

# The Academic Jobs Crisis: A Forum

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## Introduction

Daniel Bessner and Michael Brenes

The U.S. academic job market is in total freefall. As the American Historical Association's (AHA) 2020 jobs report bluntly stated, "History Ph.D.s who graduated in the past decade encountered fewer opportunities and more competition on the academic job market than any cohort of Ph.D.s since the 1970s."<sup>1</sup> And this was before the COVID-19 pandemic, which, the 2021 jobs report noted, has resulted in numerous "program closures, enrollment declines, and faculty layoffs."<sup>2</sup> It's not an exaggeration to say that, even if things improved tomorrow (which they won't), there will be several "lost generations" of historians who will never secure stable academic employment.

The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) is well aware of these depressing and disturbing trends. Under the leadership of past-SHAFR presidents Barbara Keys and Kristin Hoganson, the organization recently established a Jobs Crisis Task Force to begin to deal with the new material and structural realities of U.S. higher education.

Most, if not all, members of SHAFR have experienced the effects of the jobs crisis. Even if scholars have not personally been subjected to the capricious cruelty of the tenure-track job market—the dozens of job applications that require voluminous amounts of paperwork and personal time; the relentless rejections; the deafening silence of institutions that don't have the courtesy to reject applicants; the overwhelming stress and anxiety as one contemplates a "Plan B"; the inability to provide for oneself, let alone loved ones—they have probably seen students struggle to land an academic position or heard stories from colleagues about budding scholars with stellar CVs who did not receive tenure-track offers. And if scholars haven't personally encountered the market's indignities, they can simply read publications like the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Education*, or *Slate*, which all have published popular articles on the humiliations of the academic job market.<sup>3</sup>

SHAFR is in a unique position to tackle the jobs crisis. In the last three decades, our subfield has increasingly supported and centered scholarship produced by marginalized groups—women, Black Americans, people of color, LGBTQIA+ scholars, and first-generation students. Unfortunately, the diversification of scholarly production within SHAFR occurred at the very same moment that

tenure-track employment all but disappeared. Put another way, as SHAFR began to overcome the well-founded concern that the field was too demographically homogenous, the historical profession entered a period of long-term decline. As a result, many of the people who comprise SHAFR's new and more diverse constituency won't find stable academic employment, preventing the field, and society more broadly, from learning from and being transformed by their scholarship.

If recent experience teaches us anything, it is that university administrators, already under significant pressure to cut costs, will use the shock of the pandemic to institute austerity measures that starve the humanities and social sciences of funds. And under austerity, most tenure-track history positions are unlikely to return. To add insult to injury, the fields for which historians who can't secure tenure-track employment are most suited—archival work, museum work, journalism—are likewise experiencing their own jobs crises.<sup>4</sup> There is no escape from the miseries engendered by contemporary austerity and inequality—not within the university, and not outside of it.

We believe that the only effort that might begin to change the present situation is one that begins with us. We should make use of our labor power and collective knowledge to band together with other workers—from adjunct faculty to university staff, from archivists and librarians to high school teachers, from Uber drivers to Amazon employees—to demand that society's resources be redistributed to aid the many and not the few.<sup>5</sup> Whether SHAFR will contribute to this broader project remains to be seen; personally, we hope that it will.

To try and help build the consciousness required to reverse trends in the job market and the modern university, this forum has collected eleven short articles written mostly by non-tenure track scholars working in or adjacent to the history of U.S. foreign relations. The pieces address a diversity of topics, including gender and racial inequity in the academy; the purpose of a history PhD; the challenges of producing scholarship off the tenure-track; the long history of the jobs crisis; recent activism on behalf of adjuncts and contingent faculty; and the state and fate of tenure. Though the essays don't come together to offer a single solution to the jobs crisis—in our opinion, such a solution does not exist—we believe they will help SHAFR members learn about the degradations of being an early-career scholar in the American academy of 2021 and, hopefully, inspire action to reverse the corporatizing trends that have done so much damage to the university system.

We believe that the only effort that might begin to change the present situation is one that begins with us.

## Notes:

1. Dylan Ruediger, "The 2020 AHA Jobs Report: New History PhDs Awarded Continue to Decline as Academic Job Market Remains Flat," *Perspectives on History* (February 12, 2020), <https://www.historians.org/ahajobsreport2020>.
2. Dylan Ruediger, "The 2021 AHA Jobs Report: 2019–2020 Data Show Relative Stability in the Year before COVID," *Perspectives on History* (January 20, 2021), <https://www.historians.org/ahajobsreport2021#:~:text=Job%20ads%20placed%20with%20the,rise%20in%20tenure%2Dtrack%20positions>.
3. Rebecca Schuman, "Thesis Hatment: Getting a Literature Ph.D. Will Turn You into an Emotional Trainwreck, Not a Professor," *Slate* (April 5, 2013), [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2013/04/there\\_are\\_no\\_academic\\_jobs\\_and\\_getting\\_a\\_ph\\_d\\_will\\_make\\_you\\_into\\_a\\_horrible.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2013/04/there_are_no_academic_jobs_and_getting_a_ph_d_will_make_you_into_a_horrible.html); Daniel Bessner and Michael Brenes, "A Moral Stain on the Profession: As the Humanities Collapse, It's Time to Name and Shame the Culprits," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 26, 2019), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Moral-Stain-on-the-/246197>; Zeb Larson, "You Can't Kill It with Kindness," *Inside Higher Education* (June 23, 2020), <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/23/kindness-wont-resolve-core-issues-what-makes-job-hunting-phds-so-demoralizing-and>.
4. Matthew Francis, "2013 Archival Program Graduates and the Entry-Level Job Market," *American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 514–47.
5. Bessner and Brenes, "A Moral Stain on the Profession."

## What Can SHAFR Do?

Susan Colbourn

Last winter, in January 2020, as the work of SHAFR's Jobs Crisis Task Force was getting off the ground, the committee's plans happened to come up in conversation as Mike Brenes and I chatted over a coffee. (That sentence was a real flashback—having coffee with friends and colleagues!) Mike asked me if I could think of any concrete things that professional societies like SHAFR might be able to do for early-career scholars facing an increasingly precarious professional future.

I couldn't.

All I could think about were the large, daunting structural problems—the various trends we all know are eroding the chances at stable employment for up-and-coming scholars who would like to find careers researching, writing, and teaching history. You know, the kind of things that come up all too often in conversation when your office is full of predoctoral and postdoctoral fellows.

After that coffee, it frustrated me that I couldn't come up with any concrete ways to improve the lot of young scholars.

It also, if I'm being honest, left me even more depressed about the grim state of affairs facing the discipline and profession as a whole, and the countless talented people who hope to make a living in the academy but likely won't. Certainly, the sweeping hiring freezes and university budget cuts of recent months have done little to make me more optimistic about our present situation.

But I still believe there is a place for professional societies like SHAFR to make a difference in the careers of junior scholars. In that spirit, I want to offer SHAFR a modest proposal: Why not create a new small grant that would help authors not on the tenure-track defray the costs of publishing a book?

Other comparable professional associations already offer programs explicitly designed to help authors and presses with the publication of first books. The Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), for instance, runs a program that offers subventions for

first books. In the case of ASEEES, applications are made by publishers "for manuscripts that have already been contracted and peer reviewed in full, and are at or nearing the production stage."<sup>1</sup>

What I envision is a bit different, geared toward authors themselves. Perhaps SHAFR could establish a grant that would make it possible for authors to hire an indexer, secure image permissions, or even commission a map. With academic publishing timelines far outstripping short-term contracts and one- or two-year fellowships, it's very difficult for scholars in precarious positions to find the resources to support such necessary but often overlooked aspects of book publishing. A grant like this could—not unlike the Michael Hunt Fund—be established through voluntary contributions and gifts to SHAFR.

Even a small amount of money could go a long way toward making a huge difference for an individual scholar.

## Note:

1. "ASEEES First Book Subvention Program," Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, <https://www.aseees.org/programs/firstbook-subvention>.

## Unfenced

Emily Whalen

In the baldest, least compassionate language I can muster, the thrust of my essay is this: the point of getting a PhD is not to get a job. What a tenured job symbolizes for most scholars—economic security, the ability to live in a stable community, and the freedom to speak your mind—is something that ought to be guaranteed from birth, by virtue of one's humanity. While it's important to lament that struggling through graduate school is no longer a viable path toward this birthright, we cannot, in our lamentation, lose sight of the bigger picture.

As an institution in human society, academia is a means to an end. The end is not economic security; the end is deepening and broadening the realm of human knowledge. As a means to achieving this end, academia has always been imperfect. The historical moment we are living through, this series of cascading economic, social, and political disasters, is perhaps the best possible time to look critically at academia, and question if it is still a useful means to the end of wisdom. Pursuing a PhD, ironically, is an excellent way to begin this shift in focus, from explaining how the proverbial game is rigged against us to building an entirely new game.

Put another way, my argument is that there are good reasons to get a PhD even though you and I and the vast majority of our talented, brilliant peers will likely never land a tenure-track academic job. There is something in the pursuit of getting your PhD that is *better* than membership in academia or economic security in the private sector. Something in the process cuts to the heart of what it means to be alive in the world, and that might, just possibly, be excellent preparation for the upheavals to come—in academia, in the university system, in the world.

Security and stability, even outside the academy, are scarce these days. Erratic political leaders and their unhinged acolytes, deficient governments, climate change, and profound social fragmentation have all made planning for any kind of a future difficult. Realistically, these factors were destabilizing our futures even before the coronavirus pandemic. In academia, the mirage has been shimmering for some time; the job market has been bleak for more than

ten years. Much of the academic discourse around the so-called “jobs crisis” reflects the fractured reality of many scholars’ experience: even in fitful moments of general economic recovery, academia has not recovered. Scarcity has been our reality for decades.

Most “quit lit” and writing about the “jobs crisis” is still trying to convince the broader public that there’s a problem, usually to no avail. Reflecting the deeper disconnection between academia and the general public, “quit lit” hasn’t really moved past the Cassandra phase, prophesying doom and gloom to deaf ears. Certainly, on an individual level, reckoning with the “jobs crisis” requires reckoning with our own feelings about living through this ill-starred moment in time. Usually, essays on our dismal prospects for meaningful and economically viable employment evolve into expressions of grief, rage, frustration, or despair—often beautiful, often searing, always important. Yet in these expressions, we lose sight of the crux of the problem: a system of producing knowledge that relies on exploitation.

The current “jobs crisis” is in fact a slow-burning social crisis. This period of acute pain is not an aberration, it is the culmination of a process with short roots in the erosion of middle-class stability in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, longer roots in the development of the Cold War university, and thin, hairline root tendrils that curl back into the development of the university system in eighteenth-century North America. In the shorter term, as higher education in the United States became a commodity, social and communal ties became less important than economic ties. As the walls between academia and the general public became higher than ever, curiosity and imagination lost ground to efficiency and productivity as important social values. In the very long term, the guild of academia, no less than the university system that supports it, arose from notions of social order based on classist, racist, and sexist assumptions. Its proponents made virtues of self-abnegation, exclusivity, and ideological homogeneity.<sup>1</sup>

These historical antecedents are reflected in how we talk about the “jobs crisis.” The remedies that the historical discipline offers to graduate students collapse the entire process of obtaining a PhD into its outcome: a doctoral degree. Pushes for “career diversity” (or its more patronizing cousin, “alt-ac careers”) and suspending—or seriously curtailing—graduate admissions exist on the same spectrum of half-measures, reinforcing the elitism of an earlier era while pretending to alleviate the problem. We remain stuck in the privatized mindset that led us to this crisis, one in which scholarship is an elite, marketable commodity, rather than a universal resource.

The structure of academia reveals how completely we accept the premise that the pursuit of truth is a luxury, reserved for the select few, or only justifiable in its perceived utility to some indefinite, amorphous “broader good” (but not for the broader public). Academic writing devolves into insider baseball, both financially and stylistically walled off from non-academics. Recent efforts to bolster public history programs, filtered through this system, still suggest that public-facing historical work is an “extra” skill that graduate students must acquire, rather than the very soul of our work. We forget that one of our most solemn duties as knowledge-seekers is sharing that knowledge with the rest of humanity as much as with our peers.

Evidence abounds that academia’s institutional culture, insular in the extreme, in fact retrenches regressive norms instead of overturning them. Despite popular anxieties about liberal campus culture and many academics’

self-images as radical progressive voices, the scholarly community remains resistant to change. The scholarly life is notoriously inaccessible to promising students from the middle and working classes and is becoming ever more so as it offers fewer paths to basic financial solvency. Less than 10 percent of academics are Black; Black and brown scholars are often the only people of color in professional spaces and face not only the daily degradations of systemic racism, but outright resistance from their white colleagues in having even basic conversations about race and racism.<sup>2</sup> Sexism is so prevalent in the academy that it merits its own article. In a revealing snapshot, Princeton’s leadership agreed in October 2020 to a \$1.2 million dollar settlement after a federal investigation revealed the university was still consistently underpaying female professors.<sup>3</sup>

In April 2019, two of my colleagues made perhaps the best argument for rescuing academia.<sup>4</sup> They looked specifically at the discipline of history, but their conclusions would carry weight in any discipline currently in extremis. The jobs crisis, they argue, is more than a jobs crisis. It foreshadows a *knowledge* crisis. Without tenured scholars producing historical knowledge, history as we have come to understand it will erode, thinning with the passage of time into something insubstantial, something far less than

wisdom. They point accurately to what we often forget: the reason academia exists is not to provide jobs for eccentric intellectuals, but rather to enrich and grow the store of human wisdom.

