The Repurposed Ph.D.

Finding life after academia — and not feeling bad about it.

By Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow

On a recent Sunday afternoon, a monthly meeting convened around a long table in a Whole Foods cafeteria on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. As people settled in, the organizer plopped down a bag of potato chips and tackled housekeeping matters, like soliciting contributions. But she did not insist. “I know that some of you are in fragile situations,” she said.

One attendee recalled scraping by on $9,000 a year. “I was exhausted by years of living in poverty,” she said. Her neighbor chimed in: “Amen, sister.”

An eavesdropper might have been surprised to learn what the group had in common: formidable academic credentials. Sitting at the table were a historian, a sociologist, a linguist and a dozen other scholars. Most held doctorates; a few were either close to completion or had left before finishing. All had toiled for years in graduate school but, by choice or circumstance, almost none had arrived at the promised destination of tenure-track professorships (the one who had was thinking of leaving). Now they found themselves at a gathering of a group called Versatile Ph.D. to support their pursuit of nontraditional careers.

After a round of introductions, the participants broke into clusters to swap stories and tips. A 32-year-old man who had studied ancient religion at Princeton wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the name of his employer, a finance Web site; he talked up his job to a physicist who was finalizing her thesis. The historian, a teacher at an elite private school, advised a recent American studies Ph.D. on where to find job postings and how to package himself. That young Ph.D., Adam Capitiano, who completed his degree in 2012, had looked for an academic position for three years, focusing his search on the Northeast and applying for at least 60 jobs. He hadn’t received a single interview. Now he was working as an editorial associate at an academic publisher, trying to devise a long-term plan. “Things were kind of desperate before I had that job,” he said. “This gives me some flexibility to figure out what I actually want to do.”

Dr. Capitiano’s experience is far from unusual. According to a 2011 National Science Foundation survey, 35 percent of doctorate recipients — and 43 percent of those in the humanities — had no commitment for employment at the time of completion. Fewer than half of Ph.D.s are expected to land tenure-track jobs. And many voluntarily choose another path because they want higher pay or more direct engagement with the world than monographs and tenure committees seem to allow.

Though graduates have faced similar conditions for decades, the past few years have seen a surge in efforts to connect Ph.D.s with gratifying employment outside academia and even to rethink the purpose of doctoral education. “The issue itself is not a new issue,” said Debra Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools. “The response, I would say, is definitely new.”

In addition to New York, Versatile Ph.D. groups have formed in at least seven other cities, including Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles. Abundant online resources help Ph.D.s turn curricula vitae into résumés and market their skills to nonacademic employers. And former academics can find kindred souls at blogs like “Chronicles of a Recovering Academic,” “Your Barista Has a Ph.D.” and “Dr. Outta Here” (obscenity alert).

The spirit of change has even begun to take root inside the ivory tower. The University of California, Berkeley, held a “Beyond Academia” conference last spring, hosting Ph.D. speakers who have succeeded in other domains, from consulting to biotech. Similar events are planned at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, which established its new Office of Career Planning and Professional Development in February.

The problem is especially urgent in the humanities. For Ph.D.s in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), industry has long been a viable option. But students who study, say, Russian literature or medieval history have few obvious alternative careers in their fields. They confront questions about their relevance even inside the academy, let alone outside it.

In August, the Scholarly Communication Institute released a report titled “Humanities Unbound: Supporting Careers and Scholarship Beyond the Tenure Track.” In it, Katrina Rogers, the lead researcher, discusses the nascent concept of alternative academic, or alt-ac, professions. The term has gained widespread currency (and its own Twitter hashtag) and can refer to jobs within universities but outside the professoriate, like administrator or librarian, as well as nonacademic roles like government-employed historian and museum curator.

Dr. Rogers suggests that alt-ac is less a matter of where you work than how — “with the same intellectual curiosity that fueled the desire to go to graduate school in the first place, and applying the same kinds of skills, such as close reading, historical inquiry or written argumentation, to the tasks at hand.” In an interview, she credited the neologism with infusing “positive energy” into the often gloomy conversations about alternative careers. The alt-ac ethos holds that nonacademic work is not a fallback plan for failures but a win-win: Ph.D.s can

Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow has written for The Times Book Review and Slate, among other publications.
Adam Capitano spent nine years in graduate school, getting a master’s in cinema studies and then a Ph.D., hoping to teach film. “Maybe a little more than halfway through,” he said, “it dawned on me how bad the job market actually was.” On phcsatwork.com, he writes: “I looked everywhere a confused humanities post-academic would look: nonprofits, museums, media companies, I ended up in that refuge of former academics, publishing.”

Karen Shanton realized she was more interested in politics than in a faculty position. After earning her doctorate in 2011, she completed a series of internships in Washington, then won a fellowship working with a nonprofit organization that researches issues for state policy makers.

bring their deep expertise and advanced skills to a whole gamut of challenges, rather than remaining cocooned in the ivory tower.

Karen Shanton explored unconscious cognitive processes for her philosophy Ph.D. from Rutgers but works at the National Conference of State Legislatures, which provides legislators with nonpartisan analysis. She won the two-year fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies. Its Public Fellows program, created in 2011, places Ph.D.s from the humanities and social sciences in nonprofit and government organizations.

Dr. Shanton said her education “absolutely informs her work, which focuses in part on voter ID laws, as she draws on her writing and thinking skills as well as her knowledge of how the mind works. “It’s actually kind of great because it has a lot of the benefits of academia,” she said. But “with politics, you can have a sort of more immediate impact.”

