Plan C
By Anthony T. Grafton and Jim Grossman

Our column, "No More Plan B," in the October 2011 Perspectives on History, has already stimulated more discussion on the web than we expected, and its reappearance in the Chronicle of Higher Education seems to be kindling a few more fires. It has also brought us a great deal of mail—much of it from people trained as historians who now work outside the academy. We were especially encouraged by a letter from a historian who is employed by the military and has just completed his first book, on a nonmilitary topic, soon to be published by a university press. "The greatest problem I have seen," he noted, "is the need for those of us inside the academy to interact with those outside." The difficulties are clear: though he has "worked with several graduate students over the years to assist them in seeking employment in the federal government," and some have succeeded in their quest, still his "academic colleagues and friends tend to see my non-academic status as an interesting and entertaining quirk. I don't think they would consider a similar career for their students."

What we have here is, if not a failure to communicate, at the very least a disinclination to; perhaps even a failure to associate. This is where the AHA can be most effective. As a scholarly society and professional association, we exist in part to build, broaden, and maintain networks of scholars; to transform separate and unequal communities into a less hierarchal network of interlocking communities with a shared set of values that relate to the place of history and history education in public culture and institutional settings.

The AHA can help to pry open the channels. We can use the Association's web site to inform early career historians of the extensive possibilities open to them. We can devote sessions at the annual meeting to careers outside the academy—especially if, as we hope, non-academic members of the AHA can be enticed to speak, and non-member historians to rejoin and attend the annual meeting. As the AHA rethinks and redesigns its ways of communicating with the larger world of historians—and as it builds on the considerable accomplishments of the Council members who have represented early career historians in the recent past—it can highlight the range of careers that await exploration.

Most of the work, however, needs to be done not by the AHA, but by the historians who train PhDs and the departments and universities in which they
work. Some history departments already have strong models for multiple tracks, usually aimed at public history in its various forms. But many of the largest departments have yet to embrace the legitimacy of public history as an aspect (not a track) of PhD instruction equivalent to other modes of dissemination and practice. So public history remains just that: a separate track, seldom integrated into the PhD program in a way that enables a critical mass of students to seriously consider—and then be competitive for—a wider variety of employment opportunities. As we reconsider our role as designers of the PhD curriculum, and as graduate advisers, we might consider one of the hundreds of comments that this conversation generated at higher education media sites: "Mentors, and faculty in general, are socialized to believe that the only mentoring worth the name is related to research." The result of this short sightedness is not only to narrow students' options, but also to make it difficult to see or follow the pathways blazed by those historians who have moved in different and promising directions.

This is irrational on many levels. Most obviously, it shortchanges our students, who need a wide platform of occupational options. But we also underestimate ourselves, and our ability to craft a PhD curriculum that would provide a set of skills and knowledge frameworks beyond the bachelors and masters, and useful to a variety of professional and social roles. In his recent dismissal of humanities disciplines at public universities, the governor of Florida threw down the gauntlet: "If I'm going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I'm going to take that money to create jobs . . . . So I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in this state." Our disagreement with the governor's agenda to move funding away from the humanities rests on our belief that education trains citizens as well as workers. But we also must insist to ourselves and our students, as well as to the taxpayers, that a PhD in history opens many occupational doors. If we don't believe it, why should voters and governing boards?

There are programs—especially small ones—that have been particularly creative, or taken advantage of unique local assets. James Axtell tells us that when he arrived at William and Mary in the late 1970s, "we had MA (and occasionally PhD) apprenticeships (along with coursework) in archival management (through the library), historical archaeology (with Colonial Williamsburg), historical editing, and museum management (with CW). The first and last have disappeared for budgetary reasons, but we've added humanities computing with CW for one person a year. The strongest and most popular program is editing at the Institute for Early American History and Culture."