Academia has always been an imperfect path to wisdom, one that ignores and silences many voices and many would-be seekers. A raft

of new tenure lines will not solve that problem. The scarcity mentality the academy cultivates is inescapable, always waiting around the corner. Individual scholars may shift out of the feral mistrust the system breeds in us, but without establishing a different paradigm—moving away from the old, broken process of academic apprenticeship and the tenure track—real change will remain elusive. Perhaps it is time to start imagining other routes to wisdom, other ways to cultivate and to spread knowledge—paths that do not exclude and exploit, but rather embrace and amplify. A system that chews people up and either spits them out, broken and disillusioned, or swallows them whole, leaving them broken in quieter, more insidious ways, is not a system worth saving wholesale.

Why, then, pursue a doctoral degree? The PhD process asks you to embark on an indefinite period of uncertainty, all while doing the hardest thinking you’ve done to that point in your life. It subjects you to the agony of continual scrutiny and frequent critique, not only of your intellectual output but of your personal choices, set against a background of existential and economic anxiety. It is like learning acrobatics without a safety net. It is humiliating. It is infuriating. It is unfair.

Yet it is also an opportunity to build invaluable capacities—not in the sense of “marketable skills,” but rather in the realm of “basic human decency.” The endless, agonizing documents you read in freezing archives can teach you the ability to absorb and process an enormous amount of information. Your towering list of reading for your comprehensive exams can hone your sense of the truth and your instincts for critical thinking. Learning to write clearly can force you to think clearly, and if you write very clearly, you may discover how to bring others along with you on your journey. The process can instill humility and a sense of solidarity with those who went before and those who will come after; it can engender empathy and altruism, since an understanding of what it is to be lonely, strapped for cash, and uncertain of the future can make

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you a kinder, more giving person in the years to come.

Individual grit is not the answer to systemic failure. Presently, obtaining a PhD means incurring deep costs, material and otherwise. In the days after I defended my dissertation, I tried to tabulate these costs, spending some indolent mornings indexing debt, lost opportunities, failed connections. All of my savings from before graduate school were gone. I'd lost weeks of my life to packing and unpacking, coordinating moves, searching for apartments. The innumerable daily compromises between budget and need had certainly shaved months off my life. Abandoned relationships, both romantic and platonic, lay strewn across my six years of graduate school. Yet it was worth it. I don't have a job, I've got no idea what comes next for me, and I still think it was worth it.

Sometime in the mid-2000s, I read a magazine article about the only place on earth that produced ethical foie gras.<sup>5</sup> Producing traditional foie gras requires brutally force-feeding geese, usually through a tube, until their fattened livers are a rich paste. The process is revoltingly cruel. Yet in southwest Spain, a man named Eduardo de Sousa took a different approach. Geese, de Sousa explained to the skeptical author of the article, would gorge themselves, given sufficient opportunity and freedom, without human coercion. The key to making exquisite foie gras without cruelty was to give the goose complete and utter freedom. De Sousa's farm resembled a sort of goosy paradise: luxurious beds of hay and grass, wide ranges and crystal ponds for waddling, a never-ending buffet of delicious and varied goose foods.

There were no fences on De Sousa's farm. The geese were blazingly free. The costs were steep. Some never returned after their winter migration, some fell victim to foxes and other predators. One winter, de Sousa lost nearly a quarter of his flock. Yet the birds who survived returned again and again, to their gluttonous, anserine heaven, where de Sousa greeted them as friends. De Sousa was sparing in his selection of geese whose livers would become that year's product. He was careful not to exploit the geese. The foie gras, the author reported, was transcendent.

The author returned to the United States, determined to replicate de Sousa's methods. Unable to find investors willing to sign onto a goose farm without fences, the author compromised. He built the fence as far from the geese as possible, on a farm much larger than was normal for the size of his flock. Hiding the fence did not work; his geese ate normally, and lived placidly, securely. Their livers were lean. De Sousa, over the phone, insisted that they could sense the presence of a fence. Freedom could not be faked. Excellence and security were antithetical.

Something of the means always seeps into the ends. If the end is knowledge and the pursuit of truth, academia has always been flawed means, a hidden fence. The part that we tend to rush over, the part of greatest insecurity, the process of getting one's PhD, happens to be a far more consistent means. The PhD process offers the necessary skills to exploit our unprecedented insecurity, which is also an unprecedented freedom: a sense of the truth, a deep humility, and an abiding empathy. These are critical capacities for building what comes next—in one's individual life, in academia, and in the world around us. If we hope to combat the cynicism that pervades our age, if we hope to right the wrongs that have produced this historical moment, we will need many people with these skills, working on many fronts.

Here, then, we are, a flock of geese without a fence. The dangers are real, we are not safe. But we do have freedom, a freedom that permits us to strive for more. To build something better. To forge new paths and to bring others along with us. To follow the wild, winding pull of our own hungry hearts.

Notes:

1. Robert Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, UK, 1988), 21–86.
2. Nidhi Subbaraman, "How #BlackInTheIvory put a spotlight on racism in academia," *Nature*, 11 Jun 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01741-7>; Tsedale M. Melaku and Angie Beeman, "Academia Isn't a Safe Haven for Conversations About Race and Racism," *Harvard Business Review*, 25 Jun 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/06/academia-isnt-a-safe-haven-for-conversations-about-race-and-racism>.
3. Concepción de León, "Princeton to Pay Nearly \$1.2 Million to Female Professors to Address Inequity," *The New York Times*, 13 Oct 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/us/princeton-female-professors-backpay-discrimination-lawsuit.html>.
4. Daniel Bessner and Michael Brenes, "A Moral Stain on the Profession," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 Apr 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-moral-stain-on-the-profession/>.
5. When I read the article prior to graduate school, I didn't note down any of the bibliographic information, callowness I've regretted many times over.

### Career Diversity in the 1970s: Ernest May's "Careers in Business"

Michael Franczak

The lede in the Harvard *Crimson* article was grim. "The educational analysts agree: the academic job market looks bleak now, and during the coming decade it will worsen considerably." Those in the "humanities disciplines" were particularly at risk. Aware of the awful employment conditions facing them, already anxious humanities PhDs-to-be were exploring "a wide variety of solutions to the academic job crunch, ranging from driving cabs to belatedly enrolling in law school."<sup>1</sup>

Whatever their path, the article made clear, no doctoral students could deny a simple fact: there were too few jobs for too many PhDs. As one Harvard faculty member put it, predicting the job crisis' impact on this generation of PhDs would be "like predicting the numbers of traffic fatalities on Labor Day weekend." You don't know what the numbers are going to be, but you know they're going to be high.<sup>2</sup> That article was published in 1977. Thirty years earlier, millions of American World War II veterans had returned home. Generous federal programs like the 1944 G.I. Bill subsidized (mostly white) Americans' capital accumulation in the form of low-interest loans, cheap housing, health care, and tuition and living expenses for higher education. (Because of racist state and local governments—by no means limited to the Jim Crow South—black veterans were largely unable to access these extraordinary, unprecedented benefits.)

From the perspective of U.S. universities, the only "jobs crisis" in the late 1940s and the 1950s was a shortage of qualified instructors. To fill the gap, graduate programs expanded across private and public universities, producing teacher-scholars (and sometimes just teachers) to meet the surge in demand for experts in everything from algebra to Aeschylus. But in the 1970s, the humanities PhD market crashed all of a sudden—or so it seemed—and possibly for good. "During the coming decade," the *Crimson* article lamented, "it is estimated that 2,500 new recipients of humanities doctorates will have to scramble for 900 academic posts each year."<sup>3</sup>

My point in highlighting this article is not to contextualize our own generation's misery. After all, our odds for the tenure track today are far *worse* than they were for the beleaguered class of '77. And I'd bet money that our CVs are much longer and more impressive.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I bring in the article to highlight its title: "Program to Ready PhDs for Careers in Business."

Careers in Business, or CIB, was a short-lived but

# VARIATIONS ON A THEME

SHAFR ANNUAL CONFERENCE

June 17-20, 2021

## VIRTUAL

Due to the global pandemic, the conference will be entirely online this year. SHAFR is excited to partner with Pheedloop, an online conference platform that has successfully transitioned programming for organizations such as the Western History Association. We hope that the online platform will allow more scholars to engage with the conference.



## THEMES

The program committee will organize the conference around themed sessions including borders, capitalism, decolonization, development, domestic politics, empire, environment, gender and sexuality, ideas, immigration, law, race, religion, rights, science and technology, security, strategy, and war and the military.

## EXHIBITS

SHAFR will continue to partner with university presses to host book exhibits. The virtual exhibit hall will offer chat and podcast features, plus new book promotion opportunities for members and participants. Contact [conference@shafr.org](mailto:conference@shafr.org) for more information.



## REGISTRATION

SHAFR will offer reduced registration rates for this year's conference. Registration information and the program will be available in April. <https://www.shafr.org/events/shafr-2021-annual-meeting>.

ambitious program that, as the *Crimson* put it, “attempt[ed] to teach graduate students basic entrepreneurial skills, such as business language and corporate strategy.” The program was conceived and led by the esteemed Harvard diplomatic historian Ernest May (then History Department chair) and Dorothy G. Harrison, a New York State Education Department official. Its funds came in the form of a \$205,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, with additional gifts from Prudential, Pfizer, Exxon, and General Motors (the Rockefeller Foundation matched all corporate gifts). As part of the program, blue chip behemoths like Time, AT&T, IBM, and CBS provided humanities PhDs with direct access to company interviewers, who would teach them corporate lingo and potentially hire them after the program.

In its first year, CIB staff sent out some 2,500 applications for the seven-week orientation program, mostly to department leaders and “people who read ads in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.” Interest was high, and CIB received five hundred complete applications from humanities PhD students.<sup>5</sup> Program officials then interviewed 116 distinguished candidates from 44 universities, representing 31 fields of study. In the end, forty-five to fifty were selected for admission. During the process, May and Harrison also completed a monograph titled *You Don’t Have to Teach!* which was based on their popular *Chronicle* article, “The Academic Job Crisis: The Problem and the Opportunity.”<sup>6</sup>

CIB’s full story has not been told, though perhaps it should be, especially given our own woeful jobs crisis. On the surface, the program was a success. As stated in the “Careers in Business Progress Report, May 1977–May 1978,” “the primary objective of the project was to demonstrate that the pool of Ph.D.’s and near Ph.D.’s in the Humanities and related social sciences contains a significant number of men and women with high aptitude for and interest in business careers. . . . [The] response to the project over the past 12 months has shown that there are a significant number of people in corporations and on campuses across the country who believe that the two sectors have much to gain by working together.”<sup>7</sup>

The majority of CIB attendees did in fact leave academia to give “business” a shot, both at and beyond the participating corporations. That is not all there is to learn from CIB, however. The extensive and remarkably candid follow-up interviews, conducted in 1979, suggest a darker conclusion.

Many students were never able or willing to complete the turn away from academia. An interviewee named Robert, to cite one example, committed the sin of having “purposely pursued academics when his dissertation was complete,” and “should not have been admitted to the program.” Reviewers were also harsh on Dean, who “received his Ph.D. at a time when the sky was the limit. There were plenty of jobs for everyone and Dean had every right to expect a grand future.” Now, “Dean’s pursuit of [an academic] career [rather than one in business] has brought great hardship on him and his family. . . . His attendance at CIB was a waste of money and a waste of space.”<sup>8</sup>

Even those who landed “careers in business” found those positions unglamorous, unfulfilling, or both. “It is not hard to see Sibyl’s dissatisfaction with her job,” began one review, which the author blamed on her “unrealistic expectations” and “age (over 35).” Rick was another “confusing case.” Despite his “continued success in the insurance industry,” Rick “has, by his own admission, a value conflict with business” and “would return to academia if given the opportunity.” The report concluded

with familiar circular logic: “It would have behooved Rick to have made more effort to find a job that coincided not only with his abilities, but also with his values.”<sup>9</sup> What did they suppose the purpose of his PhD was?

