

Jennifer Brown Urban and Miriam R. Linver

Introduction

The number of new psychology and social science doctorates has been steadily increasing, with roughly 9,095 doctoral degrees granted in psychology and the social sciences in 2013 (up from 6,027 in 1985; National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics [NCSES], 2017). Alongside this increase, however, there has been a concurrent decline in the number of available tenure-track academic positions (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017; McKenna, 2016). In 2015, 59.6% of psychology and social science doctoral degree recipients obtained traditional academic positions (NCSES, 2017).

Increasingly, recent psychology doctoral program graduates are seeking alternative positions in government (11.6%), industry or business (16.2%), nonprofit organizations (9.1%), and other or unknown fields (3.4%; NCSES, 2017). The approach to doctoral education used by academic institutions in this country has not kept pace with these shifting employment trends. In fact, students who are interested in nonacademic or more applied careers are often marginalized in their graduate programs. This is exacerbated by a lack of resources available to help navigate a nonacademic career path.

Most professional development courses for doctoral students in the behavioral and social sciences focus on preparation for careers in academia. However,

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0000110-001>

Building a Career Outside Academia: A Guide for Doctoral Students in the Behavioral and Social Sciences,
J. B. Urban and M. R. Linver (Editors)

Copyright © 2019 by the American Psychological Association. All rights reserved.

nearly half the students in these classes are unlikely to obtain or even want to pursue academic careers. Doctoral students may choose to pursue a career outside of academia for many reasons: compensation is often higher in nonacademic jobs, there may be more geographic flexibility, applied work is valued, and one has the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in people's lives.

Given the need for professional development for those pursuing nonacademic careers, why has the academy been so slow to respond? One reason may be that professors feel most comfortable teaching what they know, and that is the world of academia. However, it is a disservice to many students not to prepare them for the nonacademic job market. Given most professors' inexperience with careers outside of academia, there is a great need for books that can help guide students pursuing such careers. A scan of available books revealed a dearth of such resources. Therefore, we decided to create such a book ourselves. This book was built out of our own experiences as graduate students considering potential career paths and in our work teaching and mentoring doctoral students with ambitions beyond academia.

As a graduate student at Cornell University, Jennifer was intent on pursuing a nonacademic career and was frustrated that her professional development class focused entirely on preparing for tenure-track academic positions. To better prepare herself for the nonacademic job market, she helped start a student organization, Policy and Advocacy in the Social Sciences, whose mission was to provide a support network and professional development opportunities for doctoral students interested in pursuing nonacademic careers. After graduation, she served as a Society for Research in Child Development Executive Branch Policy Fellow and was placed in the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the National Institutes of Health. She ultimately decided to pursue a career as a tenure-track professor, and in that capacity, she has been charged with developing and teaching the program's doctoral professional development course. One of the primary readings for this course is *The Compleat Academic* (Darley, Zanna, & Roediger, 2004), which serves as an excellent resource for students and emerging scholars pursuing academic careers. The hope is that this book can serve as a counterpoint for those pursuing nonacademic careers.

Miriam also followed an indirect path to her current tenured position. Commencing her PhD program immediately after her bachelor's degree, she was unsure of the direction her career would take. Her program did not offer a formal professional development course; all professional development was imparted informally via mentor-student interactions. While still a PhD candidate at the University of Arizona's Family Studies & Human Development program, she moved across the country to New York. Still unsure of exactly which direction her career should take, she interviewed for research positions at think tanks and nonprofits and in the end took a position as a part-time research associate in a lab setting at Columbia University's Teachers College. After completing her doctorate, she continued in the lab as a postdoctoral researcher and then as a research scientist. When the opportunity arose, and the timing was right, she transitioned into her current tenure-track position.

Intended Audience

This book was written primarily for doctoral students in the behavioral and social sciences, including those earning a PhD, EdD, or PsyD in such disciplines as psychology, education, sociology, human development, family science, anthropology, demography, economics, and political science, to name a few. Although those who have earned or are in the process of earning a doctorate are the primary focus of this book, those who have or are working toward a master's degree in the behavioral and social sciences may also find the tips and strategies provided herein applicable to their job search. A secondary audience for this book are the mentors and advisors who support graduate students. Those who teach professional development courses for doctoral students may also find this book to be a helpful resource for their classes.

What makes this book unique among career guides for doctoral students is that it provides real-life stories from the trenches. When students approach us wondering what career path is right for them, we often tell them to conduct informational interviews with people who work in sectors of interest to them. This book brings a full spectrum of informational interviews to you. In a single, concise, accessible book, you will be exposed to a diverse array of potential careers. Across a range of sectors, the authors of each of the chapters in Part II of this book address questions such as, How did you get to where you are today? What types of jobs are available? What skill set should students work on building to be competitive? How can a doctoral-level skill set be applied? and What is a typical day like? Part III of the book provides the tools and resources you need to prepare yourself for the nonacademic job market, including advice on how to find a supportive mentor, how to prepare for and conduct nonacademic job searches, and how to effectively network and interview.

