

# Why Every Doctoral Student Should Volunteer Off Campus

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*Getty Images*

*By Kimberly Probolus*

I had just received a private tour of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and seen treasures like B. F. Skinner's famous Teaching Machine, but as I sat in a curator's office and looked out over the National Mall, all I could think about was my dissertation.

With a big deadline looming, I was angry at myself for taking a whole three hours away from my writing. I had asked to meet with the curator because I had applied for a postdoctoral fellowship at the museum, but the whole thing felt like an exercise in futility. After all, I hadn't heard anything back from the 60 other applications I'd sent out. Why would this one end any differently?

I don't remember much from my conversation that day with Peggy Kidwell, a curator of the history museum's division of medicine and science, but at one point she asked me about my long-term goals. Hoping to get the postdoc, I mentioned an interest in curatorial work. She paused, leaned forward slightly, and, seeming to choose her words carefully, said, "I realize that this might seem beneath you, given that you almost have your Ph.D., but you could volunteer here at the Smithsonian."

At that point — after five years of TA work — providing any institution with free (or next to free) labor was the last thing I wanted to do. Even aside from the compensation issue, I felt like I just didn't have the time. I had to finish! Again and again, I'd heard people in my

American-studies program say the only thing that would get me a job was a completed dissertation. I had internalized the message, becoming singularly focused on that one goal.

So I was very surprised when friends outside of academe encouraged me to consider Peggy's advice. In the "real world," they said, volunteering often leads to a full-time job. They also pointed out that it would give me insight into the kind of work I wanted to do.

Less than a week later, I accepted Peggy's invitation to volunteer for her division. This past August, after only three months of volunteering, I got a position as a postdoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian. My new colleagues have since told me that I was selected, in part, because I had demonstrated my interest in the institution through volunteering.

I won't belabor the reasons for the sorry state of the tenure-track job market, but in short: Many graduate students and Ph.D.s, especially in the humanities, worry that they have no marketable skills and no real job prospects outside of the professoriate. Some efforts are underway to help Ph.D.s make the transition to different careers — such as the [5+1 Postdoctoral Fellowship Program](#) at the University of Notre Dame and the [ACLS Public Fellows Competition](#) — but, so far, they have only aided a limited number of students.

To prepare for a scenario in which you don't receive a coveted postdoc or tenure-track job, you should consider volunteering. Here's why:

**Volunteering is flexible.** When I started, I told Peggy that I had to devote my mornings to dissertation writing, so I could only work for her a few hours a week in the afternoons. She was more than happy to accommodate my requests. In fact, she told me not to come in at all during the two weeks leading up to my dissertation deadline.

When you are donating your time and labor, a good supervisor makes a real effort to help you achieve your professional goals. Paid, part-time opportunities rarely offer that level of flexibility or support.

**Volunteering reminds you of your strengths.** In graduate school, my dissertation chair provided excellent, and fairly critical, feedback. His careful reading helped me produce a much stronger project, and I know that his criticism came from his unwavering belief in my intellect and my project's potential. But it also took a toll.

In contrast, Peggy showered praise on my writing. Of course much less was at stake in my writing as a volunteer, and she was focusing on what I did well while my dissertation chair's job was to offer constructive criticism. But on days when I felt like everything I wrote was a mess of hot garbage, Peggy's support provided a much-needed confidence boost.

**Volunteering helps you network.** I once attended a happy hour for public historians but left disappointed because I hadn't been able to chat with anyone from an organization I'd applied to for a job. The next day, I expressed that frustration to a colleague who

immediately introduced me, via email, to someone she knew at that organization.

The relationships you build as a volunteer will be more beneficial than any brief conversations you have at some formal networking event. What's more, the people who supervise you as a volunteer can write you letters of recommendation. Having letters from professionals who were not your professors will be essential if you're pursuing a nonfaculty career.

**Volunteering demonstrates your willingness to hustle.** Many employers are leery of hiring a Ph.D. because they assume that you couldn't get a job in academe and saw their company/association/museum as a Plan B. They figure you will quit the instant you find a full-time academic position.

Volunteering shows a potential employer that you are genuinely invested in the organization's success and that you don't think you're better than everybody else because you have an advanced degree. Ideally, you leave a good impression as a volunteer — you're someone they would enjoy working with in the future, too.

A volunteer gig can help you narrow your options. It teaches you if this is a career — or an institution — you want to be a part of. Volunteering at the Smithsonian taught me that I loved working with objects, and that I care deeply about public history. I was incredibly fortunate to land in a great work environment with an amazing mentor.

Not everybody is so lucky. But it's far better to find out about a toxic work environment as a volunteer than as a paid employee. (A good way to get a sense of that: Attend weekly staff meetings.) If the place is awful, you can quit without repercussions.

Volunteering doesn't mean you're giving up on academe. It means you're preparing for the very real possibility that you won't get a faculty job. You can still apply for your dream job at a major research university. Volunteering will never work against you on the academic job market. In fact ...

Volunteering makes you a better academic. Writing for the Smithsonian made me a stronger, more organized, and more concise historian. Now, when I do archival research, I am more adept at quickly and succinctly summarizing the material.

The writing I did as a museum volunteer also taught me how to synthesize dense, scholarly arguments and make them accessible to a broad audience. That kind of translation work allows me to write more clearly and compellingly for academics, too.

Volunteering lets you contribute to something you believe in. As a Ph.D. candidate, you are so focused on the academic world that it's easy to forget there are plenty of other organizations and institutions making meaningful contributions to our society. Take some

time to think about what drew you to graduate school, and consider nonacademic organizations that do the kind of work you're passionate about. For example:

- If your favorite part of graduate school is teaching, consider volunteering at a local school. Many public schools are grossly underfunded and will be happy for any additional support you can offer. Private schools hire recent Ph.D.s as teachers — provided you have experience working closely with secondary-school students. You can get that experience by volunteering at a private high school.
- Are you obsessed with academic Twitter? Most organizations have a communications expert (or team) who would value your social-media expertise.
- Do you have a passion for issues related to racial, gender, or economic inequality? There are thousands — maybe even tens of thousands — of NGOs and nonprofits where you could make a real impact on those issues.

I am still early in my career, but I am already seeing benefits from my volunteer work. It recently helped me land — in addition to my postdoc — a part-time, paid position writing for the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum.

In hindsight, I wasn't just putting off my dissertation by volunteering at the museum. I wasn't being exploited for my free labor. Instead, I was investing in my professional development. And that has, quite literally, paid off.

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