These are selections from the first half-dozen interviews in the collection. Reading on, one encounters even more depressing tales of professional regret, loss of identity, depression, alcoholism, despair, even paranoia and madness. Worse, the only thing on which interviewer and interviewee generally agree is that the latter’s predicament is no fault but his/her own. Again, CIB on poor Dean: “Maybe his [planned] return to academia can be interpreted as the one thing that employers fear about Ph.D.’s, that their true love is the university. When and if the job market is favorable, Dean is apt to leave business and return to teaching.”<sup>10</sup>

What does the CIB effort mean for our current jobs crisis? To begin with, the scale of CIB was multiples greater than the recent revitalization of alternative academic (“alt-ac”) programs. CIB’s largest benefactor was the U.S. government, which contributed nearly a quarter-million dollars for the seven-week effort. There is no such federal effort today. Instead, the “job” of helping PhDs find jobs is left either to well-meaning but misguided efforts by department leaders, who in most cases have zero experience in the private sector, or to the private sector itself, in the form of PhD “consultants” whose hourly rates rival those of a decent tax attorney.

A second point of contrast between CIB and today’s alt-ac is that CIB had demonstrable buy-in (figurative and literal) from American corporations. Again, this is not the case today. If you want real industry connections—that is, the people who hire or suggest hires—you will not find them in your department. There is another bit of irony in CIB’s tragic conclusion: today’s humanities PhDs cannot even get jobs they hate—or at least jobs that pay well and offer a future (i.e., a career). Whether for structural economic reasons or the bottom line, American corporations are not clamoring to employ more humanities PhDs. From Wall Street to Silicon Valley, America’s premier corporations and firms are far more likely to hire an undergrad history major from an elite school rather than one of that school’s history PhDs for the same entry-level job.

The biggest lesson we can take from CIB is also the most obvious. PhDs, especially in the humanities, want to be academics. The deep reservoir of adjunct or contingent faculty that elite and non-elite universities alike depend on for their courses is testament to this fact—as is the excellent scholarship so many adjuncts produce without department support. To pretend otherwise is disingenuous, and, as CIB shows, possibly dangerous, too.

#### Notes:

1. Jonathan D. Rattner, “Program to Ready Ph.D.s For Careers in Business,” *Harvard Crimson*, November 4, 1977, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1977/11/4/program-to-ready-phds-for-careers/>.
2. Rattner, “Program to Ready Ph.D.s.”
3. Rattner, “Program to Ready Ph.D.s.”
4. The productivity generational gap is not unique to academia. Since 1980, average productivity per worker in the United States has risen steadily. Average compensation (for the vast non-executive set) is another story.
5. “There were roughly an equal number of incomplete, late, or ineligible applications. The latter group contained a significant number of masters-only candidates and people with Ed.D.’s.” From “Careers in Business Progress Report, May 1977–May 1978,” HUG 4564.9 (Correspondence and Other Papers), Box 10, Folder: Careers in Planning—Reports (1 and 2), Ernest May

Papers, Harvard University.

6. "Careers in Business Progress Report, May 1977–May 1978," HUG 4564.9 (Correspondence and Other Papers), Box 10, Folder: Careers in Planning—Reports (1 and 2), Ernest May Papers, Harvard University.

7. "Careers in Business Progress Report."

8. Careers in Business Program, HUG 4564.10 (Correspondence and other papers), Box 3, Interview Reports and Analyses, 1979 (1 of 4).

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

## "Crisis? What Crisis?" A Personal View from Outside the Academy

Henry D. Fetter

"Crisis? What crisis?" was the headline emblazoned across the *Sun* when suntanned UK Prime Minister James Callaghan returned from the Caribbean to a strike-bound Britain during the Winter of Discontent of 1978–79. From my vantage point, that pretty much characterizes the reaction of the historical profession to a decades-long jobs crisis that suddenly struck half a century ago and is the subject of this special issue of *Passport*. What follows is a personal, unsystematic and anecdotal view of that crisis and my perception of the historical profession's response to it.

The January 2014 issue of *Perspectives on History*, the newsletter of the American Historical Association, includes a graph that depicts the precipitous collapse of the history job market in the early 1970s and its failure to recover to any significant extent thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

I was not surprised by what the graph showed. I entered the UC Berkeley doctoral program in history (Late Modern Europe) in the fall of 1972. At our orientation, the chairman of the department said that he knew many of us were "worried about the jobs crisis," but he tended to be an optimist, adding, "I also tend to have a job." He was right about the crisis. He was wrong about the optimism.

As it happened, I completed my MA and then left the department to enroll in law school. I was not alone among my graduate school cohort in leaving academia, both before and after receiving a doctorate. Law school was a popular escape route. One day I even encountered one of my undergraduate teachers in a law school corridor. The untenured assistant professor was changing careers.

Unlike most of my friends who left the profession, I retained the interests that led me to grad school in the first place, and to this day, I continue to scrutinize with care the footnotes of books I read and, as a Europeanist manqué, I even continue to cross my 7s. I have contributed to peer-reviewed journals and maintained memberships in the AHA and SHAFR, and I follow developments in academia.

What has surprised me is the very belated, and still grudgingly inadequate, recognition by the historical profession of a crisis that is now fifty years old. Why is this? Most likely because academic associations and organizations are almost entirely comprised of academics who do have jobs (like the UC Berkeley history department chairman I quoted earlier) and are not on the sharp end of the crisis. It may also be true that in the afterglow of the great expansion of academic employment opportunities in the 1960s, it took a while to face up to the new reality that the jobs crisis marked a secular decline and

not a temporary blip.

Then too, for a while at least there was an expectation that job opportunities would open up when the hires of the 1950s and 1960s retired—a promised land lying just over the hill. But then mandatory retirement was abolished. And as it happened, the crisis was not an equal opportunity destroyer. While the overall hiring market might have crashed, expanded employment opportunities opened up to scholars from previously underrepresented constituencies. Perhaps that overdue development alleviated concern about the more general and ongoing crisis.

As for the field in which members of SHAFR are engaged, there may be an additional reason for a delayed recognition of the "job market failure." As the jobs crisis hit, the entire field found itself being written off as an academic backwater that was merely "marking time," to quote Charles S. Maier's much-cited critique of the state of the field, circa 1980. By way of at least an implicit response,

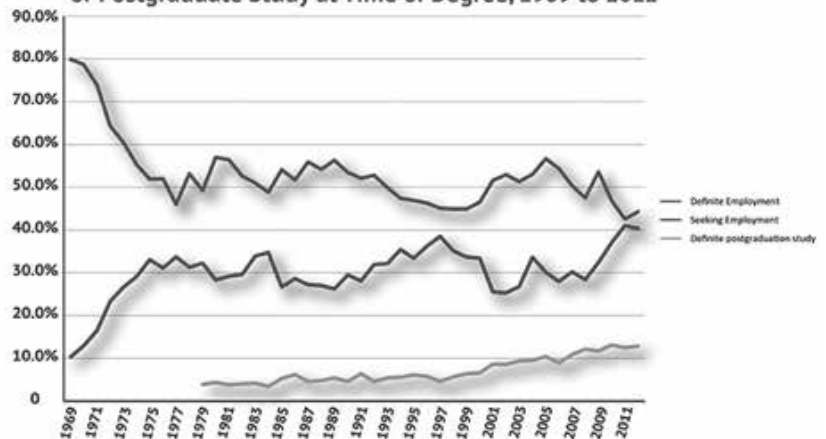
much time and energy were consumed thereafter in jettisoning traditional diplomatic history and fashioning a "new international history" that confronted subject matters and posed questions extending far beyond what one damn clerk wrote to another. A preoccupation with "rebooting" the field and assuring its continued relevance and scholarly bona fides, while necessary and justified in many ways, may also have shunted concern with anything else, including the jobs crisis, aside.

Not that the profession's myopia improved much once the crisis was finally acknowledged. Flawed vision was especially manifest in the apparent determination to keep the doors of graduate education in history open, despite the shortage of employment opportunities in academia, and to tout the value of a history PhD for non-academic pursuits. A 2013 AHA publication ("The Many Careers of History PhDs") optimistically contended that "students interested in careers beyond the professoriate should recognize the versatility of a history education and know that they, too, can leverage their PhD into a meaningful career outside the academy."<sup>2</sup>

But can anyone really believe that the holder of a doctorate in history will be as well positioned in the non-academic job market as their peers who have studied law or business—or library science, for that matter? Talk about opportunity cost—one can obtain both a JD and an MBA in less time than a PhD.

Nor should any PhD holders who are employed

Figure 3. New History PhDs Reporting Employment or Postgraduate Study at Time of Degree, 1969 to 2012



Source: Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2013. Previous years taken from tables created and updated by Robert Townsend. Percentages are of total number of graduates who answered the question on the survey, not total number of graduates.



outside academia be under the illusion that they can easily pursue the research and writing interests that drew them to the field in the first place. A PhD holder outside the academy will be out of the feedback loop of grants, lecture invitations, fellowships, offers to contribute to symposia or essay collections, opportunities to appear on panels at professional conferences, and other elements of academic life that fuel the careers of those who have landed academic jobs. Moreover, as their time away from the university increases, they will likely find it increasingly difficult to round up the letters of recommendation upon which all such opportunities depend.

In any event, it seems somewhat beside the point to worry—at long last—about the jobs crisis when the entire discipline is under siege. The jobs crisis is now only a subset of a crisis facing the entire discipline, and by no means the most acute. Enrollments in history courses have been falling at institutions both high and low, as is the number of students majoring in the subject. Writing a senior thesis was once a matter of course for students majoring in history (including those not intending to pursue graduate study) at “elite” colleges. That’s no longer the case. As movie mogul Sam Goldwyn did (or did not) say, if people don’t want to come, you can’t stop them. Perhaps it’s easier to worry about the jobs crisis and moot solutions (whether effective or not) than to face up to the challenges to the continued existence of the field itself. It’s more than about time that the jobs crisis was acknowledged. Ironically, now that it has been, it seems so last century.

#### Notes:

1. Allen Mikaelian, “The 2013 Jobs Report: Number of AHA Ads Dip, New Experiment Offers Expanded View,” *Perspectives on History*, January 2014, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2014/the-2013-jobs-report-number-of-aha-ads-dip-new-experiment-offers-expanded-view>.
2. L. Maren Wood and Robert B. Townsend, “The Many Careers of History PhDs: A Study of Job Outcomes, Spring 2013,” <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-resources/the-many-careers-of-history-phds>.

### I’m Still Standing. Better Than I Ever Did?

Chris Foss

Over the course of my career in academia, I haven’t faced the personal and professional challenges that Bernie Taupin and Elton John must have been reflecting upon when they made “I’m Still Standing” the title of John’s 1983 hit song. Nearly fifteen years after deciding to go to graduate school and pursue an advanced degree in history, I’m also still standing, but I’m wondering if I’m better off now than I would be if I had made a different career choice.

On the one hand, I made great friends and worked with cherished colleagues at the University of Colorado. I almost surely met my wife because I made the decision to move to Colorado. I wrote a book, and I got to teach some amazing classes (and continue to do so!). On the other hand, I still live with my parents at the age of thirty-five, and, thanks to the CARES Act, I made more money from a spring and summer of unemployment than I would have if I had worked during the same period of time as an adjunct faculty member. As the dust (hopefully) settles from a year of living with COVID-19, how do I come off the high of successes I *have* had in academia, and find new opportunities to help not only myself but others facing the academic jobs crisis? I hope that a review of my story encourages readers to offer some answers to these questions that will start to give our discipline a way forward.

When I decided as a college senior at Willamette

University to try to make academia a career, I was warned away. Jobs were scarce. Competition was fierce. The politics would make me crazy. And this was before the Great Recession of 2007–2009! Yet I was encouraged by all of my closest advisers in and out of the History Department, who told me that graduate school was something worth doing.

In my senior year I was editor-in-chief of the campus newspaper, so I was also thinking about pursuing a career in journalism. But that seemed like a dying field. Plus, I already knew what it was like to fight with the major power players on campus whenever a big and controversial news story broke, and, having come of age at about the time 9/11 struck, I was wary of having to cover wars and terrorism. I therefore bid adieu to the paper, wrote my senior thesis on the Argentine “dirty war” of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and spent the next couple of years working in my hometown of Portland, Oregon, saving money and applying to grad schools. Diplomatic history seemed like a natural fit for me because it would marry my interests in U.S. history and foreign affairs. I remain grateful to this day to Bob Schulzinger and Tom Zeiler for taking a chance on me and bringing me to CU in the fall of 2009.

My early years of graduate school were a struggle. Early on, I was diagnosed with a rare (but treatable) brain condition, and had trouble figuring out how to deal with it emotionally. I was also unused to the loneliness that accompanied the new workload of reading and paper-writing. Furthermore, in those early years I experienced anxiety around the professional aspects of graduate school—going to conferences, networking, giving papers, and (perhaps most of all) picking a cutting-edge dissertation topic. Yes, I went to SHAFR annually. Yes, SHAFRites are an extremely friendly bunch, and I met a number of interesting people. But my anxiety and occasional health issues kept me, for the most part, from “jumping in” and networking until I got a bit more seasoned. I didn’t give a paper at a major conference of any kind until my fifth SHAFR, in 2014.

