

CONTENTS

Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
1 Dread	1
<i>An Event Horizon</i>	2
<i>Background to the Book</i>	4
<i>Intended Audience</i>	6
<i>The Vocation Trap</i>	9
<i>User's Guide</i>	12
<i>Further Reading and Other Resources</i>	13
<i>Caveat Lector (Reader Beware)</i>	17
<i>Light at the End of the Tunnel</i>	19
<i>A Wide World of Work</i>	21
<i>Conclusion</i>	23
<i>Action Items</i>	24
2 Discern	25
<i>Admitting We Have a Problem</i>	27
<i>Reclaiming Your Life Choices</i>	30
<i>Discernment beyond a Career Change</i>	41
<i>Practical Exercises in Discernment</i>	43
<i>From Living to Learn to Learning to Live</i>	44

viii CONTENTS

	<i>Conclusion</i>	49
	<i>Action Items</i>	49
3	Discover	50
	<i>Opening Your Eyes</i>	54
	<i>Beholding the Wider World of Work</i>	55
	<i>Informational Interviews: A Primer</i>	58
	<i>Checking Other Sources</i>	66
	<i>Self-Awareness through Discovery</i>	69
	<i>Networking 101</i>	70
	<i>Explaining Your Career Change</i>	73
	<i>Sticking with It</i>	77
	<i>Talking to Nonacademics</i>	78
	<i>Applying the Lessons of Discovery</i>	80
	<i>Conclusion</i>	85
	<i>Action Items</i>	85
4	Decipher	86
	<i>Making Your Degree Relevant</i>	87
	<i>The “Overqualification” Trap</i>	88
	<i>How to Write a Résumé</i>	93
	<i>Translating Your Academic Experience</i>	103
	Teaching	103
	Service	112
	Research	119
	<i>A Model Résumé</i>	127
	<i>Conclusion</i>	131
	<i>Action Items</i>	131

5 Develop 133

Confronting Your Résumé Gaps 134

Acquiring Skills, Building Experience 135

Making Time for New Activities 143

Development Strategies 145

Cultivating a Public Persona 147

Finding Open Positions 150

Connecting to the Right Opportunities 154

Planning for the End of the Race 156

Conclusion 162

Action Items 163

6 Deploy 164

Preparing for Change 165

Making Mistakes: A Case Study 167

Overcoming Culture Shock 168

Building New Relationships 173

Getting Down to Business (or Government or Nonprofit) 175

Growing as You Go 176

Discussing Your Past 177

Maintaining Old Relationships 179

Reaping the Rewards 181

Looking Forward 183

A Final Request 183

Action Items 184

1

Dread

Confidence is where this story begins. It was confidence to me, at any rate—though others might have called it arrogance. That firm conviction I'd be successful. Not lucky, mind you. I believed academia was a meritocracy and trusted my ability to outthink, outwork, or outlast whatever stood between me and a professorship.

Confidence was good. Or at least it was good for me. Confidence got me up early to prepare for general exams. It let me stand in front of a classroom full of excitement and passion. It stoked a desire to leave grad school behind and pursue the next phase of my career. It drove me to write articles and revise thesis chapters for publication, albeit in a future that was always undefined.

Confidence was crushing. In truth, it's crushing to most. After three years on "the market," I finally realized academia *isn't* a meritocracy, my hard work *wasn't* coming to fruition, my career *wouldn't* be spent as a professor. There's a reason people talk about blind confidence. Anyone could have told me the

2 CHAPTER 1

numbers were never in my favor, but I refused to believe them. So there I was at thirty years old, caught unawares.

Confidence was gone. I felt hemmed in, pinned down, unsure of where to turn. The change was sudden—and radical, too. Shame, anxiety, and fear combined to weigh me down as much as confidence had buoyed me. Leaving academia had overwhelmed me with a potent new emotion: pure, unmitigated dread.

An Event Horizon

Graduate education is broken.¹ Most doctoral programs train their students to serve as tenure-track professors, but today only 7 percent of people who enter grad school in the United States will secure one of those coveted positions.² In this environment, we may safely say **there is no such thing as an “alt-ac” career: *academia* is the alternative path.**

Ironically, grad students, recent PhDs, and the people who advise them have responded to this state of affairs by digging in their heels: now more than ever, these groups view anything

1. Lenny Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess* (2015), presents a detailed assessment of this situation, as well as advice for how faculty and administrators can address it. My own book offers more immediate aid to those impacted by “the mess.”

