (4) frequently include an expectation that the job-holder will conduct research on medieval topics and will present that research in traditional scholarly venues such as in journal articles or conference presentations. Usually, though not always, employers supply these workers with the time and funding necessary to support that research goal. This is less often the case in any of the other professional categories listed above.

Because many traditionally-employed medievalists are unaware of the activities undertaken by those working beyond the professorate, our professional orientations tend to promote exclusion when they could instead offer complementarity. **Now is the time to reclaim our intellectual communities**, to understand that our efforts to interpret and understand the period of human history called the Middle Ages can only be deepened when we invite a plurality of perspectives and modes of scholarly engagement.

III. What non-traditionally employed medievalists contribute to the field

Medievalists employed in categories one through three (1-3) and category five (5) have much to offer the profession, both in terms of their traditional scholarly contributions and the non-research-based work they perform. Relying on their medievalist skills-set, they have found ingenious ways to add to the field, even as they fulfill their duties in non-research and non-tenure-based positions.

The kinds of contributions they make depend, naturally, on the jobs they perform. Often in their professional lives, medievalists working outside of the professorate can bypass some of the challenges present in more traditional careers. Because they are free from the constraints imposed by the tenure process, for example, those working outside of the professorate often have a jump-start on ways to incorporate new ideas and approaches into their scholarly work, even if tenure does eventually provide a space for more innovative ways of scholarly thinking. This has certainly been the case for medievalists working with digital humanities methodologies, for example, but [also in more traditional ways, as articulated by early modernist Natalie Zemon Davis.](#)

Moreover, medievalists working outside of the professorate are often uniquely placed to understand both academic and non-academic workplace cultures, which make them vital interpreters and ambassadors within each arena and extending the reach of medievalist work beyond the confines of the university. Medievalists work as editors, publishers, translators, writers of historical fiction, docents, curators, business consultants, administrators of cultural institutions, grant writers, rare book dealers, high school teachers, librarians, computer systems managers, lawyers and many other kinds of professionals. They can serve as important resources for faculty who counsel their students about the wide range of professional activities performed by those who have trained as medievalists.

Greater awareness of the benefits of professional diversity requires a demystification of non-traditional medievalist positions. Non-traditional medievalists should be encouraged to speak to others about the work they do, the challenges they face, and the opportunities they enjoy in their chosen professions. Finding a platform for medievalists who work outside of the professorate, and particularly those who have done so in co-operation with traditionally-employed scholars will help us understand what each kind of worker can contribute to the medievalist conversation.

Introducing current and future medievalists to the range of options for remaining part of the field will empower all of us in our professional lives; we will no longer be bound to the employment structures that dictate the terms of participation in the medievalist conversation so narrowly. Plainly

put, if we open our intellectual communities to those working outside of the professorate, we will be less constrained by the harsh employment terms that certain medievalists and humanities scholars are at times asked to accept.

An intellectual community open to contributions from medievalists of all professional standing translates into more freedom for all of us— to those in traditional positions who may or may not be satisfied with these roles, to students contemplating an array of work environments, and to those operating outside of the tenure track or faculty who wish to be part of the medievalist intellectual community.

IV. Barriers to participation

Notwithstanding the clear benefits to recognizing and including medievalists working in both traditional and non-traditional settings, certain barriers remain for those of our community employed in non-faculty positions, and particularly for those working in non-university settings. Among the most challenging are the following:

1. Lack of access to an intellectual community;
2. Lack of access to the raw materials of medievalist scholarship (libraries, scholarly journals, manuscripts, digital tools);
3. Financial precarity;
4. Lack of time.

The suggestions below seek to address these barriers for fellow medievalists. Actions need not rest with only one subset of the profession; they can be undertaken by individuals working at multiple positions within the arc of the profession.

V. Steps towards a culture of inclusion for medievalists of all professional standing

For medievalist training programs:

1. Talk to incoming students at graduate school and department orientations about the variety of careers open to those who undertake graduate work as medievalists; programs should speak approvingly of all the pathways and give concrete examples of successful alumni in many sectors. What we offer our students has value outside of preparing them for one—and only one—acceptable job.
2. Make a concerted and ongoing effort in all MA- and PhD-granting departments and programs to include alumni who work in other sectors (to the extent they can and would like to) in the continuing intellectual discussion. Invite them to attend department events; ask them to chair conferences or conference panels or to act as respondents to invited speakers; request that they serve on dissertation or MA thesis committees; ask them to mentor current students, etc. Find ways to include them, over and over, until a continued participation from a diverse set of professionally-placed medievalists becomes part of the culture. Incorporating these individuals into the intellectual life based at the university serves to model those diverse career opportunities and presents both networking and mentoring opportunities for current program students.

3. For MA students, present PhD programs as one future option among many, not just the assumed next step. Encourage students to choose a PhD program with the same active decision-making strategies they would when considering any other profession.
4. Encourage digital fluency, either by providing access to training for students or by incorporating/accepting digital methodologies as a part of graduate training. Digital work supports continued participation in scholarly communities regardless of professional placement or status.
5. Become aware of the transferrable skills already being taught in graduate seminars that allow students to work in careers compatible with their medievalist training (see Appendix 1 for specific suggestions).
6. Use the extraordinarily valuable resource of the non-traditional (sometimes called “mature”) students enrolled in medievalist training programs who have already had successful careers in another field. These students can offer advice about what skills transfer to other sectors, or how academic pursuits are viewed by other professions.