That leads me to what I think may have been my biggest problem—choosing a dissertation topic. This is where the apparatus of graduate school may have failed me the most. Could advisers or fellow grad students have gotten me more on track? Perhaps, but I ultimately blame no one but myself. If I could travel back in time, I would tell my Younger Self to settle on a reasonable topic and work on it whenever I had the chance. Instead, I probably focused too much on my coursework, on trying to fit in better socially, and on figuring out how to better manage my health condition. It wasn’t until the fall of 2011—over two years into grad school—that I realized that my idea to study in Argentina wasn’t financially feasible or personally rewarding enough and that I needed to change course.

During the spring of 2012, I wrote a research paper on the rise of bookselling culture, but struggled to figure out how to make that work as a U.S. foreign relations topic. It wasn’t until the summer of 2012—three years into graduate school—that I finally determined that I would write about the intersection of U.S. foreign policy and the Pacific Northwest. Even with this late start, it seemed like things fell into place, at least for a few years. Setting my dissertation topic in Washington and Oregon allowed me to complete my journey through grad school affordably.

Modest award winnings, stays with friends and family, and an adjunct position back at Willamette during my final year of school helped push me across the finish line. During this time, I was incredibly happy. I met my wife and got married. I was an assistant editor of *Diplomatic History*. I attended the SHAFR Summer Institute in Columbus, Ohio, in 2015. I got the opportunity to travel more than I ever had before, and it seemed like my research and writing flowed at a remarkably easy pace.

Things slowed down for me, however, once I graduated

from CU in August 2016 and settled into year after year of adjunct gigs. One problem I quickly discovered was that there were not very many tenure-track jobs that fit my research interests. Again, if Older Self could go back in time and meet with Younger Self, the former would have encouraged the latter to be more serious about taking the market into consideration. At the same time, I also knew that I did not want to move to a job in an undesirable place, uprooting my family for my needs alone.

But it looked like I was going to do just that until, a few months into my job search, my wife was offered her dream job as a full-time pediatric physical therapist, a rare opportunity for someone who was herself a few months out of grad school. Her job doesn't pay well enough to enable us both to live the so-called American dream, but it has unbeatable benefits, she loves the work, and we stay close to Portland so I can help my aging parents. How could I pull her, and us, away from that? As it became clear how good this job was, it seemed unlikely that we would want to leave the Portland area.

Even with my lack of luck on the job market, my work has carried on. I enjoyed my time as an adjunct at the University of Portland, and I especially enjoyed teaching at Willamette's Tokyo International University of America branch before it was forced to close when the pandemic hit. Within those varied institutional settings, I built a corpus of classes in a wide variety of U.S. history subfields. I used the extra time I would have lost as a full-time assistant professor to finish my book. I published a number of journal and encyclopedia articles, as well as book reviews. Though I haven't been able to attend SHAFR since 2016 because of a lack of funds and institutional support, I have taken advantage of conferences put on by regional groups like the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association and Oregon's and Washington State's historical societies. And, while I haven't felt like a true member of the faculty at any of my stops along the way, I have made good contacts, and people have been exceedingly friendly and willing to help me in every way they can. Doing all of this has helped me stay reasonably active in the historical profession.

I have no doubt that it's been worth it. I have a young family, a Rolodex full of friends and colleagues down for conversation and commiseration at the drop of a hat, and fond memories to look back on. I grew up, and, even though I eventually returned home, my years in Colorado and around the United States taught me how to be self-reliant, self-disciplined, and happy—in short, a well-rounded adult. I always knew that the odds of receiving a tenure-track job at the end of the rainbow were somewhat remote, but I made peace with that long ago, and I've mainly been able to enjoy the ride.

If I had chosen a more conventional career like many of my old college buddies did, I'm not sure I would have been able to have done the things I wanted to do, like get away from home for a time, visit most of the presidential libraries, travel to most of the states in the country, meet my favorite authors, and impress upon thousands of students the importance of history. If I hadn't moved to Colorado, I wouldn't have met my roommate of six years, David Varel, who became one of my best friends and has gone on to become a highly-accomplished historian of African American intellectuals. Most important, I wouldn't have met my remarkable wife and been able to share the best little boy ever with her.

With all that in mind, I am still left to wonder how I and those like me are going to carry ourselves forward for the

next half of our lives before (God willing) retirement. Even before the pandemic struck with full force, the news was getting worse for contingent scholars: diminishing tenure-track *and* adjunct opportunities and few public history or historical consulting jobs. I've weighed whether to go back to school and spend more money to get a teaching degree so I can teach high school or middle school social studies. Every time I think seriously about that path, an adjunct carrot seems to dangle itself to keep me going. So, what to do? I'd love to hear suggestions from you, fellow readers.

Beyond that, I'm back to time travel as the best option. But I wouldn't go back and tell Younger Self not to take the path I ended up following; rather, I'd have him come up with a serious Plan B, and maybe even a Plan C. I've devoted the last fifteen years of my life almost wholly to making myself marketable for a tenure-track job as a history professor. I can't reset for a completely different career. Archives want trained archivists; museums want Museum Studies grads; architectural firms want trained architects or archaeologists. The career diversity program at the American Historical Association thus has its work cut out for it. In recent years, even as the "alt-ac" track has become trendy, I've found that, like Lyndon B. Johnson and Vietnam or Michael Corleone and the mob, I may have gotten myself too far in to get back out.

### Getting Out and Fighting On: How to Confront the Jobs Crisis

Zeb Larson

It's strange to be writing about the academic jobs' crisis from the outside; stranger still to be doing it in *Passport*, where I was an assistant editor for a few years. In December of 2019, I decided that after several years of applying to academic and "alt-ac" positions with nothing to show for it, I was done. So I enrolled in a coding boot camp. I'm a software developer now, writing for fun and working on my book, but firmly "out" and glad to be. I pat myself on the back regularly for this decision, though I don't deserve much credit for it: I couldn't have guessed that COVID was going to come along and wreck what little was unbroken in the humanities and higher education.

The American Historical Association likely won't have its 2020–21 jobs report out until early 2022, though given how little there is to study, maybe they'll just knock it out over a weekend. Based on the number of job postings historically seen on H-Net and elsewhere, it's going to have people pining for how "good" things were back in 2016. If you're rolling your eyes, you should be: things were terrible in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. Cutting a piddling number in half leaves you with a smaller piddling number, but that's where we are. The damage being inflicted by COVID isn't an anomaly or a "bad year"—it's creating a new reality, and we can probably look forward to more of nothing in 2022.

The pandemic is accelerating forces that were in play long before 2020–21, and these forces will continue to wreak havoc on academe even after vaccines are in wide distribution. State higher-ed budgets are going to be cut, undoing any of the gains made since 2008 for public universities. There were fewer young people applying to college even before COVID: in 2019, there were two million fewer postsecondary enrollments than there were in 2011.<sup>1</sup> University endowments will shrink for both public and private schools. Barring a miracle of support from gridlocked Washington, DC, federal fiscal relief will be

insufficient to offset this crisis.

As we've seen through most of 2020, administrators will use this current crisis to eliminate faculty. In fact, the cuts that occurred at the University of Akron, or more recently at the University of Vermont, were already in the works for budgetary reasons.<sup>2</sup> Cuts are being supported at a political level as well. As an example, Kansas has announced that layoffs due to financial exigency will proceed at state universities through December 2022: this means that the tenured professoriate is at risk.<sup>3</sup>

Talking about "recovery" or "going back to normal" is a special kind of nonsense—one that's even worse than the fallacious comparisons to how bad the job market was in the 1970s and 1980s. One has to ask, recovery to what? To 2017, when the decline bottomed out somewhat? Even a return to this pathetic "normal" isn't going to happen, and for that matter, it shouldn't. The old status quo worked for only a few people and did little but mask a deeply unstable and exploitative system.

I offer four suggestions to SHAFR and to other historical societies on what they ought to do going forward if they want to support historians and ensure that history is still written. Truth be told, this is what they should have been doing well before the arrival of COVID, and having waited so long will likely make the transformation that much more painful. Nothing can be done about that now, and the shocks caused by COVID might finally give people a reason to fight for this profession.

**1. Academia needs to fight for its survival.** The tenured professoriate has been long on thoughts and prayers and short on action when it comes to the plight of contingent faculty. Up until now, many tenured faculty have benefited from the job crisis. They haven't had to teach classes they dislike: they pass them over to adjuncts, knowing full well they can take them back if they need to. Hiring and grant committees always get their pick of overqualified candidates. The lucky tenured few still receive a fair amount of respect and prestige.

No tenured faculty are safe from financial retrenchment, on the other hand. *Force majeure* clauses can remove just about anybody from their job, tenured or no, and that's led to a lot of sudden concern about the state of the field. But just sounding the alarm isn't going to do the trick: academics need to internalize and promote genuine solidarity with contingent faculty. Unionization can no longer be an abstract goal. But effective unionization also means leveling the status between faculty members somewhat: it's hard to engender solidarity between heavily exploited adjuncts and professors with incredible job security.

Academics also need to become more aware of the political dimensions of this problem. It's easy (and fair) to complain about university administrators, but funding decisions are ultimately made at the state level. Conservative groups like the National Association of Scholars (NAS) are already making a clear case for what they want. In a report from April of 2020, for example, the NAS offered several proposals to guide a bailout of higher education, including "intellectual freedom charters" to prohibit safe spaces; the restriction of hiring practices aimed at fostering social diversity; and a declaration that prohibits comments on "issues such as climate change, electoral politics, foreign policy, federal or state diversity programs, immigration policy, or marriage policy." COVID and the economic fallout that's coming will make bargains like this increasingly attractive. Protecting academia means fighting for budget appropriations and participating in lobbying efforts, which we have mostly left to university presidents and administrators.

**2. Start looking beyond the academy to preserve scholarship.** Something I always liked about SHAFR is that

it seemed like a big-tent professional society, welcoming people from think-tanks and government in addition to universities. SHAFR must lean even more heavily into that identity. Furthermore, adjuncts must become part of society governance. It is problematic that contingent faculty are so poorly represented in SHAFR and other professional organizations, especially when they make up the majority of faculty.

SHAFR must also orient itself to dealing with the concerns of people like myself, who gave up on tenure-track jobs but would like to remain members of the historians' guild. I have a dissertation I'm working to publish, I have article ideas and drafts, and I stay in regular contact with scholars in the field. It might be difficult for me to keep up that output as time goes on—which would also have been true if I'd remained an adjunct—but it will be much easier and more rewarding if I still feel like I belong at SHAFR. Moreover, the field itself will benefit from the scholarship of people like me.

Scholarly societies need to strengthen and create new links with scholars working outside of academia. The stigma needs to be taken off part-time historians, who will no doubt form an increasingly large subset of the field. Even if we could somehow restore funding to higher ed, it's unlikely we'll be able to give every history PhD a tenure-track job. At least two generations of historians have been lost to the job market; the question is whether we can find a way for those who left the university to stay involved in the discipline.

**3. Rethink how we amplify and develop scholarship.** It's absurd that it took the pandemic to force conferences online. People who couldn't travel, people who didn't have money or institutional support, people with chronic illnesses, and people who just had a conflict were told time and again that they couldn't present their work remotely. But suddenly, we can present online. And despite the hypocrisy, I don't think we should reverse this decision. Yes, it's fun to see friends and colleagues in person, and the social bonds formed in real-life discussions are stronger than those formed online. Nevertheless, forcing everyone to gather in one place at one specific time benefits the resourced at the expense of the poor. Ensuring that people have the opportunity to present online is a meaningful step that SHAFR can take to support contingent and other scholars.

There's been another silver lining to the pandemic: people sharing research materials online. Archives will be closed for a while longer, but even when they reopen, there will be a lot of people who simply won't be able to travel to them. Research is expensive, resources are scarce, and a lot of people's scholarship will grind to a halt if they can't look at primary sources. The kinds of sharing networks that emerged during COVID could help the situation and should not be abandoned once we "return to normal." If anything, such efforts should be expanded.

We also need to be more intentional about the kinds of research we amplify and support. A lot of people's scholarship is going to end with a dissertation. Why not, therefore, review dissertations in forums like *Diplomatic History*, *Passport*, or *H-Diplo*? Collaborative work on multinational research projects should also be encouraged, as it's not practical or ethical to expect that single-author projects remain the standard when so few authors have the resources to pursue multi-archival scholarship. The standard going forward should be that SHAFR, and academia more broadly, functions less like a club and more like a community.

**4. Decide what we want the changes in graduate education to look like.** I've been afraid for a while about what the inevitable "reforms" to graduate education might look like—in particular, cuts that will leave a handful of Ivy League

schools and a couple of state and private institutions with grad programs. Such a system will overwhelmingly favor white, upper-middle-class men. Scholarship will border on the inbred if it just comes out of a few institutions.

So, what should the future of graduate education look like? There's an argument to be made that departments that don't successfully place large numbers of graduate students in tenure-track jobs should no longer have PhD programs. Nonetheless, eliminating programs or dramatically slashing admissions is an ugly solution in a world where many history courses are still being taught. In some ways, it confirms a conservative critique of this profession, that the study of history is not worthwhile except as a hobby for the well-off. With institutions like the NAS pushing for schools to focus on vocational training, the humanities will increasingly be pushed aside. History will become a pastime of the leisured class.