2. This calculation is my own, and admittedly imperfect (see n. 6 for details). Lenny Cassuto (2015) notes that “data on overall Ph.D. academic job placement are too poor to support a data-driven graph” (p. 190); even so, he recently provided an estimate only marginally more optimistic than my own: “for every eight students who enter a humanities Ph.D. program, about four will not finish. . . . Of the four who do, statistically, two will eventually get full-time teaching jobs. Less than one will get a full-time job teaching at a research university” (quotation from Emma Pettit, “Columbia Had Little Success Placing English Ph.D.s on the Tenure Track. ‘Alarm’ Followed, and the University Responded,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 21, 2019: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Columbia-Had-Little-Success/246989>).

besides total devotion to a field as a harbinger of failure.³ It's yet to be seen whether initiatives to reverse this trend will succeed.⁴

For academics considering the world beyond higher education, the situation is akin to looking at a black hole. You know the object is there, but it's impossible to see past the event horizon that shrouds its true workings in mystery. Its gravitational pull actually makes that limit a point of no return: anything that moves beyond the event horizon is unable to cross back over again, at least not without being irrevocably and utterly transformed. These attributes make leaving academia awesome in the word's original sense: enormous and terrifying. Many people consequently try to keep even its event horizon in the distance—preferring the familiarity of the world they know to the risk and uncertainty of being drawn into a different career.

I've written this book after safely crossing that metaphorical limit. I was, in fact, transformed by the process: I'm now far happier than I ever was in academia.

Even so, I didn't achieve that state without my share of suffering. It took me over two years to expand my sense of what I could do, to develop new skills, to learn how to convey my strengths to those from other backgrounds—and finally to get a job. Along the way, I was plagued by doubt. I didn't just fear

3. L. Maren Wood, "Odds Are, Your Doctorate Will Not Prepare You for a Profession outside Academe," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 9, 2019: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Odds-Are-Your-Doctorate-Will/246613>.

4. In 2018, the American Association of Universities started the PhD Education Initiative to "promote more student-centered doctoral education at AAU universities by making diverse PhD career pathways visible, valued, and viable." Eight institutions piloted this program in 2019, but no results had been quantified by the time of publication.

4 CHAPTER 1

that leaving was the wrong choice. I also worried I could only ever be good at research and teaching. Fortunately, these concerns faded the more I learned about the world beyond academia. There was an added benefit of that exploration, too: for the first time in years, I had the feeling that there were more open doors before me than closed ones.

Background to the Book

This book distills the lessons I personally learned while changing careers, as well as advice I received from the roughly 150 people I met while leaving academia. The latter group is diverse. It spans businesspeople, nonprofit directors, college administrators, civil servants, and other trained professionals.

I've supplemented their wisdom with formal interviews of twelve former academics (listed on page 5). These individuals come from different backgrounds, trained in different disciplines, and have gone into different professions. While I initially collected their stories as a check on my experience, I found time and again that their stories were remarkably similar to my own. Regardless of our discipline and eventual career, academics who succeed beyond the professoriate become good at meeting new people, taking risks, and learning from every experience—whether good or bad.

I never imagined these traits might describe me when I began my career transition. As an academic, my chief professional goal was to become the leading expert on a minor Roman poet. I was an introvert—and proud of it. I didn't have many hobbies, and as you'll read in chapter 3, I thought that made me more credible in the role I aspired to.

Change took time. It wasn't natural for me to reach out to strangers, ask them for help, or accept the challenges they