A more ambitious way to open possibilities is to form university-wide alliances.
Deans of graduate schools and disciplinary divisions are collecting statistics, for instance, far more systematically than they once did, tracking students' progress through their programs and their success in finding jobs. Institutions need to know what their graduates are doing—whether to assess the quality of education they have delivered, or to keep track of potential donors. Their comprehensive collection and assessment of data could be of tremendous assistance not only to historians, but also to other fields in the humanities and social sciences.

By working with one another and with their deans, departments could more easily find the resources to provide kinds of instruction that we aren't offering at present: courses in digital technologies and their uses, for example, could be mounted more economically for all students in the humanities than for historians alone. One of us took a course in graduate school—while working on the dissertation as suggested in the "Plan B" outline—that offered humanists an opportunity to learn basic quantitative literacy from an economic historian. Digital literacy would be the contemporary counterpart. It would also make sense for universities, rather than departments that necessarily work from a limited perspective and knowledge base, to mount workshops on career possibilities, to bring informants like some of our correspondents to campus to talk about their lives and careers, and to offer systematic help for nonacademic placement (a service that they offer their undergraduate and masters alumni as a matter of course). The AHA hopes to become a clearinghouse for such resources.

Peter Conn of the University of Pennsylvania recently described a program along these lines that he developed in the 1970s, when the market collapse in humanities first became apparent: "Staffed by faculty members from the Wharton School in such areas as marketing, finance, and management, the program enrolled about 40 PhD's each year from all over the country for a six-week, residential, summer institute combining a micro-M.BA curriculum with intensive counseling in résumé-writing and interview preparation. Above all, my associates and I worked assiduously to bring corporate (and a few not-for-profit) recruiters to the campus, persuading them that our participants had unusual profiles but were eminently employable in all sorts of fields. We had an excellent placement rate (consultancies, management training, human-resources groups), and we stayed in touch with as many of the roughly 190 "graduates" as we could, a somewhat hit-or-miss proposition since we had no budget or post-1984 staff. Conclusions (comparable to those reached by the managers of the few similar programs, such as one at NYU, though all of our data were pretty soft): These women and men found somewhat more job satisfaction than did members of their cohorts who continued in academic careers, in part because they ended up in locations of their choice, and in part because they tended to make more
money."

PhD programs are a great Rube Goldberg ecosystem: solving one great problem will always create new ones. We argued last month that the PhD dissertation has to remain a rich, complex and demanding exercise or the whole system will be denatured. David Bell, a Princeton historian who has also worked as an administrator, conveyed his appreciation for the intellectual value of the long American PhD while nonetheless arguing that for programs to serve in any practical way as preparation for multiple occupations, they'll have to provide a shorter route to the degree, perhaps on the British model: "I think this is one of the cases where the profession has its collective back to the wall, and there are simply no good options. Either we shorten the PhD, or eliminate the current tenure system, or continue with the current situation in which, in practical terms, non-academic careers will remain a last choice for most of our graduate students." We don't know if he's right, but we do know that this predicament stirred up a storm on web sites where our article was discussed.

Look around and, like it or not, you see a world of new jobs that demand new skills. Most of us believe that the kinds of learning we have cultivated and pass on to our students still matter, and most of us are still trying to do the kind of teaching we love in the teeth of reformers who want to cut costs by turning our lectures into You Tube videos and fixing us permanently at our computers to answer the queries of our viewing audience (formerly known as students). This persistence—which is not mere Luddism—is as it should be. Standards matter. But there's no sense pretending that the new world isn't out there. Some of those currently taking doctorates in history will carry on this project, changing the academy as has each preceding generation. But many others will have to blaze new trails, finding ways to remain committed to history, and to practice it, in venues that are not now listed by most departments in their placement claims. A college president with an unconventional trajectory tells us of the times he has encountered former teachers and colleagues from his history program who didn't quite know what to do with my own 'confusing career path'." If we cannot prepare and support students along such paths, then we will go on failing them, as we have for years, and we'll know that we're doing it. So will they.

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