This leads us to the subject of "alt-ac" careers. While I dislike this term—it's nonspecific and implicitly demeans non-academic careers—it's the one we're stuck with. Alt-ac has garnered a lot of attention, though in terms of practical support, not much has actually been done to encourage it. Instead, we've been handed tokens: committees have been formed, workshops have been attended, and practice interviews have been given. But beyond that, there have been few genuine links established between graduate programs in history and extra-university institutions. This is problematic, because a PhD by itself is not a strong qualification for non-academic jobs. Furthermore, new skills cannot be meaningfully learned or taught in the course of a weekend or day-long workshop. If I started a month-long class that claimed to teach students how to become history professors, #academictwitter would put a bounty on my head. But that's how many schools and professional societies have approached alt-ac.

If we're going to take alt-ac seriously—and there are reasons we should, given the long-term problems we're facing—we need to embrace curricular changes. The best and most productive thing to do is to teach hard skills that can be used by both scholars and those forced into different careers. If we want to talk about sending people into instructional design, that means an actual understanding of design pedagogies and theories of learning. If you want to talk about writing or editing, that means actually offering coursework on developmental editing. A PhD by itself is not a qualification for editing.

Offering that kind of coursework means encouraging PhD candidates to write for non-academic venues. Journal articles and dissertation chapters are painfully irrelevant to hiring entities when you leave academia. There's no reason, either, that courses on programming and coding can't be wedded to scholarship. An SQL database properly managed is useful for academic research, and programming languages like Python open up new paths of data analytics. (I spent much of graduate school grumbling that I needed to learn how to build a scraper, and I'm currently using what I know to build a digital archive for oral histories).

Adding new courses also means fostering honest conversations about finding work outside graduate school. Difficult though it may be to accept, most employers don't regard graduate school as a useful work history, and work history counts for a great deal in publishing, in education, in journalism, and in general throughout the private sector.

The other choice is to do what the professoriate has been doing for a long time now, which is basically nothing. Offering faint sympathy or banal platitudes like "good work gets a job" could be interpreted as advancing what some professors might feel is an agreeable vision of what the profession could look like: a shrinking, gated community where the residents pat themselves on the back for being where they are but occasionally miss having somebody to talk to. Perhaps now that universities themselves are in

genuine peril and the polite fiction that tenure is ironclad is dying, people will make a different choice.

Notes:

1. Michael Nietzel, "College Enrollment Declines Again. It's Down More Than Two Million Students in this Decade," *Forbes*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2019/12/16/college-enrollment-declines-again-its-down-more-than-two-million-students-in-this-decade/?sh=30f99d03d959>.
2. The University of Akron president referred to the need for cuts as a \$50 million problem the administration had to solve suddenly instead of slowly. Reporting from *Inside Higher Ed* agrees that the Vermont cuts were planned previously. Lilah Burke, "Arbitrator Sides with U. of Akron on Faculty Layoffs," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/09/21/arbitrator-sides-u-akron-faculty-layoffs>; Colleen Flaherty, "Not-So Fait Accompli," *Inside Higher Ed*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/12/07/vermont-faculty-members-pledge-fight-planned-cuts-liberal-arts>.
3. Colleen Flaherty, "Suspending the Rules for Faculty Layoffs," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/01/22/firing-professors-kansas-just-got-lot-easier>.

### A Conversation about the Jobs Crisis

*In autumn 2020, a small group of SHAFRites chatted remotely about the jobs crisis. The four participants work at different kinds of institutions and have had different experiences in higher education, but they share common concerns about the future of the profession.*

**Ryan Irwin:** Shall we start with introductions?

**Stuart Schrader:** Sure. I received my PhD in American Studies from New York University in 2015, and I'm currently at Johns Hopkins University on a contingent contract. Technically, I'm in the sociology department, but I teach interdisciplinary courses listed in Africana Studies and International Studies. And then also sociology and political science. My students always read historical analyses and wrestle with primary sources.

**Judy Tzu-Chun Wu:** I am a professor of Asian American studies at the University of California, Irvine. I also direct the UCI Humanities Center, which is a really wonderful opportunity to foster collective intellectual engagement. I received my PhD way, way back in the last century, in 1998, and I taught for a long period of time at Ohio State. I've been at UCI for just over five years.

**Julia Irwin:** I'm an associate professor of history at the University of South Florida. I got my PhD from Yale in 2009 and then came here to USF in 2010 after a yearlong stint as a visiting assistant professor. I teach classes on the U.S. in the world, and my research focuses on U.S. foreign aid and international humanitarianism in the twentieth century.

**Ryan Irwin:** I'm an associate professor at the University at Albany, SUNY. I got my PhD at Ohio State and took a fellowship at Yale that turned into my first academic job as the Associate Director of International Security Studies. That position got me through the post-2008 downturn and taught me how to use my dissertation to do weird things like raise money. I came to Albany in 2013, and I've been teaching here since then.

So, how do you all define the jobs crisis? We work at different kinds of institutions and we've had different experiences in our careers so far. Do you think the jobs crisis is baked into our profession—something we all experience when we're on the market—or is it something that has

changed over time and gotten worse in recent years?

**Stuart Schrader:** Being on the job market is a burden that is at times overwhelming and all-consuming. I joke that I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. It's not a market, right? I think a market would imply that there's some kind of choice, but there is very little choice; we're just kind of stuck going where it leads us. Honestly, it feels sometimes more like a lottery, although even that metaphor doesn't exactly work because the job market is not totally random. There are certain types of hidden criteria that help people succeed.

It's very demoralizing. At the same time, when you do it for a while, you get used to it in a weird way. It's just, "Okay, fall is coming. It's time to apply for jobs." Then around Christmas or New Year's, you know you'll be in a state of deep depression. Or maybe you'll get your hopes up a little bit and then they'll be crushed.

For me, there's a before-and-after in my sense of self. I feel like I meet grad students now who are so happy-go-lucky, or maybe even a little cocky, before they apply for jobs. Then they go on the market and come out the other side, and their demeanor has totally changed. It's quite sad and kind of tragic.

**Ryan Irwin:** Judy, do you think the situation has gotten worse since the 1990s? Is Stuart describing something that's been "normal" for a long time, or have things genuinely gotten harder in the period you've been in the profession?

**Judy Wu:** I think it's become more difficult to land a tenure-track academic position. I was just looking at some statistics from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and they're estimating that 337,000 people have lost their jobs in higher education since March 2020. That's not history-specific, but that's a really steep decline. The academic market has changed dramatically since I began looking for my first job. I noticed, when I was at Ohio State, people were coming into the department with CVs that made them appear as if they were tenured faculty already. They had a book out, they had taught in multiple places, they were already thinking about a second book. By the time they got a job—if they got a job—they were incredibly accomplished. In fact, I've noticed that the expectations for graduate students and postdocs escalate every year. Also, the people who tend to be contingent faculty tend to be marginalized in many ways. They might be women or people of color. Their economic marginalization is compounded by other forms of exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

I will say, as the director UCI's Humanities Center, that we try to support the research initiatives of our faculty and students, and we're also trying to think about how to professionalize people in multiple ways. For those who are thinking about pursuing a career as a tenure-track faculty member, we're trying to figure out ways to support their writing and publishing and get them prepared for the job market. But we're also trying to cultivate different skills that come out of their love for the subject they study. One example of this is that we're sponsoring summer internships with different local and national cultural and educational institutions. Participants might work with the *Los Angeles Review of Books* over the summer or they might work for a museum. We are now trying to make connections with the Smithsonian. These kinds of positions help students use their intellectual skills in diverse settings, develop professional contacts, and think about the various ways in which they might share the passion of their intellectual love.

**Julia Irwin:** Yes, the situation has gotten exponentially worse. I was on the market for two years, and I applied to somewhere between fifty and seventy-five jobs and

fellowships in each of those years. In my second year applying, I got two offers for tenure-track jobs. At the time, that seemed pretty difficult. Now, I recognize that it's nothing by comparison. These days, I know people who have been on the market for five years, who have applied to over five hundred jobs. And it's not just anecdotal—one only needs to study the statistics in the AHA job market reports to appreciate the dire state of the market.

Regrettably, I think it could—and likely will—get even worse. Just look at the cuts, the hiring freezes, and the declining university budgets right now. At my university, there is talk of closing programs and shutting down entire units. This is also happening in a lot of other places, and I fear it is likely to accelerate, especially if the pandemic continues well into 2021. It's all pretty dismal.

**Ryan Irwin:** Yeah, I share your fears. My university is also struggling with a hiring freeze and an apocalyptic budget. In the past decade, my department has tried to collaborate with other units on campus to hire people who can teach across disciplines, and we've adjusted our hiring priorities every time the president's office announces a new initiative. We've managed to hire about ten people, which is great, but I don't think any of those lines have been straightforward replacements for retiring faculty.

At SUNY, undergraduate enrollment often feels entwined with hiring. The reason we've had to fight so hard for the opportunity to hire is because our majors declined dramatically after the 2008 recession. Although our classes still fill, fewer students want to major in history, so the department is constantly being told, "If you want lines, get majors." We've made adjustments—rebranding classes, assigning new kinds of projects, clarifying career pathways—but the result has been minors, double majors, and skeptical administrators. We're pushing against a powerful headwind.

If we all agree that the jobs crisis is getting worse, do you think there's a straightforward explanation?

**Julia Irwin:** Our majors have declined too. I think we've probably lost half our majors since the 2008 recession. However, the numbers stabilized a few years ago. And in fact, I think they've actually gone up a little bit, in part because of changes we've made to our curriculum. So, I don't see a straightforward connection at my institution. Our hiring situation definitely hasn't been as good as yours, Ryan. We've hired four tenure-track people in the time I've been at USF, two of whom are no longer here. But we've lost far more than that—roughly ten tenure-track people in ten years, most of whom haven't been replaced. Our classes fill well, yet we still can't hire. So, there doesn't seem to be a clear relationship between hiring and enrollment.

**Judy Wu:** At least three things are happening, though I'm sure there are more. One explanation for why things are getting worse is the systematic defunding of higher education. Three of the four of us work in public institutions, and the percentage of funding that our state governments provide has gone down, which has led to a greater reliance on grants as well as tuition from out of state, particularly from international students. The humanities do not bring big grants like the STEM fields. Similarly, there's been a push for new economic partnerships outside the academy in fields like engineering. Again, the humanities is not in a position to take advantage of these types of partnerships.

Another thing that's happening is that the value the humanities bring to college education has become less obvious, especially for students who are the first members of their families to get a college degree. Even students whose parents went to college have new anxieties about their increasingly precarious middle-class status. So, I think it makes sense that our classes are full, because

we teach subjects that interest a lot of people. However, the perceived cash value of some majors is more obvious than that of others, and that cash value has grown more important in the past decade.

There is also a third thing, which is the denigration of higher education in the United States. This has happened in a broad sense, but the Trump administration has been extremely hostile toward experts or so-called “liberals” working in the academy. I think all three things have changed how people approach university education, which has affected how education is funded and how faculty are hired.

These things are not easy to address. But the humanities play such an incredibly important role in our society. It is our job to help people make sense of our world. For example, why has COVID-19 affected some communities so disproportionately? How do we make sense of the racial violence that’s happening? We need the humanities for intellectual guidance, and universities must begin to see beyond cold fiscal logic when they set priorities. That’s what leadership is supposed to be about.

**Ryan Irwin:** When you walk into the Albany airport, there’s an enormous banner announcing that our university has created more new programs than any university in the United States. Maybe that’s true; I have no idea. But every time I look at that banner I start gritting my teeth and muttering about the vagaries of neoliberalism. One group of administrators is telling us we need more majors to get more tenure-track faculty lines, while another group is creating, and celebrating, new programs as proof that the university is racing into the future.

You can’t really “win” in that environment; there are a finite number of students on campus. The tragedy is that many of these new programs recycle existing faculty and resources, so the arrangement feels very market-driven, and if you complain too loudly, you invite uncomfortable questions about your personal version of that banner: How many Twitter followers do you have? How many people have downloaded your work? Who are you influencing? Sometimes, it feels like we’re caught in a system and pushing its excesses onto job candidates.

Is there a solution? Do you think things would get better if schools produced fewer PhDs?

**Stuart Schrader:** That’s a hard question. On the one hand, “yes” might seem like the rational answer. The market is saturated. Therefore, producing fewer PhDs makes sense. But on the other hand, I feel like that mindset submits to this unnecessary austerity, because if state budgets were putting more money into universities—or even just returning to the levels of twenty years ago—the landscape around hiring might look completely different.

I think the fundamental question is whether we design our programs to accommodate the crisis in order to muddle through in this environment, or do we rather think about more collective solutions to refuse the crisis? Obviously, that’s a really hard thing to do, but this jobs crisis is so big, I don’t see any alternative to thinking and acting collectively.

