

# Preparing for Unforeseen Opportunities Outside Academia

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Upon entering graduate school, my plan was simple: land a tenure-track job at a university, and live the life of the mind. An old Volvo would carry me to campus each day. I would stride the leafy grounds wearing a turtleneck and a shabby-chic sports jacket with a smoking pipe jutting from my mouth. Students would throng my courses on the great books and proper governance.

I laid much of the groundwork during the 1990s. I capped an honors bachelor of arts degree with a final research project on Friedrich Nietzsche and a master's degree with a thesis on the liberalism of the men who drafted the US Constitution. I took the political theory courses that New York University's politics department offered, then sought additional coursework outside. A New School class on "styling of the self" was particularly invigorating, and an NYU philosophy class on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was brutally challenging. I joined the editorial board of *Conference*, a journal of philosophy and literary theory then-published by a consortium of New York City universities, and later became its lead editor.

Yet I did not become an academic. Instead, I went to work for think tanks in Washington. After a dozen years, I can confidently say I made the right decision for me.

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Strangely enough, a big impediment to my bucolic, professorial fantasy came from my future employer—Congress. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 forbids employers from having mandatory-retirement rules. Initially, universities were excluded from this law, but Congress let their free pass expire in 1994. It was a victory for equity, but it came with a cost: the sunny forecasts of a surfeit of political science positions grew darker. The closer I got to dissertating, the longer my odds looked for getting a job.

The dimming prospects forced me to consider how I might further up my odds to be hired for a faculty job. I realized that, to have any chance, I needed to publish an article or two before I graduated. That meant finding something new to say about the very old books I loved so dearly. I spent months deep-diving the literature in a vain quest for a political theory topic. At least twice I thought I had found subjects little picked over and ripe for both dissertating upon and producing articles. The first topic, an examination of the political thought of Thomas Paine, vaporized when an eminent scholar published a thick, exhaustive tome on the topic right as I was drafting my own study proposal. The second subject, a history of twentieth century American conservatism, I abandoned after discussion with a couple of faculty advisers.

My subject, they explained, did not make me a strong hire either for political theory or for American politics. Worse, I was cautioned, becoming *the* expert on this subject might arouse suspicion in hiring committees that I was a conservative.

All this cogitating to find the right research subject induced me to imagine life *even if* I got a tenure-track position. Do I really want to move wherever the job was, no matter the environs and the distance from family and friends? Did I want to spend another five years trying to publish in the right journals, on topics that were, to me, more "publication worthy" than interesting?

I had my doubts. Life is more than vocation. Finding happiness, as Aristotle counseled, means considering other factors.

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I had no clue what I might do if I did not land the idyllic teaching position. I was determined to finish my doctorate, but I decided to better my odds of finding a fulfilling job by spreading my bets.

First, I changed my dissertation subject, deciding to use political theory as a lens through which to look at the debates surrounding the federal role in education policy. I stocked my dissertation committee with three faculty who were renowned publishing machines, and who graciously hired me on as a research assistant. I hoped doing these things would increase my chances at getting hired by either a political science department or a public policy school.

Second, I took part-time work in journalism at the *New York Press*, a weekly Manhattan newspaper. I began as an unpaid fact-checker, and moved up to paid hourly editorial assistant and contributing writer. Perhaps, I reasoned, this experience, plus my *Conference* journal editorship, would make me attractive to a media company.

Third, I got into the Internet startup game. I cofounded *Bully Magazine*, a humor website and started AlcoholReviews.com, an online review of beers, spirits, and wines. These ventures further added to my journalism experience and schooled me in new media, and I thought they might develop into careers. (The dot-com boom was on, and venture capital did come calling, but I spurned it.)

Juggling all of this was not easy, and my dissertation did not proceed as quickly as it might have. I did, however, learn a lot from these nonacademic experiences, and I reaped new skills that helped get me a nonacademic job. Critically, my resume showed I could both research deeply and write quickly on a variety of topics for expert and general audiences.

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I applied for about a half-dozen academic positions during my final year. I chose judiciously, limiting myself only to

positions looked like a real match for my academic expertise. I put in for a post-doc. I thought my odds of landing an academic position were good, but I was very wrong. Despite becoming expert on a topic that was hot in politics, despite having a degree from NYU and big-name advisors who wrote glowing letters for me, months passed without offers for interviews.

With graduation approaching and my anxiety rising, I cast a wide net. I applied for a policy job at New York City's welfare department. My dissertation chair had notified me of the opening, and he was highly regarded there. I also took the Foreign Service examination, and I put in for the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program, which matches advanced degree holders with federal agencies looking for hires. My interview with the welfare department went well, but we

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were not quite a match. I passed the Foreign Service test, then got bounced after the oral interview. The PMF program accepted me, and shortly after applying to the Congressional Research Service, I got called in for an interview.

