

Why Your Advice for Ph.D.s Leaving Academe Might Be Making Things Worse

chroniclevitae.com/news/2032-why-your-advice-for-ph-d-s-leaving-academe-might-be-making-things-worse



April 9, 2018

Image: iStock

By Erin Bartram

In the two months since I [chronicled my grief](#) over abandoning my tenure-track dreams, I have been the recipient of all sorts of career advice — solicited and unsolicited. Lots of well-meaning people who've never worked outside of academe seem to have thoughts on my transition to nonacademic life.

The ever-unfolding crisis of the academic job market means *The Chronicle* has offered plenty of advice for Ph.D.s like me on life beyond the ivory tower. There are columns on how to [transform a CV](#) into a résumé; how to [write a cover letter](#) that doesn't spend two single-spaced pages discussing our dissertation research; and how to show potential employers [the value of all those skills](#) we've been honing in doctoral programs.

I have no such tips to offer at the moment. How could I? My career transition is still very much in progress. Instead I have some suggestions for the advice-givers — especially professors who have spent their entire careers in academe. How can you best support and advise Ph.D.s who are leaving a life and a career you'll remain in? And how can you make sure your support and advice won't make us feel worse?

I've received a mix of great and not-so-great advice about career transitioning from my own colleagues and mentors. Based on my own experiences and on those of other Ph.D.'s — friends, acquaintances, and internet strangers who have shared their stories with me — here is

what we would like the advice-givers to know.

Be honest about the limitations of your advice. Before you reach out and offer suggestions on our career plans, think about why you're doing so and about the emotions you might communicate.

You may feel terribly sad and angry on behalf of a Ph.D. who struck out on the tenure-track market and is leaving academe, especially if that person was someone whose work you guided along the way. As our mentors and advisers, you may even feel guilty or full of regret, thinking you could have done more to help. And perhaps you could have.

But know that those of us leaving the faculty career path are probably feeling a similar sense of regret — that we could have done more. Only we're feeling it more intensely, even as we know on an intellectual level that the tenure-track market is a crapshoot. Your grief, sadness, and guilt — as authentic and sincere as they may be — might feel like more emotional weight pressing down on someone who is already dealing with a lot.

Moreover, in sharing your emotions, consider whether you're trying to help us feel better, or yourself. Are you, in fact, looking for our forgiveness or even our reassurance that you are not to blame? That may be something you need and want desperately. But is it really something you should lay on your colleague, particularly at this juncture?

Instead, listen to us. Ask what we need and when we need it.

In my own brief experience, and in the stories of the thousands of people who've responded to mine, the grieving process is a long and complex one. While you might want to help us spring into action right away, we might want to talk through the emotions we're experiencing as we confront a future that's different from the one we'd anticipated. That is as important a part of moving forward as learning how to turn a CV into a résumé.

You may feel uncomfortable being the person we talk with about those emotions, but you can at least recognize that we're not simply wallowing or avoiding moving forward. I can assure you: One can be grief-stricken over research projects that will never happen while also remaining acutely aware that paychecks and health insurance will soon be coming to an end.

Allow us to signal to you when we want to talk about the nuts and bolts of our career transition, and accept that moving on to those practical concerns doesn't mean we're done grieving.

If and when we signal that we're interested in your advice on those nuts and bolts, be honest with yourself about how you can help — and how you can't. If you've been working and hiring in academe for most of your adult life, consider how much you really know about labor conditions and hiring practices in nonacademic job sectors.

To put it bluntly, academe isn't even fully honest about the bleak conditions of its own job market — perhaps because to describe it accurately still feels like hyperbole to some. Giving Pollyannaish advice doesn't help those leaving the faculty career path any more than it does

for those remaining. Just as you'd send a student with a particular intellectual question to a colleague with relevant scholarly expertise, rather than making up an answer yourself, it's OK to admit you might not be the best person to give us the kind of career advice we need.

Try to recognize how little you may actually know about us as individuals. Let that realization shape the advice you offer.

Even if you were our adviser — and intimately involved in our intellectual growth for a decade or more — there's a lot about us that you may not know. For good reasons, faculty members tend to keep a professional and personal distance from their advisees. Thus, when you imagine careers that your student might pursue, you're basing those ideas on a very narrow conception of that person's life.

That doesn't mean you can't help; it just means you have to listen before you try to help.

Recognize that you most likely know very little about your advisee's financial situation. So if you're going to assume anything, start with the assumption that we are concerned about paying for food, shelter, transportation, and health care.

For many doctoral students, graduate school has meant sacrificing at least five years of earnings, and a series of postdocs and nontenure-track gigs probably haven't filled our coffers to bursting. Many of us are paying back undergraduate loans that were in deferment while we were in grad school and we may have additional loans from graduate school itself. While adjunct pay is often so abysmal that it makes nonprofit work look like a dream, that doesn't mean that a departing colleague should be — or can afford to be — interested in other sorts of low-paying work, however "fulfilling."

Thinking more broadly, it's also important to accept that you don't have a full understanding of our personal life and how it will shape the choices we make in this situation. Don't assume:

- That our significant other can support the family while we take some time off, or that we would feel comfortable with that.
- That a departing advisee who is single or childless has no personal relationships or obligations to consider and can just pick up and go anywhere.
- That we must be single or childless just because you've never met our partner or children.

The advice-givers always tell Ph.D.'s transitioning out of academe to draw on our "networks." But you shouldn't assume we *have* a network of nonacademic contacts to draw on, or that our families are extant, safe, or supportive resources. Even if we do have those things, some of us might feel very uncomfortable asking for certain kinds of support as adults, especially in the wake of what can feel like failure on the tenure-track market.

Moreover, our pre-graduate-school networks might not be immediately accessible. Few scholars go to graduate school near where we grew up, and after chasing a succession of VAPs across the country in an attempt to stay in the game, we may be completely dislocated from our original support networks. The faculty career path demanded complete mobility in

exchange for tenure-track employment. Not having to pick up and move again for a teaching job — or being able to move back near family we've been separated from for years — might be a small silver lining.

For most people, going to graduate school in a particular field was a choice we made, often after pursuing other careers. It was a choice that foreclosed those other careers to a certain extent. Your initial impulse may be to recommend career paths that draw on specific skills cultivated in our field. but it's good to remember that we might have skills, interests, and even prior or parallel careers that you know nothing about.

Does all of this sound like I'm suggesting you can't give us *any* effective advice? I'm not saying that at all. What I am saying: It's important to know your limits.

We are embarking on a new project, one that will take us well beyond the parameters of our existing relationship with you. Just as you encouraged us in scholarly research — and recognized when some question went beyond your expertise — now you can encourage us in this new project and acknowledge your limitations on the nonacademic-careers front. Listening to us, and learning from us as we leave academe, will allow you to provide the kind of support that we need and that you want to give.

Erin Bartram is a visiting assistant professor of history at the University of Hartford. She is writing about her career transition out of academe. Her original blog post about her decision to leave academe is [here](#) .