From the perspective of declining majors, sure, it may seem there are no fulfilling and high-paying employment opportunities for undergraduates who study history, and it might feel smarter to major in something that appears to lead to guaranteed employment, like computer programming. I get that, though I believe it is a mistake. But we also have to be mindful of the gap that would emerge if the students who studied history did so only because they have the financial ability not to worry about whether they’re going to get a great job after graduation. That would be a huge tragedy, and I don’t think we should resign ourselves to a looming bifurcation in which the humanities or social sciences become luxury goods available only to students

who can afford to be “impractical” in their choice of major. I’m not convinced that majoring in history is less practical than computer programming over the long term.

**Julia Irwin:** I think Stuart makes really important points. I agree that accepting the logic of scarcity and austerity will have unintended side effects. However, this isn’t to say that we should ignore the realities. At USF, we try to be very upfront with anyone applying to doctoral programs and to talk with PhD students about the market’s realities. That’s the only ethical and responsible thing to do. We need to be very blunt about the job situation nationally and students’ competitiveness for tenure-track faculty positions.

That being said, we have a lot of students who, for various reasons, want to study and learn history. Some of them are retired. Some of them are working parttime as they earn their PhDs. They *want* to study history. I don’t think they should be refused simply because they didn’t go to an elite undergraduate school.

When we talk about the PhD, we need to recognize that there are different ways to be successful. A number of our graduates have gotten really good non-tenure-track jobs. For example, one of the students I advised is now teaching AP and dual-enrollment history courses in a local high school, which is exactly the position he wanted. Another of my students got a job as a curator at a local museum. In addition to these, several recent graduates from our program have gotten full-time jobs in regional community colleges and universities.

The problem with shutting down regional graduate programs like the one at USF is that it would lead to a situation where only a very small and select group of students get to study the past at the graduate level. That seems very damaging to our profession. Going back to what Stuart said, what is the point of a public university and a public education if not to educate students and serve students in the region? I think giving up on that right now would be problematic in many ways.

**Judy Wu:** I guess I would share three things. One, I think we should be open to redefining the purpose of the PhD. Because there are various paths that a person might pursue that are fulfilling intellectually yet may not necessarily correlate with a tenure-track position. I agree with Julia about this.

Two, I think we should recognize the way history and humanities intersect with other forms of inquiry. For example, we have a medical humanities program at UCI that asks, “How do you train doctors and nurses to be ethical if you don’t talk about the human experience of healthcare?” To take another example, this year I’m trying to promote the exploration of oceans. I’ve been in conversation with people in various fields about the environment, including scientists studying microorganisms and ocean pollution.

Three, we all need to learn how to explain the real-life impact of our work. It’s not enough to train students to be better critical thinkers; we need to show them how to make an impact in our society. During my time at Ohio State, I was engaged in a community research project that recorded the life experiences of Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated during World War II and relocated to Ohio. Ryan, you engaged in this project as a student. I’m now located in Orange County, which has the third largest population of Asian American and Pacific Islanders in the country. I’m using this methodology called PhotoVoice, which is a community participatory action research methodology. We’re utilizing photography to capture worldviews, and we’re pairing those images with oral histories and storytelling. The objective is to create something artistic and well researched, but also something that will help advocate for social change and that might change minds, behaviors, and policies.

Those are the things I'm really invested in, and I know I'm in a very privileged position as a professor and as the director of this center, but I think that these types of projects resonate with students who are experiencing a lot of anxiety and stress about the job market. We all crave a sense of agency, something that we can do with our intellectual labor that is meaningful.

**Ryan Irwin:** For most PhD programs, the "outcome" is the dissertation, which is a splendid exercise in so far as it teaches people how to squeeze complexity from apparently straightforward things and turn that complexity into something stylish, accessible, and, hopefully, important. As an intellectual act, nothing else compares. But dissertations can also be lonely, expensive, and time-consuming—the opposite of Judy's collaborative community project—and it's occasionally hard to explain what they prepare you for. Is this a problem?

**Judy Wu:** Stuart, you just published your first book with University of California Press. I'm on the editorial board for that press and one of its acquisition editors came to UCI recently to talk about how to translate the dissertation into a first book. In addition to talking about the importance of considering the audience, the speaker also mentioned that many editors are now looking for authors with platforms. Editors want authors who have a social media presence through Twitter, Instagram, etc. That really enhances the author's ability to create a reading public. Even "traditional" markers of academic success are changing. We have to have the ability to communicate across multiple mediums.

**Stuart Schrader:** Yeah, I think one of the things that's vertiginous about all of this is that history is so present in our contemporary political and social discourse. President Trump, for instance, issued an executive order against a project of historical scholarship, the *New York Times'* "1619 Project."

Some of the contemporary visibility of historical scholarship is actually a function of the job market. So many people with PhDs are incredibly smart and talented and well equipped to do really interesting work. And they are doing that work in the public sphere with or without secure tenure-track employment. There's so much amazing scholarship happening. Some of it is online in new kinds of startup venues, but a lot of it is being featured in the old guard media that has not previously published historical pieces by people with PhDs. So, in a weird way, I feel like the argument about the importance of history isn't as hard to make as it used to be.

But at the same time, it's also true that the visibility of history and historical analysis is a function of the crisis that is facing many PhDs. A feeling of urgency is driving public scholarship. Further, historians and social scientists are becoming more present in intellectual debates outside our fields. At Johns Hopkins, where the campus is plagued with lots of divisions, interdisciplinary exchanges are growing a little bit. First, COVID's disparate impact has forced people to talk about racial inequality, which has crucial historical dimensions. Then the protests about policing exploded, and suddenly many public health, medical, and nursing students and faculty wanted to learn about history, or at least acknowledged its relevance. This work was already happening a bit, but there's been an uptick facilitated by the general turn to Zoom experienced across professions.

As Judy said, there needs to be an effort to meet the appetite for what we do, and we need to make sure we are well equipped to speak to our colleagues—whether they are in oceanography or the medical school—because that relationship might be a stopgap measure to prove our importance and relevance in a way that sustains the work we do. This is especially true for critical work.

I don't think we have a full understanding of the ways the jobs crisis is affecting the field and shaping scholarship. In some ways, it may be perversely positive, encouraging creativity within institutions and among individuals. But it also may be stunting intellectual production. Intellectual daredevilry and risk aversion are probably happening simultaneously.

In fact, we shouldn't so easily separate the jobs crisis from our scholarship. I think any historiographic essay—or argument about the direction a field is or is not taking—needs to acknowledge the unstable employment options facing so many junior scholars.

**Ryan Irwin:** Is there something you know now that you didn't know when you started graduate school? I'm thinking back to Stuart's comment about that happy-go-lucky person who hasn't yet experienced the soul-crushing vicissitudes of the market.

**Julia Irwin:** It's a really good question. I'm wary about giving advice, because I feel like any advice I give risks sounding paternalistic. I am not in school or on the market right now myself, so I don't know what students on the market are going through. At least, not on a personal, visceral level.

But with that caveat in mind, my advice would be to make sure you have your eyes wide open. Make sure you understand the situation and how the market has changed over the last decade or so. Read the reports about the job market before you apply for graduate school, and make sure that it is still something you want to do, knowing full well that there may not be—there likely won't be—a job at the other end of it, or at least the sort of tenure track job that many envision. Hope and optimism without clarity are bad things, though I certainly hoped I would be an exception when I was on the market. But it was easier to be an exception a decade ago, and easier to be lucky, which I definitely was.

I'm hesitant to say, "Don't try." We need good people in the academy, and I think simply saying "don't bother" does a disservice to many students who *do* have their eyes open and would be amazing professors. But you need to have your eyes open. Learn about the state of the profession before committing to it, and recognize that it is challenging to be an exception in a world where everything has gotten exponentially harder.

**Judy Wu:** When I graduated from college, I felt like I had no job skills. I couldn't even figure out how to present myself in a way that might make people want to employ me. In general, I think grad schools don't do a great job teaching people how to talk about their skills. Two books that have been recommended to me are Katina Rogers's *Putting the Humanities PhD to Work* and Bill Burnett and Dave Evans's *Designing Your Life*. The skills a PhD candidate develops by writing a dissertation can be translated in lots of unexpected work environments. For example, if you've written a dissertation, you already know how to manage a large project. There are things you take for granted that you've internalized through osmosis and hard work, but these skills are translatable to non-academic work environments.

Another thing I didn't appreciate until later is how much each field or department in graduate school can be siloed from others. As a graduate student, you become an expert in a particular topic or a set of fields that is often organized around methodology. But if you're able to secure a tenure-track position, you'll probably be the only person on your campus with that particular specialization. You'll find yourself talking to sociologists and political scientists. The other side of knowing what you're good at is knowing how to talk about your skills and research in relation to other areas of expertise.

Lastly, your audience is constantly changing, which I think is particularly important to recall if you're on the market. Developing the ability to see your work in a broader context and to talk with different constituencies and groups is something that is really valuable. That's what I'm trying to emphasize with my students.

**Ryan Irwin:** Ultimately, I'm like you, Julia. I often tell undergraduates to go for an MA before committing to the PhD. Somebody's got to do this job, so why not you? Just make sure you keep your eyes open. There are so many interesting exit ramps on the road between year one of graduate school and year one of a tenure-track job—or, more likely, year one of an adjunct professorship. It's condescending for someone in a tenured position to talk about those exit ramps, but I think it's courageous to take them when they make sense. There are lots of different ways to love history and be successful.

**Stuart Schrader:** You know, there's been such a profusion of professionalization advice about how to succeed on the job market that I think now there's a little bit of a backlash. What's the point of giving this knowing advice that pretends the key to succeeding is the perfect cover letter or CV? I feel reluctant to give people advice that promises to unlock the secret to their ultimate success on the academic job market, and I definitely agree about advising graduate students to think differently about what success looks like. But I also believe that we need to recognize how graduate programs socialize us into a certain model of success. You attend SHAFR meetings, you publish your journal articles, you write your dissertation, but all of these things just encourage a narrower and narrower definition of success.

We also need to reckon with the fact that it's not enough just to say, "Okay, we're going to hold some workshops where you think about other types of careers." Even as I'm organizing one of these workshops as part of my current position, I'm on the market myself, trying to tell grad students that they could do something else that might be more fulfilling and lead to greater employment security.

The one piece of advice I'd actually offer is for hiring committees, not job candidates. They must make their applications less onerous.

**Julia Irwin:** I agree, byzantine applications create such a burden for job candidates! I think hiring committees should only ask for a letter and a CV during the first round. That's it.

**Ryan Irwin:** Agreed.

Let's wrap up. First, thank you. I learned so much from this conversation. And thanks too to Daniel Bessner, Mike Brenes, and Andy Johns for putting together a special forum on this topic. Second, it's mid-October. A presidential election is looming here in the United States and COVID-19 is out of control. None of us know what the spring will bring, but the problems we've discussed today aren't going anywhere, obviously.

We've sidestepped grand solutions, so I won't offer a grand conclusion. My only hope is that we continue this conversation. Seeing this crisis—recognizing its existence and its effects on the profession—is so important, especially because solutions are elusive. Maybe one good thing to come from this bad year is that we have an opportunity to

revisit old assumptions and find new ways to collaborate on shared problems. Let's keep this discussion going.

Note:

1. Colleen Flaherty, "More Faculty Diversity, Not on Tenure Track," *Inside Higher Education*, August 22, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/08/22/study-finds-gains-faculty-diversity-not-tenure-track>. See also the statistics compiled by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), <https://www.aaup.org/issues/contingent-faculty-positions/resources-contingent-positions>.

### "Rethinking Tenure: Serve the Public, not the Profession"

*Michelle Paranzino*

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended higher education, wreaking havoc on the budgets of colleges and universities nationwide and exacerbating inequality by disproportionately affecting those who are least privileged. Though enrollments at most public and private four-year universities have remained relatively stable, enrollments at community colleges, which tend to serve lower-income and first-generation students, have been decimated.

More than half a million people who work in higher education have lost their jobs, with the layoffs overwhelmingly coming from staff and contingent faculty. In contrast, those at the top of the academic hierarchy—tenured professors and high-ranking administrators—have been comparatively safe from redundancy.<sup>1</sup> The present situation is grim, and yet the long-term consequences of the crisis have not even begun to be felt. Whether higher education as we know it will survive the pandemic is not yet clear, but one thing is certain: the roots of the jobs crisis in academia stretch much deeper than the devastation wrought by COVID-19.

Much of the criticism surrounding higher education correctly focuses on administrative bloat and the "business model" of universities, both of which have contributed to skyrocketing tuition rates and widened the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." However, not much direct criticism has been levied at the institution of tenure and the ways it has created a two-tier labor force, with profound effects on the state of the humanities in higher education and especially academic history. Perhaps this is because most academics believe they have a vested interest in the maintenance of tenure as an institution.<sup>2</sup> Those who enjoy tenure wish to continue benefiting from it, while contingent and non-tenure-track faculty scramble to research and publish in order to climb their way up the ladder to a tenure-track position.