Name	Current Role, Employer*	Academic Field, School	Degree (Year)
Laura Ansley	Managing Editor, American Historical Association	History, the College of William and Mary	MA (2012), ABD
Vania Cao	Asia Pacific Sales Manager and Support Lead, Inscopix	Neuroscience, Brown University	PhD (2013)
Susanne Cohen	Principal UX Researcher, Elsevier	Anthropology, University of Michigan	PhD (2010)
David Engel	Managing Director, Wells Fargo Advisors	Philosophy, University of California at Berkeley	PhD (1997)
Kristine Lodge	Graduate Career Advisor, University of Oregon Lundquist College of Business	Medieval Studies, University of Oregon	PhD (2010)
Chris Papadopoulos	Data Scientist, Credit Karma	Physics, University of Maryland	PhD (2009)
Elizabeth Segran	Senior Staff Writer, <i>Fast Company Magazine</i> ; Author of <i>The Rocket Years: How Your Twenties Launch the Rest of Your Life</i>	Southeast Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley	PhD (2011)
Patricia Soler	IT Specialist, US Department of Housing and Urban Development	Latin American Studies, Georgetown University	PhD (2014)
David Stevens	Founding Partner and acting CEO of Broaden By WPI	Politics, Princeton University	MA (2006), ABD
Chela White- Ramsey	Senior Training and Development Man- ager, Indeed, Inc.	Human Resource Leadership, Louisiana State University	PhD (2015)
Michael Zimm	Director of Marketing, Kris-Tech Wire	Classics (history focus), Yale University	PhD (2016)
Anonymous	Top 3 Technology Firm	Anthropology, Ivy League University	PhD (2016)

* As of February 2020

6 CHAPTER 1

offered. But these activities provided a path forward when I desperately needed one. So I fought through the discomfort and made myself do them.

Practice hardened these efforts into habits. I gradually realized that even silly opportunities presented a chance to learn, and that each new experience brought me closer to whatever career my future held. As that happened, the world beyond academia became less and less scary, because by then it was actually familiar.

Everyone reading this book will already possess at least one of the traits you need to change careers successfully. Your academic training has made you curious and critical, instilling a reflex to consider not just what's right or wrong about your work, but *why*. That impulse defines people with our background and runs like a thread through every career transition I've heard about over the last five years. Crucially, this trait will enable you to acquire the others—and so to find a new career outside the academy.

Intended Audience

I've written *Leaving Academia* for grad students, recent PhDs, and professors who've grown dissatisfied with their prospects in higher education.⁵ My hope is that reading it will make your path easier as you venture beyond the ivory tower.

I know how hard leaving can be because I was once in your shoes: a visiting assistant professor of Roman history and Latin literature with virtually no knowledge of what nonacademic jobs entailed. I was scared at how large the rest of the world

5. Throughout this book I refer to these groups interchangeably, a choice I've made for the sake of lexical variety rather than because of ignorance of the differences between them. I also expect some readers will be committed members of the professoriate who want to provide their students better advice.

appeared—and I was daunted by my ignorance of who else had ventured into it.

There are three ways people find themselves where you are now: academic roadblocks, personal causes external to your work, and professional changes of heart.

Academic roadblocks are work-related disappointments that compel you to seek a new career. Most of you will know these challenges all too well: the bleak job market, program cuts, failed tenure reviews, and the like. Since these events are tied to your field and professional identity, leaving academia because of them can feel like an indictment of your professional capabilities.

Let me disabuse you of this belief. Today in the United States, only about 1.2 percent of people who enter a doctoral program in the arts and humanities earn a tenure-track position at a leading institution.⁶ The situation isn't much better if you remove that final qualifier. People in *any* tenure-track job represent just 2–7 percent of those who start a PhD. To state the case inversely, **more than nine out of ten academics don't achieve the career most of us hoped for** when we set down the path to an advanced degree. I never expected to find comfort in

6. I had to use multiple statistical studies of higher ed to arrive at this number. Given slight differences in their time frames and how they grouped disciplines, my calculation can only be taken as a rough estimate. In particular, I multiplied out the following figures:

43 percent of doctoral students in the humanities actually finish their degree (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. 2011. "Data-Based Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States.")

56 percent of *employed* humanities PhDs in 2015 were teaching at the postsecondary level (Humanities Indicators. 2018. "Indicator III-7a.")

27 percent of faculty jobs in 2018 are tenured or tenure track (American Association of University Professors. 2018. "Data Snapshot: Contingent Faculty in US Higher Ed.")

19 percent of history PhDs worked at R1 institutions in 2017 (American Historical Association. 2018. "Where Historians Work.")

8 CHAPTER 1

statistics, but those numbers stopped me in my tracks.⁷ People don't succeed or fail at being academics in this kind of market: they simply fall victim to luck.

Some people decide to play the academic odds anyway. For those who do, the situation is bleak. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) recently reported that 73 percent of college professors work as adjuncts—that is, in contingent roles with semesterly contracts, limited job security, and unreliable access to benefits like health insurance. A quarter of this group is enrolled in public assistance programs. Many more qualify.⁸ There is no shame in wanting to avoid or escape a career that provides so little material support: leaving academia under these circumstances may even come as a relief.