Sitting in a dim room in one of the Library of Congress' Madison building, I felt a little out of my element. The position was to conduct research on public administration topics for Congress. I had written very little on the subject, which made it difficult to answer the questions about federal agency operations. Come the conclusion of the interview, I felt I had blown it. When asked if I had any final things to tell the hiring committee, I threw the dice. I noted that my resume indicated that I was very experienced in reading congressional documents (legislation, committee reports, etc.), and that my lengthy list of nonacademic publications proved I was intellectually flexible. I closed by saying something like, "I also can write about new topics at the drop of a hat. Like, not long ago I was sent a book about gin and asked to review it, so I just read it and wrote a review." One of the interviewers slapped the table and exclaimed, "Gin! Well, that's just the sort person we're looking for around here!" I am certain my face turned red as I assumed he was joking. He was not.

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I spent 11 years at CRS, then hopped to a private sector think tank in autumn 2014. Both organizations prized my graduate degrees in political science. Neither, however, would have hired me had I not demonstrated three things. First, that I was willing and able to apply my political science training to practical governance matters; second, that I had shown I was able to master new subject matter; and third, that I could write for both expert and non-expert audiences.

Think tanks play an important role in our twenty-first century, mass democratic republic. Modern American government is extraordinarily immense and complex. There are about 180 federal agencies, tens of thousands of pages of law

and more than 175,000 pages of policy regulations. Anyone, regardless of governance knowledge, can be elected to Congress or the presidency. Politics moves very quickly these days, and policymakers seldom have the luxury to devote weeks to studying a subject. They value authoritative information and analyses on topics of current or potential public interest, provided in concise, easy-to-digest formats. That is what think tanks do.

Think tanks, be they governmental or private sector, are sources of information and advice. They can explain how things work, which is no easy matter, and what might be done to improve matters. All three branches of government have think tanks and private sector tanks often are places stocked both with former and future government wonks.

Do not be misled by media anecdotes about politicians' hostility to knowledge. Modern government runs on expertise and hires smart people. To see this truth, one need only attend the Association of Public Policy Management and Analysis' annual autumn gathering. Doves of highly educated individuals, many from government and think tanks, congregate there to discuss methodologically sophisticated studies of policy and approaches for improving governance.

With all of that said, think tanks are not the only nonacademic organizations that hire political scientists and help the government govern. Congress employs political scientists, as do government agencies. So, too, do the various federally funded research and development centers (e.g., RAND), the myriad private research institutes (e.g., Mathematica Policy Research) and the plethora of public policy and advocacy groups. (One political scientist I know was hired as a researcher by a national teachers' union.)

Inevitably, policymakers want actionable information that can help them decide whether to do or not do something. To meet their needs, sometimes I brief members of Congress or legislative staff in-person. Other times I have helped staff prepare for a hearing by identifying witnesses and crafting questions. I, myself, have testified. My written research products have included everything from short, fact-providing emails to chapter-length analyses. We private sector think tankers also write op-eds and blog posts—a lot of them. Politicians and influential players read them, and they are a great way to put information in front of readers and lead them to our longer scholarly studies.

Truth be told, my vocation is not all that different from a university job. I still attend political science and academic conferences, investigate new methodologies, and write and peer-review for journals. I have published one academic book and may well write another. My day-to-day work does involve

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teaching—it is just that the class members are legislators, their staff, and the American public generally.

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I would advise current political science graduate students to consider spreading their bets among academic

organizations, public policy and advocacy groups, and media and publishing companies. Doing this will open your eyes to possibilities you never imagined and clarify what skills they value. These days, think tanks and research organizations value an advanced education credential

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and nonacademic positions. How widely one does this will depend on one's personal preferences and the chances for landing a desirable position in one's area of expertise.

Do take time each year to review the academic job data to get a sense of the market. Then identify the schools where you might want to teach and contact their departments to see if they anticipate any openings in the coming years. One can cold call the department chairs, or arrange meet-ups at political science conventions.

To explore nonacademic opportunities, first, pester every professor you know to connect you with nonacademic contacts working in appealing environments. Take time to regularly scan the job advertisements posted by research

and demonstrated experience assessing real-world political and policy issues in heady publications. Also ask your political science department if you can earn class credits for working at an organization outside the academy. Call it field work.

Last and relatedly: develop a broad and deep professional network both inside and outside academia. The competition for jobs is intense. No matter how good you may look on paper, ultimately, employers must make a gut call: *Do we like this candidate? Will he or she be a productive team member who will help us get things done?* Being known and trusted by well-regarded professionals helps employers answer this question in the affirmative. ■