And who can blame them? Adjunct faculty are crushed under the weight of burdensome teaching loads, sometimes without the benefit of teaching assistants even for very large survey courses. They do not enjoy job security, they do not receive benefits like paid vacation and health and dental insurance, and they frequently struggle to survive on salaries that amount to less than minimum wage. Non-tenure-track faculty now comprise over seventy percent of all instructional staff positions in U.S. higher ed.<sup>3</sup> And the state of contingent faculty at universities across the country is an absolute disgrace.

What distinguishes adjunct faculty members from their



tenured counterparts? Are they less educated, or otherwise less qualified to teach college courses? Not usually. Most non-tenure-track appointments are held by full-fledged PhDs, some of whom have already published articles in top-ranked peer-reviewed journals or even have monographs with university presses. Contingent faculty are among the most highly educated people in the country, and the fundamentally different treatment they are accorded by their institutions is unjustifiable and immoral. Yet this situation persists in part because of the glut of humanities and history PhDs on the academic job market, itself a result of the conflicting interests of graduate programs and graduate students.

Graduate programs at public research universities, like the one I attended at the University of Texas at Austin, tend to use graduate students as cheap labor to teach or assist with large undergraduate history survey courses. The “adjunctification” of higher ed means that the majority of such survey courses are now taught by contingent faculty, with a corresponding decline in student outcomes, not to mention the negative consequences for knowledge production and community engagement.<sup>4</sup> In theory, teaching assistantships help graduate students fund their education, while providing valuable experience that can boost their prospects on the academic job market. In reality, however, hundreds of applicants vie for a minuscule number of tenure-track job openings, which means that the vast majority of history PhDs will not ultimately secure such employment. And yet many graduate programs in history continue to operate on the basis of a false premise: that they are training graduate students to be professors.

The administrators of graduate degree programs in history have traditionally been reluctant to compile, crunch, and disseminate data about attrition rates in the program and job placement rates afterward. This information is thus typically not readily available to prospective graduate students who must make profoundly consequential life decisions while lacking knowledge of the potential opportunity costs involved. The sources of incomplete knowledge are many and varied—epistemic, institutional, historical, social, cultural—but in this case must be seen as the result of conscious decisions that the administrators of graduate degree programs make to preserve the priorities and prerogatives of the profession’s most elite members at the expense of its most vulnerable. In this sense, it is not merely a disservice to bright young people who could be making their mark on the world in any number of different and creative ways, but a moral lapse that undermines consent by intentionally withholding the information needed to make an informed decision about graduate school.

The elitist culture of history PhD programs, meanwhile, tends to encourage the production of scholarship that follows academic trends and fashions and to disincentivize policy-relevant research and public engagement. I will never forget my first graduate seminar at the University of Texas. It was not my first graduate seminar, as I had earned a terminal MA at the California State University at Northridge before moving to Texas. Having come from a working-class family, I was largely ignorant of the elitist culture of academia and had erroneously assumed that decisions about recruitment and funding were based on merit. I was quickly disabused of this notion. At an orientation for new graduate students in the history department, I discovered that many people in my cohort already knew each other, as they had attended a recruitment orientation on campus during the summer.

This was how I realized that the department hadn’t

considered me worthy of recruitment (or funding), despite the fact that I held a BA and an MA in history, had conducted archival research, had presented my research at several conferences, and even had an article in the pipeline for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Meanwhile, some of my peers, who didn’t even have undergraduate degrees in history, had been extended full-funding packages. I could only assume it was because they had attended Ivy League schools and I had not.

The professor opened the graduate seminar by asking why we study history. I pounced on the question, offering a utilitarian answer that I considered uncontroversial. We study the past, I contended, because we need to do so in order to make sense of the present. To my surprise, I was greeted by blank stares. Another student raised a hand and said, meaningfully, “We study history because we love to study history.” The other students around the table nodded vigorously and chimed in with agreement. Thus, my first and most powerful impressions of the PhD program were that elitism trumps merit and that there was a general disdain for the idea that our study of history should serve a useful public function.

This disconnect between the priorities of academic historians and the interests of the general public has contributed to steadily declining history enrollments, while the negative student outcomes correlated with the rise of contingent faculty have resulted in an appalling lack of historical consciousness among the American public. The skills that an education in history imparts are among those most sorely needed in the general populace today. The ability to identify authorial intentions and biases and to triangulate multiple and varying accounts and narratives is crucial to determining the accuracy and authenticity of information. Yet the rise of social media and the concurrent public discourse surrounding “fake news” (not a novel concept, as anyone familiar with the term “yellow journalism” is aware) suggest that too many Americans are fundamentally incapable of distinguishing between fact and interpretation, and even more alarmingly, are unable or unwilling to even agree upon what constitutes a “fact.”

This poverty of historical knowledge and deficit of critical thinking skills is currently on full display as politicians, pundits, and protestors across the ideological spectrum distort and manipulate history to legitimize their political agendas. Calling themselves “Western chauvinists,” the Proud Boys purport to be protecting Western civilization from what they perceive as the encroaching political and cultural power of women, immigrants, and people of color.<sup>5</sup> Their rhetoric rests on a fallacious interpretation of history in which white Europeans are responsible for all of the positive achievements of modernity.

Other nationalist groups and pro-Second Amendment organizations seek to borrow legitimacy from the Founding Fathers by proffering dubious interpretations of the American Revolution. The 1776 Report, commissioned by the Trump administration, is only the most recent example of the blatant politicization of history to serve a political agenda.<sup>6</sup> The incoming Biden administration has already vowed to rescind the commission via executive order, and while the move is certain to please historians, it is unlikely to quash the culture wars over the meaning and history of the United States.

Academic historians, meanwhile, seem unable to agree upon what constitutes “mainstream” history, as a recent debate within the scholarly community of historians of U.S. foreign relations demonstrates.<sup>7</sup> This debate risks eliding the crucial distinction between elite history and mainstream

This disconnect between the priorities of academic historians and the interests of the general public has contributed to steadily declining history enrollments, while the negative student outcomes correlated with the rise of contingent faculty have resulted in an appalling lack of historical consciousness among the American public.

history. Elite history appears in the pages of top-ranked academic journals and university presses and, because it is locked behind expensive pay walls, is typically out of the reach of the American lay public. Mainstream history, in contrast, is written precisely for that public and is made accessible for low list prices at commercial outlets.

Historians themselves make the critical choices about which audience to write for. The overwhelming majority of them choose to write for the scholars in their field and look snobbishly down their noses at those who decide to write for the public. (Those who make the latter choice are sometimes denigrated as “airport historians” because their books are sold at airport bookstores.) This is to a significant degree the product of the elitist culture surrounding tenure; typically, the only scholarship that “counts” is peer-reviewed and based substantially on archival research. The general public does not particularly care for abstract theoretical debate, post-modernist jargon, historiographical “interventions,” or esoteric archival findings. Yet this is exactly the type of scholarship that the priorities of tenure incentivize.

Most academic historians (myself included) have not been trained in how to write history as a compelling narrative story. We have been trained to find gaps in the existing literature, which tends to narrow the focus—and thus the appeal—of our work. Yet given that higher education is taxpayer-funded, academic historians have an obligation to serve the public.<sup>8</sup> This is why, at a minimum, the requirements for tenure should be refocused on public engagement rather than peer review. Public policy research and advocacy, community outreach, and teaching and writing for underserved audiences should be valued just as much if not more than peer-reviewed publications.

Tenure has contributed to an unjust and exploitative two-tier system of academic labor and has disincentivized academic historians from engaging with the American public, with damaging consequences for our nation’s collective understanding of and interest in history. Whether tenure even protects academic freedom—often seen as its *raison d’être*—is also up for debate. Recent examples like the firing of Garrett Felber from the history department at the University of Mississippi raise questions about the degree to which academic freedom protects professors from retaliation for unpopular or subversive political views, regardless of their position on or off the tenure track.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in an age of social media “scandals” manufactured and exploited by rightwing conservatives, it seems that in at least a few cases tenure has lost its ability to protect scholars from being dismissed for controversial opinions.<sup>10</sup>

Academic freedom must be disconnected from tenure, and all faculty members, regardless of status, should feel safe raising contentious subjects in their classrooms or in the public sphere. History is nothing if not controversial, and academic historians should not feel pressured by university administration to whitewash it. Meanwhile, tenure has too often served to protect those whose jobs should be stripped from them because of misconduct.<sup>11</sup> Abolishing tenure, or at least reforming it to center public engagement rather than service to the academic elite, could mitigate the injustices of the current system while bringing the incentives of the profession into line with the interests of the general public. It may sound paradoxical to some, but doing away with tenure could contribute to a brighter future for all historians.

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## History for Everyone: On *Contingent Magazine*

Marc Reyes

A long-form article about hunting dinosaurs in Central Africa. A short piece about the evolution of women’s wrestling gear. A field trip to a museum dedicated to sanitation and toilets. At first glance, these topics don’t sound like the obvious subjects for a history publication. But as one of the editors involved in selecting these articles for publication, I can assure you, we don’t do the obvious.

These three articles were published by *Contingent Magazine*, a history-focused publication geared towards everyone interested in history. Co-founders Erin Bartram, Bill Black and I, along with website developer Emily Esten, launched *Contingent* in 2019. From the start, the magazine operated on three principles: (1) history is for everyone; (2) every way of doing history is worthwhile; (3) historians should be paid for their work.

Whether your employment is directly tied to interpreting the past or you are merely interested in history, *Contingent* is for you. Our writers include graduate students, museum workers, adjunct instructors, and independent scholars. All are working off the tenure track and have published many forms of historical scholarship. Many are based in countries other than the United States.

This special issue of *Passport* is a great idea and provides a forum for a much-needed discussion about what SHAFR

can do to address the increasingly worsening academic jobs crisis. Pre-pandemic, the academic job market was already abysmal, with not enough positions available for qualified candidates. A lack of federal support and further state cutbacks will continue to degrade the employment opportunities of the next generation of historians. The historical profession never recovered from the 2007–2009 recession, and most scholars completing their degree programs and heading onto the job market will never find steady, secure, and satisfying employment as historians.

For my contribution to *Passport*, I'd like to tell you about *Contingent Magazine*, its ethos, and its success in publishing contingent scholars. My colleagues and I founded *Contingent* because we believed another model for publishing accessible historical scholarship, one based on payment in money, not exposure, was necessary. We don't believe that *Contingent* alone is the remedy for the jobs crisis, though it is playing a role in modeling what a better historical profession—one that values and financially compensates the scholarship of some of the most underappreciated scholars working today—might look like.

When we think of the academic contributions of contingent scholars, we tend to think mostly of the classes they teach (often for little pay and few if any benefits). But contingent scholars are also publishing articles, writing manuscripts, and collaborating on all types of analog and digital projects.<sup>1</sup> *Contingent* exists to showcase the hard work and impressive scholarship they do. Oftentimes, their work is stuck behind journal paywalls. Even worse, when scholars leave the academic job market for good, their scholarship ceases and the discipline loses their work forever. There had to be a place to preserve that work, a place that would compensate that scholar for turning that germ of an idea into a piece of historical analysis. That place is *Contingent Magazine*.

When I first got involved with what would become *Contingent Magazine*, it existed only as a Google Doc called "Untitled Project Brainstorm." As the project began to take shape, one of our earliest ideas was to offer something more than "hot takes" or writing primarily focused on political history and present-day issues.

While this work is important, we sensed that mainstream publications were placing too much of a premium on political history. As historians know, there are countless fields of historical study. It's one thing for us to say that history is for everyone, but it's another to show it and show it consistently. When *Contingent* reviews pitches, we look for clear and concise submissions, around one to two paragraphs long, that establish a clear topic, your enthusiasm for it, what format (short, field trip, review, feature) it will be in, the significance of the topic, and what you will argue. We're the first readers and we want to be hooked.

Telling possible contributors that we have greenlit their pieces and we will be working together is such a wonderful part of my job. When Erin, Bill, and I prepare to edit pieces, sometimes we are familiar with the topic, but other times we are engaging with historical writing far removed from the fields we have studied. If we find ourselves hooked and interested in different historical fields and topics, then we know our readers will be too.

*Contingent* exists to tell different histories as well as challenge readers' notions about what constitutes history. When scrolling through *Contingent's* archives, you'll find articles about the U.S. Civil War or American presidents, but we try to have pieces that offer arguments and perspectives different from those readers might have seen in previous historical writing. For instance, in our debut article, historian Keri Leigh Merritt produced a photo essay about the Civil War, but it was not about famous battles or

generals. It was about the thick woods and swamps that Confederate deserters hid out in. Merritt's haunting photos combined with her gripping text to motivate readers to rethink their ideas of battlefields and consider the ways environments influence the waging of war.

Besides publishing articles that highlight the diversity of historical topics, *Contingent's* founders also aimed to broaden the public's understanding of *who* is a historian and *what* historical work entails. Do a Google image search for historians and see who pops up. What you'll find are a lot of beards or white hair, blazers of all fabrics (not just tweed or corduroy), and men—still, mostly men—staring intently into old books. The image search reinforces the idea that historian equals old white male professor.