The numerical consolations I've offered thus far may ring hollow if the roadblock that prevents you from an academic career is the behavior of a colleague. Harassment and inappropriate actions stemming from sexism, racism, ableism, and the like can drive talented people from their fields and keep underrepresented groups from establishing the footholds they deserve. None of that is fair, and I can only imagine how suffering bias would tempt many people to fight for change. I wish the best of luck to those who try. As for those who are ready to cut bait, my sincere hope is that this book will help you find a more supportive profession as quickly as possible.

7. For a fuller discussion of these trends and additional insights on how women and minorities are especially harmed by them, see the introduction to Joseph Fruscione and Kelly Baker's 2018 book, *Succeeding Outside the Academy*.

8. Ken Jacobs, Ian Perry, and Jenifer MacGillvary, "The High Public Cost of Low Wages: Poverty-Level Wages Cost U.S. Taxpayers \$152.8 Billion Each Year in Public Support for Working Families" (research brief, 2015): <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2015/the-high-public-cost-of-low-wages.pdf>.

Others leave academia because of personal causes external to their work, such as illness, pregnancy, and family exigencies. These situations can take a considerable toll: circumstances are already stressful, and leaving a field you love compounds the difficulty. Even so, it is hard (or at least uncharitable) to interpret a career change undertaken for these reasons as a professional failure. Life can throw anyone a curve ball.

Being in this group offers at least one consolation: it's easy to explain why you're seeking a new profession. Employers are people, too, and many will sympathize with the challenging circumstances that led you to change careers instead of questioning why you left a job most assume is your passion.

The last reason you might abandon higher education is a professional change of heart—that is, you realize you don't want to work in the sector any longer. Even if most academics don't discuss this occurrence openly, it's a perfectly normal experience. It can happen because you lose interest in your research, tire of the publish-or-perish rat race, or desire new and different experiences than you can have in higher education. If you hit a plateau or come to see the professoriate as a bad occupation, it's likely time to explore alternative lines of work.

Of course, these factors aren't mutually exclusive. Many of you may feel a variety of them shaping your decision. And if you're anything like me, you may realize in a few years that the last one exerted a far greater sway than you're willing to admit right now.

The Vocation Trap

Whatever led you to seek a new career, you're embarking on a challenging journey. In its course you'll experience major changes in three areas of your personal identity:

10 CHAPTER 1

1. How you view yourself
2. How other people view you
3. How you interact with the world around you

Many academics—I’d even venture to say most—find it hard to embrace change in these specific areas. As a group, we tend to view our work in higher education as more than a career: we consider it a vocation. The doubts we’re prone to feel as we think about working in a different sector thus go beyond the practicalities of not knowing what it’s like to do a new job. In a very real way, we worry that we don’t know *who we’ll be* if we cease to be academics.

When this anxiety collides with the realities discussed in the last section, it can trigger an unhealthy spiral of emotions. I raged at the cruelties of the job market, faulted advisors for not making me a more attractive candidate, and loathed the ABDs who beat me out for jobs. Most of all, I blamed myself for not working hard enough or on the right topics to become a tenure-track professor.

These feelings were clearly misdirected, but I don’t blame myself for indulging them. If you’re a “true believer” in the academic mission, it’s natural to struggle as you come to terms with changing careers. The situation is akin to a breakup. You invested years in a discipline because you liked it and cared about it. Recognizing that your love will go unrequited is going to hurt—even in the best of circumstances. The challenge is that if you get caught in that spiral of emotions, fear of the unknown can prevent you from being willing to move on.

I’d like to give you two reasons to resist that urge. First, the risk of *not* changing careers is both real and significant. I mentioned above that contingent positions now make up about 73 percent of faculty jobs, and that one quarter of adjuncts in

the United States are recipients of public assistance. Shocking as those statistics may be, they don't adequately convey the burdens of contingent life. Its demands have driven some people to work themselves to death. Literally.⁹

In April 2019, Adam Harris of *The Atlantic* told the story of Thea Hunter.¹⁰ She earned her PhD in history from Columbia University and held a few good temporary positions after finishing. As time went on, she had to cobble together full-time teaching as an adjunct at multiple institutions. She worked hard, but each college viewed her as part-time faculty. That determination meant she wasn't eligible for health insurance, and when her lungs started hurting, she had no way to see a doctor. She consequently treated the pain the way she'd always treated asthma. Before she or anyone else could realize how severe the illness was, it robbed her of her life.