While the alt-ac perspective is relatively rosy, some disenchanted academic refugees embrace what they call the “post-ac” identity. The Web site “How to Leave Academia” recently published a post-ac manifesto, defining the orientation as “a belief that the current system is flawed, cruel, unsustainable and therefore impossible to directly engage with.” In this view, Ph.D. programs, with their false promises, lure students to serve as cheap labor, first as teaching assistants, then as poorly paid adjuncts when tenure-track jobs elude them.

“Post-ac discourages people from pursuing graduate work,” write the authors, Lauren Whitehead and Kathleen Miller, under the pseudonyms Lauren Nervosa and Currer Bell. Dr. Miller also penned the blog post “I Hate My Post-Ac Job: What Happens When You Don’t Land the Perfect Postacademic Career.” In it she writes: “Graduating, leaving academia, moving to a new city, starting a new job, and then hating it? Sheesh. Let me tell you — it’s hard to feel like a success story.” Unable to secure academic employment after completing her doctorate in English literature in 2012, Dr. Miller is now preparing to start her own life-coaching business.

A handful of professors at Stanford, sensitive to the exploitative potential of graduate school but convinced of its value, are trying to instigate meaningful change. Last year, six of them wrote “The Future of the Humanities Ph.D. at Stanford,” a much-discussed white paper promoting the redesign of curriculums to prepare humanities Ph.D.’s for “a diverse array of meaningful, socially productive and personally rewarding careers within and outside the academy,” as well as reducing time to degree, which often takes close to a decade.

Russell A. Berman, a German professor and an author of the paper, feels a responsibility to recognize these practical exigencies. “Graduate education is primarily an intellectual undertaking,” he said. “But most of the participants are at an age where they also have to be making career choices.” He added, “The academic job
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REHAB FOR DOCTORAL DEFCCTORS

Want to transition out of academia? Here’s help.

Public Fellows Program Two-year fellowships for recent Ph.D.s in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, arranged by the American Council of Learned Societies. Fellows are placed at non-profit and government organizations like Amnesty International, the Feminist Press and the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. Benefits: a $65,000 stipend and health insurance.

VersatilePhD.com Advice for shifting to nonacademic careers. Free content includes a community forum with 35,000 members. Premium content includes expanded guidance, like actual résumés and cover letters from Ph.D.’s who have succeeded outside academia. Sixty universities subscribe, making premium content available to their communities. The Web site is not affiliated with the Versatile Ph.D. support groups that are formed via meetup.com. But the groups see themselves as part of the same movement. (They borrowed the name with the Web site founder’s encouragement.)

HowtoLeaveAcademia.com Pages include “How to Quit,” “Emotional Transition” and “Setting Up Your Post-Acad Life.”

The Ph.D. Placement Project Initiative of The Chronicle of Higher Education that aims to track career outcomes through reader surveys. The site now hosts blogs on the issue.

#alt-academy A “grassroots, publish-then-filter approach to networked scholarly communication,” part of the media commons project of the Institute for the Future of the Book, a “think and do tank.” Scholars in untraditional occupations contribute essays, book chapters and multimedia projects.

market is so weak that it just can’t be business as usual for department faculty.”

And yet he does not buy into the popular notion that there are just too many Ph.D.’s. “I think that doctoral education is good for individuals who are passionate about the topic,” Dr. Berman said. “I think it’s good for society. They contribute in lots of different ways.”

The professors called on Stanford to offer supplementary funds to departments that devised plans for alternative career preparations and shortening time to degree. The School of Humanities and Sciences requested proposals, but few departments responded. At the same time, new programs have been set up to help link humanities Ph.D. students with jobs in Silicon Valley and in high schools.

Initiatives are afoot at other schools as well. Collectively, they could begin to alter expectations.

While not grappling with the same existential questions as humanities programs, the Polytechnic Institute of New York University is trying to expand career options for its Ph.D. candidates. It has opened two incubators over the last few years, with a third to open soon, offering space, legal services and marketing advice to facilitate entrepreneurship. The draw, according to Kurt H. Becker, associate provost for research and technology, is “a career path that would allow them to be much more in control than if you’re a postdoc or an assistant professor, where your career path is pretty much mapped out.”

The Praxis Network consists of “digital humanities” initiatives at eight universities, focusing primarily on graduate education. They aim to prepare students for roles outside the professoriate, stressing skills like collaboration, technology and project management. In the City University of New York’s Digital Fellows Program, in its second year, graduate students commit 15 hours a week to a selected project and related activities. One historian completed a project called “Data Mining Diploma: A Computational Analysis of the State Department’s Foreign Policy Files.” Fellows also design Web sites and organize a workshop series for other students, all of which is far removed from the traditional humanities experience of sitting alone in a room with a stack of books.

“We are really thinking about it as a kind of laboratory for reshaping doctoral education and rethinking the kind of skills that we give our students,” said Matthew K. Gold, an English professor who runs the program.

Ethan Watrall, a professor of anthropology at Michigan State University, runs the Cultural Heritage Informatics Initiative as part of Praxis. “I try to destigmatize this idea of not going on to a tenure-track job,” he said. “It doesn’t matter — who cares? If you’re happy and that’s what you want to do, that’s awesome.”

He believes the culture has begun to change, “mostly because of the sort of desperate need for it to change.”

Still, he said, a transformation is only beginning. “The academy is a big ship and it takes a long time to turn it.”