For traditionally-employed medievalists:

7. Encourage faculty members to refer graduate students to the career center or other graduate-school resources when they are interested in MA- or PhD-compatible careers, but not to dismiss them after doing so. Faculty should follow up with their students by asking what they learned about their career options, and then reassure students they will receive continued support in their intellectual development, [no matter their professional choices](#). While faculty members should not be expected to be experts in compatible career options, their approval for these vocational options is **absolutely critical** to student success in non-academic sectors. **It is almost impossible to over stress this point.**
8. Find ways to support the medievalists at your institution and beyond by *a.* treating them like fellow medievalists; *b.* advocating for their continued scholarship, even in very small ways (talking about their work to others, inviting them to present their work) at the departmental and institutional levels – find ways to include them (asking them to read through an article, referring students to them) and acknowledge them as the scholars and colleagues they are.

For universities:

9. Extend digital library access to alumni who do not have digital access elsewhere, provided they *a.* credit the institution who extends them access in any scholarship they publish; *b.* deposit a digital copy of their publications in the university digital repository; *c.* cross-link that contribution to the home page of the department from which they graduated; *d.* make this contract renewable annually, at which time the scholars will be asked about publications that might have appeared over the course of the previous year.
10. Ask university career centers to advocate for MA- and PhD-recipients among their current contacts in the various industries and sectors with which the university has an established relationship. Inform potential employees of the particular skills students receive as medievalists and ask these contacts about how those skills might translate into the sectors

they represent. Be specific about the words that each sector uses to describe the skills that medievalists obtain during their training. Bring this sector-specific knowledge and vocabulary back to graduate job seekers.

11. Create university fellowships and funding opportunities that require a collaboration between a university faculty member and a non-'IT' or non-university employed scholar.
12. Support events that bring interested members of the public in; welcome non-university-trained medievalists into the discussion and respect their desire to know more about the Middle Ages.

For students:

13. Students should “diversify their portfolios,” that is, gain a small amount of experience in a non-academic sector that interests them. Most students are fully aware of the difficulties of the academic job market and are motivated to take these steps on their own. Moreover, students are increasingly aware of their own skills and interests and may only need encouragement to see compatible careers as an option. To help in this effort, programs should provide students with a list of potential sectors and related opportunities depending on the field of study.
14. Learn digital skills. Digital work supports continued participation in scholarly communities regardless of professional status.

For regional, national, international organizations:

15. Showcase the work of medievalists in multiple professional settings. Pay particular attention to examples of successful collaborations between medievalists who work inside and outside of the professorate, and what makes those collaborations work. Highlight the complementarity of differently-employed medievalists, thereby upending the notion that a faculty position is a prerequisite for participation in the medievalist discussion. Do so at conferences, on organization websites, and in newsletters or other official publications.

For non-traditionally employed medievalists:

16. Find professional fora to talk about the work you do every day. Speak earnestly about your contributions to fellow medievalists and find ways to include others when possible.

For journal editors and publishers of medieval book series:

17. Look outside of the professorate for readers and reviewers of books and articles. Ask your regular reviewers whether they have former students with expertise in particular areas who might participate in the review process in this way.

These are but some suggestions for medievalists to reclaim and to redefine our intellectual communities on our own terms. Embracing a more professionally-inclusive definition of who belongs in the medievalist community will expand the impact and perceived value of our work in the world today, a goal every medievalist can surely support.

This paper was co-authored by:

Sarah Davis-Secord

Simon Forde

Laura K. Morreale

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APPENDIX I: Teaching vocational diversity for the next generation
Authored by Sarah Davis-Secord, University of New Mexico

Many of the skills that will serve students well in non-academic jobs are skills that are already being taught in graduate seminars, although in many cases with small adjustments or reframing. In other words, graduate training in the humanities already teaches transferable skills, but often with slightly adapted aims or applications. We have found that alumni working outside the academy stress the value of what they learned in graduate school and the regularity with which their jobs necessitate the use of such skills as:

- synthesis of large amounts of material into coherent narratives
- forming and supporting conclusions from sometimes sparse evidence
- analytical interpretation of diverse types of data
- contextualization of data within broad frameworks
- communication of conclusions both orally and in writing

At the same time, many of the exercises that are employed in graduate seminars can be easily reframed or redefined in order to provide even more benefits to students seeking a variety of careers. The most important of these shifts is a greater emphasis on short-form writing. While the 25-page paper is the norm in most graduate courses, it would also benefit students to include assignments such as:

- synthesize the research paper into a two-page format
- present the academic work in a form accessible to a public audience or a policy maker
- write a one-page memo detailing the action points arising from their research
- write a blog post about their research and its implications for a wider audience
- write book reviews for different audiences
 - for example, write two reviews of the same book – one for an academic journal, and one for the local newspaper
 - or, write two reviews of the same book – one positive, and one negative
- write and submit a grant application based on their research

In addition to written communication, oral presentation skills are indispensable in many types of careers. While we often ask students to present their research in a conference-style 20-minute talk, we can also easily ask them to communicate in forms such as:

- one-minute “elevator pitch”
- talk given to a seniors group, school class, or other public audience
- poster session, in which they must answer questions about their research
- “three-minute thesis” competition
- PowerPoint presentation in which the slides are critiqued for clarity of expression

Likewise, many of the ancillary skills used in today's historical research have applications in non-academic careers. Our students can combine textual analysis with digital methods and other skills within the work of one research seminar. For example, they can be asked to:

- create a map about their topic using GIS
- build a database of the sources used for their research
- employ material culture related to their textual analysis
- investigate ways that quantitative analysis could augment their research
- data visualization: create an infographic of their research and conclusions
- produce a translation of the sources used in their research
- collaborate to build a website presenting the research of the entire class
- collaborate to create a mini-volume of the class research papers

These and other methods can allow professors to continue teaching graduate seminars largely as they have been doing, but with slightly more emphasis on the adaptability of historical skills and the reframing of those skills for a variety of applications.