For all that this story marks an extreme in the adjunct experience, it reflects a wider reality: day-to-day life is exceptionally hard for the majority of people who try to make it as a professor. At least for me, the fear of doing something else, and indeed of becoming *someone* else, was ultimately smaller than the dread I experienced staring into that personal and professional abyss.

My second argument against letting fear keep you in academia is perhaps better called a reassurance: while the sting of leaving a career you love is sharp, and it may be hard to imagine it getting better, the pain of disappointment *will* eventually fade. Nearly every former academic I interviewed for this book

9. American Association of University Professors. 2018. "Data Snapshot: Contingent Faculty in US Higher Ed."

10. Adam Harris, "The Death of an Adjunct," *The Atlantic*, April 8, 2015: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168/>.

assured me of this fact, as did those I met during my own career change. I can now confirm it myself.

One way to accelerate that process is to salve the wound. I discovered an unlikely balm just two months into my career search. I was sitting at my computer, skimming job requirements and fretting about how much they differed from academic listings. Then a thought dawned on me: no matter what job I ended up getting, no matter how bad or embarrassing it was, I would never have to read German scholarship in order to do it.

This realization came as a great relief. Despite years of practice, I had always viewed tasks involving German as a chore: I delayed my proficiency exam as long as I could in grad school, and my research process intentionally tackled articles in English, Italian, and French before reading *auf Deutsch*. So I wasn't surprised when my lips turned upward at the thought of never reading German again. But this uncontrollable response sparked another epiphany that *did* catch me off guard: I was smiling at the thought of not being a professor.

User's Guide

As its subtitle states, this book is meant as a practical guide. Its six chapters will escort you from the dread many experience when considering work outside the professoriate through the period when you adapt to your first nonacademic job.

Each chapter covers a different phase in this journey, using an event from my own career transition—and an assessment of how I handled it—to kick off more general advice. These discussions begin with three questions you'll answer about yourself and your career as you move through a given phase. While not exhaustive, they can focus your thoughts more clearly and

assist you in diagnosing where to invest the greatest effort. Each chapter then continues with advice, anecdotes, and practical steps to help you move closer to a satisfying career beyond academia. I end each chapter with three action items to help you start putting my guidance into practice.

I've arranged this material so you can read it all at once, go chapter by chapter, or flit between sections that interest you. My aim was to keep these units short and the volume user-friendly.

Further Reading and Other Resources

The guidance I give throughout *Leaving Academia* is meant to be exhaustive enough that you can successfully change careers even if it's the only book you read on the subject. But other resources are available, including how-to guides, debriefs with former academics, "quit lit," communities of job seekers, and even coaches who advise people on leaving higher ed for greener pastures.

I recommend using this volume as a starting point. After reading it, you'll possess a benchmark of best practices for your career transition that will enable you to derive greater value from any specialized resources you consult. A brief survey will help you navigate that sea of material if or when you decide to do so.

The standard book for the last generation has been *So What Are You Going to Do with That?* by Susan Basalla and Maggie Debelius, now in its third edition. It remains a rich source of material on landing a career outside academia, particularly as it breaks down the mechanics of refashioning yourself for a new job market. *So What* is also remarkable for the array of anecdotes it collects from people who have successfully turned

away from scholarship to embrace a new profession. Are you seeking an example of someone with your specific degree who changed careers? Odds are this book has one.

The downside of this approach is that *So What's* plethora of stories prevents you from seeing any one in significant detail. For me, that meant learning a lot about *what* to do, but far less about *how* to do it. A range of questions that felt essential were simply left unanswered: How did a person first encounter a challenge, where did they suffer doubts, how did they overcome them?

In short, *So What* gives you the impression that anything is possible for a PhD. That's very much to its credit. But the step-by-step process it sets forth doesn't always dig into the habits and ways of thinking that to my mind make changing careers so hard for academics in the first place.

A book that addresses this concern more effectively is Joseph Fruscione and Kelly Baker's *Succeeding Outside the Academy*. This volume groups fourteen ten-page essays by former academics into two categories: (1) "Reconsidering Academic Careers and Success"; and (2) "Creating New Careers." In comparison to *So What*, these retrospectives tell more complete stories—and strike an admirable balance between sympathizing with people in your shoes and synthesizing lessons from the authors' journeys beyond the academy.