It is important to note that this book is not meant to be a comprehensive review of all possible career opportunities outside academia. For example, we do not offer guidance for building a career as a clinician. Nor do we cover careers in school, environmental, or forensic psychology. For resources on careers in clinical psychology, we encourage you to see books by Walfish (2010) and Pope and Vasquez (2005). The American Psychological Association website also features stories from psychologists in a variety of nonacademic careers.¹

Integrating Themes

We have organized the book into four parts: (a) how to decide on your optimal career path, (b) career paths for behavioral and social science doctorates, (c) preparing yourself for the nonacademic job market, and (d) an appendix listing organizations that

¹For example, see <http://www.apa.org/science/resources/careers/index.aspx>, <http://www.apa.org/careers/resources/profiles/index.aspx>, and <http://www.apa.org/action/careers/index.aspx> for more information.

hire PhDs in the behavioral and social sciences. Part I outlines the pros and cons of pursuing an academic or nonacademic career path, including topics such as work–family balance, flexibility (work schedule, geographic location), moving in and out of the tenure-track academic path, and financial compensation. This section is intended to help you think through whether a nonacademic career path may be appropriate for you.

Part II provides firsthand descriptions from behavioral and social science PhDs who have pursued nonacademic career paths. This section is intended to give you a sense of both how the authors got to where they are today and what it is like to work in various nonacademic sectors. Each of the chapters in Part II begins with the authors answering the question “How did you get to where you are today?” These are presented as short vignettes that provide an introduction to the chapter. As you read the vignettes, consider whether any of the authors’ experiences resonate with you. This may help you identify whether a nonacademic career is for you and, if yes, which sector is the right fit. The remainder of the chapters includes a discussion of the different types of jobs available in that sector, what skill set you should work on building to be competitive in that sector (e.g., taking more statistics classes, writing for academic audience publications vs. practice-oriented publications, honing critical thinking skills by volunteering to serve as a peer reviewer, working well in a team setting), how a PhD-level skill set can be applied in that sector, what a typical day is like for the authors, what they enjoy and don’t enjoy about working in that sector, and specific advice for students who may be interested in pursuing a career in that sector.

Part III provides specific and detailed information on how best to prepare for the nonacademic job market. These chapters include advice on how to find supportive mentors who will help guide you on a nonacademic career path, the best way to prepare for a nonacademic job search, how to effectively network, and how to successfully interview for nonacademic jobs. The book concludes with an appendix that lists organizations that typically hire behavioral and social science doctoral graduates.

Practical Tips for Using This Book Effectively

There are several ways you can approach reading this book. For graduate students who are just starting to consider a career outside of academia, we suggest reading the book in a linear fashion from start to finish. Graduate students who are more secure in their decision to pursue a nonacademic career may want to first go to Part II and read about various career options before turning to Part III’s practical advice for pursuing a nonacademic job.

Mentors and instructors of professional development courses may want to use the book the way we do. When a student expresses an interest in a particular non-academic career path, we share the appropriate chapter with them. In professional

development classes, you may choose to cover a subset of potential careers outside of academia and have students read the chapter that corresponds with that day's topic. You could also have students read chapters from Part III as a prelude to completing an assignment such as a draft resume or mock interview. However you choose to use this book, we hope you find it to be a practical and useful resource.

Concluding Thoughts

Our hope is that this book will put anxious minds at ease. If you thought you were alone in wanting to pursue a nonacademic career, you're not. If you've felt as though you needed to keep your nonacademic dreams a secret, you don't. If you haven't been sure where to turn for advice and guidance, you now have a place to start. A nonacademic career is not second rate, and pursuing one does not mean that you couldn't cut it in academia. There are many reasons you may have decided to expand your career vision beyond academia, and we support you in those efforts.

As you'll hear over and over from the chapter authors, networking is the key to success. So once you've finished reading this book, start networking! Better yet, don't wait until you've finished the book—start now. Informational interviewing is a great way to learn more about potential career paths. Talk with people who have the job you think you'd like to hold one day. Ask them to describe their experience. Ask them the questions that serve as headings in Part II of this book. Learn as much as you can, and ask them to refer you to at least two additional people.

Setting yourself up for success in a nonacademic job is not that different from what you would do to prepare for an academic job. You should still focus on publishing in academic outlets. For many nonacademic jobs, publishing is one of the factors that can make you a competitive candidate. Take as many statistics and methodology courses as you can. Rarely in your career will you have the opportunity to devote yourself to learning a broad array of methods and statistical techniques. Take full advantage of this opportunity in graduate school. You will be glad you did, whether you later find yourself in an academic or nonacademic career.

You are highly educated and have an enviable skill set. Now, go put it to use.

References

- Darley, J. M., Zanna, M. P., & Roediger, H. L., III. (2004). *The compleat academic: A career guide* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Ginder, S. A., Kelly-Reid, J. E., & Mann, F. B. (2017). *Enrollment and employees in post-secondary institutions, fall 2015; and financial statistics and academic libraries, fiscal year 2015: First look (provisional data)* (Report No. NCES 2017-024). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- McKenna, L. (2016, April 21). The ever-tightening job market for Ph.D.s: Why do so many people continue to pursue doctorates? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/04/bad-job-market-phds/479205/>

- National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. (2017). *2015 doctorate recipients from U.S. universities* (Report No. NSF 17-306). Arlington, VA: National Science Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17306/static/report/nsf17306.pdf>
- Pope, K. S., & Vasquez, M. J. T. (2005). *How to survive and thrive as a therapist: Information, ideas, and resources for psychologists in practice*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Walfish, S. (2010). *Earning a living outside of managed mental health care: 50 ways to expand your practice*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.