Even so, *Succeeding* has its flaws. Chief among them is lack of cohesion. Although the book's stories are illustrative and compelling, they don't hold together as a unified work—no doubt because different people wrote them. A second (and more problematic) issue is that readers may struggle to know when to consult a given chapter. *Succeeding* doesn't depict a career transition in broad outline, and the two categories the editors use to divide its essays are insufficiently precise. While

these deficiencies don't undo the book's merits, they make it more suitable as a secondary resource than as a general guide.

Inside Higher Ed, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and other publications also house articles about leaving academia. These opinion pieces vary in quality, running the gamut from “quit lit” to more thoughtful statements of practical advice. While some may offer specialized help that you find useful, they were always most valuable to me as a breath of fresh air when I felt like I was drowning.

In 2017, panic was setting in as I entered the last semester of my teaching contract. I was still far from finding a nonacademic job, and I had less than six months until my last paycheck. Michael Zimm's “From Homer to High Tech” appeared as a godsend.¹¹ The article didn't just provide practical ideas to move my career search forward, it also helped me keep the fear of unemployment at bay. I was so struck by Mike's advice that I soon decided to contact him. As you'll read later, that decision led indirectly to my new career—and won me a close friend.

Online communities of “academic refugees” are another resource you can use to accelerate your departure from higher education.¹² These groups can connect you to new people, industries, and opportunities regardless of where you live. Most useful are those populated by members from your academic disciplines: they will understand the specific challenges of your transition and can provide a clearer glimpse into what work looks like after you shed your scholarly identity.

11. Michael Zimm, “From Homer to High Tech,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 23, 2017: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/From-Homer-to-High-Tech/238982>.

12. I should state here that I've yet to read or coin a term that I actually like for former academics.

These communities include businesses that specialize in transitioning academics to satisfying careers in other sectors. While space doesn't allow a comprehensive list, I've highlighted a few to provide you with a starting point:¹³

- Academics Mean Business
- Beyond the Professoriate
- Free the PhD
- IncipitCareer
- Imagine PhD
- Jobs on Toast
- PhD Matters
- The Professor Is In
- The Versatile PhD

As diverse as online groups may be, their variety pales in comparison to what's on social media. Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook offer a constant stream of reflections, advice, and complaints that can help you at every step of your transition. The catch is that these forums lack structure. They may provide good treatments of discrete topics, but there's no single place where you can find them—let alone any way to put them into a sensible order. The result? It's easy to get overwhelmed by the torrent of information. By all means dip your toe in that river if you're looking for additional advice, but use this book to secure your footing first.

13. I have ties to many of these organizations. I wrote a guest blog post for *Beyond the Professoriate* about aligning your life and career goals, and cofounder Jen Polk read a draft of this book. Kristi Lodge of *IncipitCareers* and Vania Cao of *Free the PhD* are two of the people I interviewed while writing. John Paulas of *PhD Matters* was one of my readers and leads a networking event at the annual meeting of the Society for Classical Studies that I have attended since its inception. Chris Humphrey of *Jobs on Toast* advised me on making my advice relevant to a UK audience.

Caveat Lector (Reader Beware)

My advice isn't a cure-all. I've collected guidance that I believe will help you find a new career that makes you happy, but some people accomplish this end more easily than others. The time you invest, the people you meet, and your emotional bond to your discipline all have an impact on the outcome. And although your personal disposition will evolve as you change careers, it will nevertheless influence your feelings about leaving academia as you find your way to a new path.

David Engel stands at one extreme. All he ever wanted to be was a scholar, all he'd ever trained to be was a scholar, and the only thing he thought he was capable of being was a scholar. But the realities of being a professional philosopher wore him down. Four years into a tenure-track job, he didn't have hobbies, grew disillusioned with the cult of personality that surrounded successful teachers, and spent hours every weekend driving to see his wife in another city.

It was 2001 when she told him, in a matter-of-fact way, that he was unhappy. At first he dismissed her assessment. But on his drive home that Sunday afternoon, as his dog leaned forward from the back seat and rested its head on his shoulder for a scratch, he came around to seeing she was right.

David still struggled with his decision to leave. He felt like a fraud for abandoning his field—and he'd quit his job without a plan. But unemployment didn't last long. David remarkably transformed a data-entry job from a temp agency into a permanent position at a bank. He then worked his way to the top of his field, now serving as a managing director with Wells Fargo Advisors.

Despite achieving unqualified success in his new career, it's been hard for David to shake the feelings of embarrassment

and fear he experienced when leaving academia. A few years ago, when he was already doing quite well, his wife caught him lingering by the shelves they'd installed for his old academic books. "You're doing it again," she said, "you're saying you're a failure." Once again, her assessment was correct. A decade had passed since he had written his last academic article, yet David still felt a lingering sadness.

To be clear, this doesn't mean he dislikes his job or regrets his departure from academia. Quite the opposite! But like so many of us, David embraced scholarship as a vocation and built up being an academic into the single defining element of his identity. Hindsight has taught him that this was a mistake—and that his attitudes towards work made a career change harder than it had to be.

A colleague of mine had an entirely different experience. Despite spending more than ten years in academia, he instantly fell for the speed, challenge, and compensation of business. He misses almost nothing of the day-to-day life he lived as a professor. In fact, an Ivy League school invited him to interview for a tenure-track job less than three months after he started his role in consulting. He didn't even make time to discuss it: once he'd seen what life could be like, going back to academia became unthinkable.

These stories won't be exact reflections of your experience—and aren't meant to be. Instead, they represent two extremes of the emotional spectrum you'll occupy when you give up a career you consider a vocation. They also teach a useful lesson: however attached you may be to your life as an academic, you can find even greater satisfaction and joy by pursuing another career.

That last reassurance isn't a platitude: there's research to back it up. In 2018, the Cornell Higher Education Research

Institute released a working paper that detailed how PhDs outside academia report higher levels of job satisfaction than their counterparts in the professoriate.¹⁴ One element of their findings may give you special solace: a greater degree of happiness still held for those who left their fields unwillingly.

Light at the End of the Tunnel

Liz Segran has this conversation often. Since trading academia for journalism, she's come to appreciate that leaving your discipline is necessarily difficult—and that your situation usually gets harder before it gets better. The trouble is that anticipating challenges often prevents people from embracing a new career, leaving them trapped in a cycle of temporary academic work.

Liz is keen to remind those in your position that your outlook will get better in the long run. You already possess skills that average people don't have, such as writing, researching, and analytical abilities. What you usually lack is knowledge of a particular subject matter or work environment. Once you acquire that experience, you become a valuable asset in the marketplace and can advance more rapidly than your peers.

The challenge, of course, is overcoming the hurdles that stand between you and that new knowledge. Many academics stumble because they don't start out where they want to in their first job beyond the professoriate. Some dislike having to

14. Joyce B. Main, Sarah Prenovitz, and Ronald G. Ehrenberg, "In Pursuit of a Tenure-Track Faculty Position: Career Progression and Satisfaction of Humanities and Social Sciences Doctorates" (working paper, 2018): <https://www.ilr.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/CHERI%20WP180.pdf>. See also Colleen Flaherty's report on the working paper for *Inside Higher Ed*, December 18, 2017: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/12/18/study-humanities-and-social-science-phds-working-outside-academe-are-happier-their>.

ask questions (that is, they chafe against not being an expert). Others resist being a thirty-year-old intern with twenty-one-year-old “peers.” Sometimes a nine to five routine is boring or workplace dynamics feel alien to what passes for normal in academia. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you do: everyone finds *something* unpleasant about changing careers.

Enduring that “something” is nevertheless essential to developing the knowledge or skills that will enable your future success. Once you settle into your new environment, your situation will rapidly improve. You’ll connect dots faster, synthesize information with greater ease, and explain complex topics more clearly than people who have more experience but less formal training in the art of learning. Your new colleagues will recognize these abilities, and most will come to appreciate the skills you honed through years of grad school. Competence, intelligence, and drive are always in vogue.

So fight the urge to give in to fear: you have less to lose from changing careers than you might think, and quite a lot more that you can gain.

While you may not be able to imagine the benefits of leaving academia now, they’re decidedly both real and tangible. To name an obvious one first: the salaries are often higher. After so many years living on a paltry income, it’s a relief to know you can cover a surprise expense—and that you won’t be expected to pay your way to a required conference or absorb the cost of a cross-country move. In time, changing careers also removes the effort of constant applications, the fear of living apart from friends or family, and the often-crushing burden of putting your life on hold.

It’s also liberating to disentangle your ego from your work. When I first entered academia, I wanted to shape young minds and change how future scholars interpreted Roman literature.

That made my work feel important—and gave me a sense of meaning. But my day-to-day efforts rarely mapped onto those lofty goals. Instead, I spent a decade trying to inflect a scholarly discussion with a global audience of fifty and forcing college students to memorize details of Latin grammar.

Today, I get far more satisfaction committing my time, treasure, and talent to other pursuits. My job is just that: a way of supporting myself. I enjoy it immensely and take pride in doing good work, but don't delude myself into thinking it's the entirety of who I am, or that it must have philosophical significance to be worth the effort.

In fact, I've been surprised to find that working in business allows me to support communities and causes I care about much more than I could in academia. I can afford to make larger, more regular donations to these groups—and my new experience has made me more capable of advising them on how to advance their mission and maximize their impact. Whenever I rehash questions of my work's philosophical significance, it's clear that, on balance, my new career puts me far ahead.

A Wide World of Work

Many industries thriving today—such as information technology, data science, and medicine—present viable careers for people with advanced degrees. Although these stalwarts of the knowledge-based economy pursue pragmatic rather than cerebral ends, they often emerged from higher education and retain certain cultural ties to that world.

Work in these fields may consequently feel more familiar than you expect. As in academia, you'll grapple with complex problems, synthesize data from diverse areas, and develop innovative solutions. The chief difference is the measure of

success: results in addressing human problems. Many of the people I interviewed were nevertheless quick to add a second, more pragmatic divergence: delivering findings in PowerPoint “decks” instead of multichapter Word documents.¹⁵

Susanne Cohen learned these lessons when she brought her anthropological training to the burgeoning field of design research. In her first postacademic job, she helped make better medical devices through participant observation. As she describes it, the job was similar to fieldwork, but without the theory: she now studied people with the express goal of improving products they used in clinics, operating rooms, and even homes.

Susanne continued to build on her experience as she branched into new professional areas. Her work as a principal user experience (UX) researcher at Elsevier required less direct ethnographic observation than she’d done in the past, but she was still called on to aggregate qualitative data and apply her findings to make products more valuable and intuitive to the people who used them. In fact, her chief project in that role brought her closer to her old life than she might have guessed: she served on a team to build and continually improve Elsa, a web-based tool for publishing academic, scientific, and medical books.

Her doctoral training has provided an unexpected benefit, too. Across the roles Susanne has held since leaving academia, she has interacted with people who possess advanced degrees of their own. These individuals have included the doctors, medical specialists, and university professionals who participated in her research, as well as colleagues who also found success outside

15. “Slide deck” or “deck” is nonacademic parlance for a slideshow.

the field they trained for. This point of contact has helped her build rapport faster than she might have done otherwise—and quickly establishes her credentials with audiences that place a high value on expertise.

While Susanne’s career is decidedly a break from her academic past, she still sees signs of continuity. In the modern economy, this makes sense. For all that Susanne had to learn new skills and adopt new objectives, the training and habits she acquired from her advanced degree have enabled her to add value to initiatives in academia, medicine, and information technology. Her current company clearly recognizes the benefits she brings to the table: less than two years after she started, they awarded her a promotion.

Conclusion

Most people begin the journey you’re embarking on with immense dread about what it might hold. It’s essential to confront these fears. For most academics, the single greatest barrier to leaving a “life of the mind” is admitting that you might want to go. Once you recognize this psychological constraint, it becomes easier to imagine and adopt new paradigms of how your work relates to your personal identity and broader goals.

You’re not alone in walking the path ahead, and there’s even cause to be excited about where it might lead. Don’t worry too much if parts of it still seem dark. Confronting dread will give you the strength you need to keep your eyes fixed ahead. And should you ever doubt how you’ll see the journey through—or be tempted to retreat back to what’s familiar—you can now take comfort in knowing that your current guide and many like him have completed the trip safely before.

Action Items

1. Start a career journal. Your first entry should discuss why you entered academia and how you feel about leaving.
2. Sit down with someone you trust to have a frank discussion about why you want to leave higher education.
3. Do something to celebrate! You're about to start a new chapter.