Before I started working with *Contingent*, when I thought of contingent scholars, I mostly associated the term with adjunct instructors. But in time, I have come to see how diverse contingent historians are. Some are postdocs on yearly appointments (some with the option of renewal) focused entirely on research or teaching or both. Some are visiting assistant professors (VAPs) who teach a number of courses, including large introductory survey courses.

Others are archivists and librarians working on projects for a year or two, depending on grant funding. And there are independent researchers writing and lecturing for a variety of history audiences. I have learned that if there is a way to interpret the past and reach people interested in history, there is a historian already doing that work.

While many historians labor as professors, we do the historical profession a great disservice by not thinking more broadly

about who does historical work. *Contingent* publishes archivists, librarians, and independent scholars without a university affiliation who write about history. Indeed, since *Contingent* started, we've worked with researchers and scholars who do not have a background in history but do the work of interpreting the past for think tanks, nonprofit organizations, and classrooms all over the United States. They are historians too, and I'm proud that *Contingent* showcases their contributions to historical knowledge.

One thing that separates *Contingent* from many other history publications is that we pay scholars for their work. As every historian well knows, writing is a job. *Contingent* believes that work should be compensated. We are, happily, just one of the sites that has started or moved to a payment-based model. Besides *Contingent*, *Lady Science* and *Insurrect!* pay their writers. In 2020, *Nursing Clio* and *Hazine* announced that going forward they too would start paying their contributors and staff.

Thanks to one-time and recurring donors, *Contingent* pays everyone involved, from our writers and editors to our marketing and web staff. We are not funded by a university or a foundation. As of January 1, 2021, we receive a little over two thousand dollars a month from two hundred and fifty donors. The majority of those donations are less than twenty dollars, with many folks contributing three, five, and ten dollars at a time. Many of our donors are contingent historians who affirm that they would donate more money if they could.

*Contingent* concluded its second year in operation in 2020. In the past year, we published plenty of shorts, reviews, and features, as well as a series about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected a number of different historians. These essays examined how the pandemic upended travel plans, immigration status, and childcare arrangements and further eroded an already weak job market. When autumn classes started, *Contingent* devoted a roundtable to historian Kevin Gannon's new pedagogical treatise, *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*. We debuted the first guest mailbags on how to use Zoom to conduct oral histories and how to write

While many historians labor as professors, we do the historical profession a great disservice by not thinking more broadly about who does historical work.

a biography.

We further expanded our series titled “How I Do History,” in which we profile different types of historians and the work that they do. We also took pains to make it clear that historians come in many diverse forms, and in 2020 we published profiles of nine historians, including two postdocs, two museum directors, an independent researcher, a librarian, a public historian involved in historic preservation, an adjunct professor, and a documentary editor, to explain what their jobs were, how they came to study history, and how their historical training prepared them for the work they now do.

With continued support, *Contingent* would love to do more multimedia projects such as producing movies in which we pair a historian and young filmmaker to collaborate on a live-action documentary short. We also hope to do more with illustration by hiring artists to create original artwork to run with pieces. We have ideas for digital projects that can assist text-based articles or stand alone as wholly digital scholarship.

But as ambitious as our goals may be, *Contingent* will never lose sight of its mission: to promote the work of contingent scholars. Whenever one of our pieces goes viral, we see that hundreds, even thousands of people are visiting our site. We know that *Contingent* is read in different countries and that our articles are cited in dissertations and assigned on syllabi. I love seeing what we have built and knowing the potential *Contingent* possesses to bring historical writing to broader audiences. But as one of the lucky editors who has the pleasure of mailing checks to our contributors, what matters most is putting a little more money in the bank accounts of historians who are some of the hardest working, most dedicated, but least compensated people in the profession. We have their backs because they have ours.

If you already are a *Contingent* donor, I can’t thank you enough for your support. But if you are not familiar with us, please give us a read. I’m sure that out of our many articles, there is bound to be something that will grab your attention. We would also love to receive more pitches from SHAFR members for shorts, reviews, and features. As someone who daily checks the *Contingent* inbox, I can assure you that we will see your pitches.

If you like what you read and want to see what *Contingent* has in store for years four, five, and beyond, then please become a donor. As little as \$3 a month unlocks all the bonus content we produce but, more importantly, keeps *Contingent* going and puts much needed money into the hands of hardworking historians.

As someone who watched *Contingent* grow from concept to reality, it is an honor to write about it for *Passport* and to encourage my SHAFR colleagues to become regular readers and contributors. We believe *Contingent* can play a role in creating a better future for history and historians, a future shaped by three principles:

History is for everyone.  
Every way of doing history is worthwhile.  
Historians should be paid for their work.

Note:

1. For the past two years, *Contingent* has published lists of books as well as articles and book chapters published by non-tenured historians. These are great works by talented scholars, and we don’t want to miss an opportunity to showcase their incredible scholarship to our readers. The lists often receive suggestions from other disciplines, and while we are open to including these

works, we are also open to helping other scholars start “*Contingent* for English” or “*Contingent* for Musicology.” We have seen firsthand that many disciplines and their early-career scholars are in similarly difficult employment circumstances.

## Do Jobs Outside the Academy Support Scholarship?

Michael Koncewicz

A stable, full-time career in archives, government, museums, publishing, or secondary education can lead to intellectually stimulating work. But what these careers rarely offer is support for producing independent scholarship. As someone who has worked in archives and at a museum, I have dealt with the substantive impediments that many others in my position face when pursuing their own work. Many non-academic employers who hire historians have little incentive to encourage outside work, and in some cases, might even be actively hostile toward scholarship that does not align with the political views of an office or their donors.

A lack of support for independent scholarship is an especially pertinent fact of life at museums, memorials, and other public history sites. Public historians frequently work with private donors or community organizations that prioritize an individual’s or a community’s legacy over its history. These groups often pressure workers to avoid producing scholarship that could upset community members who might also be financial contributors.

Relevant examples can be found across the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), which censored anti-Trump images of the 2017 Women’s March in Washington, DC, in order to make it appear less “political.”<sup>1</sup> NARA’s leadership also did very little to counter the pressure from the John F. Kennedy Foundation that was directed towards NARA staff at the JFK Library, leading to the resignation of its director, Tom Putnam, and many other staff members.<sup>2</sup> High-profile cases involving federal museums might be seen as exceptional, but they set a tone for other historians who work outside the academy.

While tenure is meant to provide a certain level of security when it comes to academic freedom, jobs outside the academy rarely have those same protections.

A lack of support for independent scholarship is an especially pertinent fact of life at museums, memorials, and other public history sites. Public historians frequently work with private donors or community organizations that prioritize an individual’s or a community’s legacy over its history. These groups often pressure workers to avoid producing scholarship that could upset community members who might also be financial contributors. Historians should scrutinize the political roadblocks and budget issues that weaken the ability to pursue independent scholarship. Without strong institutional backing for warts-and-all history—of which there is little—I have found that scholars will abandon their training, weakening both independent scholarship and historical work outside of the academy.

Public history sites often place serious limitations on what a scholar can accomplish outside the academy. When it’s a controversial museum, scholars are often forced to bend to pressure from those who aren’t interested in accurate representations of history. I worked for NARA at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum for nearly four years (2010–2014) as an assistant to the director while completing my PhD in history at the University of California, Irvine.<sup>3</sup> The library was originally a private facility, though it was incorporated into the federal presidential library system in 2010.<sup>4</sup> At the library, I was responsible for daily administrative tasks and more public-facing scholarship. I worked on museum exhibits, led school tours, and helped organize nonpartisan events.

Through my interactions with elementary school students, high school teachers, and senior citizen groups, I became a better teacher, more attuned to making history accessible to a wide range of communities.

The full-time job also fed my research, as my dissertation focused on Republicans inside the Nixon administration who refused to carry out the president's illegal orders. The topic was born out of my work on the library's revamped Watergate exhibit, which was curated by my supervisors, including the library's first federal director, Timothy Naftali. The job eventually made me even more aware of the constraints placed on scholars who work at federal institutions that rely on public-private partnerships. Scholarship is supported only if there is sufficient external pressure from leading scholars and the broader public.

After Naftali's departure in late 2011, our office shifted away from nonpartisan exhibits and programs as the privately operated Nixon Foundation regained control over much of the library's public-facing projects. As we were being encouraged to work with Nixon loyalists who sought to rehabilitate the thirty-seventh president's legacy, it became clear that my research would eventually become an issue. Indeed, my supervisors received complaints from the Nixon Foundation about my views on the president and my connections to "anti-Nixon historians." Few scholars paid attention to the library's drift back towards being a shrine to a former president.

While our office received national coverage during the opening of the library's Watergate Gallery in 2011, we were largely ignored when it came time to appoint Naftali's successor.<sup>5</sup> NARA's leading candidate for the position, historian Mark Atwood Lawrence, withdrew his name after more than a year of waiting for the Nixon Foundation to approve NARA's decision. The *Orange County Register* reported that Lawrence's scholarship—specifically, his critiques of Nixon's handling of the Vietnam War—was a factor in the delay. Although foundation consent was never of a formal requirement, Archivist of the United States David Ferriero refused to appoint Lawrence without it.<sup>6</sup> After more than three years, NARA selected Michael Elzey, a former director of Golden Gate Park and Orange County's Great Park, as the library's new director in 2015. Since then, the Nixon Foundation has regained control over the museum's exhibits, programs, and other public-facing activities.

Although my goal had been to carve out a permanent position within NARA's system, I chose to leave for a grant-funded job at the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University, which is a renowned archive on the history of labor and the Left. This move was, of course, made easier by Naftali's acceptance of a position as head of these archives. But I was also convinced that, if I stayed at the Nixon Library, I would be forbidden to publish anything related to my research on the Nixon presidency once I completed my PhD. Shifts in our office's culture made it clear to me that it would be impossible to advance my career with NARA if I wrote about the thirty-seventh president in a critical manner.

For the last six years, I have worked a forty-hour-a-week job, have taught as an adjunct at New York University and other institutions, and have been able to publish and conduct some research. I have supervisors that approve research trips and I have funding available to me for development activities. While this is not an ideal situation for my scholarship, the job has a much more structured schedule than most full-time teaching positions. I don't have to worry about politics getting in the way of my outside work. None of this would have been possible without luck and the connections that I made as a graduate student.

While presidential libraries have an exceptionally troubling past, the issues I experienced within NARA's system are common to plenty of public history job sites.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, academic historians must become more aware of the problems faced by their colleagues who work as public historians. In particular, they must appreciate that historians who work at archives, libraries, or museums usually struggle with the need to make sure their public-facing scholarship does not clash with the interests and ideologies of donors. This is especially true now that an increasing number of archives rely on private donations and external grants for their survival.

The political and logistical pressures that public historians face are significant and will inevitably lead many outside the academy to either change their scholarship or give up on it entirely. This is even truer for project-based workers at archives and museums, as public history sites are not exempt from the "gigification" of the U.S. economy.<sup>8</sup> Without the time and support that is necessary to produce good scholarship, it is safe to assume that many will choose some semblance of job security over scholarship.

Historian and former archivist Michael Brenes wrote in 2018 that the line between those who work in archives and academic historians in recent years has become noticeably blurrier. As he wrote, "many archivists are also public historians, teachers, and scholars, and collaborate with historians in teaching students how history is made, preserved, and perpetuated."<sup>9</sup> This is a positive development that scholars should support. Still, all historians must acknowledge that there will only be more alt-ac success stories if we push to protect and strengthen the institutions that employ us. We should not just tell young scholars to take nonacademic jobs and hope that their bosses or donors respect their training. We should not settle for a nights-and-weekends plan for writing and research. If we do, then it is inevitable that many will stop producing historical scholarship altogether.

As Erin Bartram, a historian who is currently school programs coordinator at the Mark Twain House & Museum, remarked in 2018, we historians have not yet "grapp[le]d with what it means for dozens, hundreds, thousands of our colleagues to leave the field."<sup>10</sup> If we want people who are not academics to remain part of our discipline, we must take the conditions of their intellectual labor seriously and do what we can to aid and promote them.

While many tenure-track professors face logistical and political challenges, their jobs provide a certain level of academic freedom, time, and funding to advance their scholarship. Any discussion that encourages a career beyond the professoriate must not ignore the fact that the overwhelming majority of workers do not enjoy these perks. As this suggests, "alt-ac" is not a solution to the academic jobs crisis; our current circumstances require much more drastic action. Still, honestly assessing the limitations that historians face when they have a nonacademic job is the first step in mapping out the future of the historical profession that actually exists. We must discover ways to protect the independent scholarship produced by those who work outside the academy. Otherwise, this scholarship, and the people who make it, will suffer.

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## The Research Downward Spiral

Kurt Güner

The adjunctification of higher education and the resulting jobs crisis (exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic) has made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for new PhDs to research and write, work that is critical both for their job prospects and for the health of the field. While the randomness and cruelty of the job market has been discussed at length, it is worth asking what the loss of *scholarship* has done (and is doing) to the field of history.<sup>1</sup> This essay will detail the dilemmas confronted by new PhDs as they try to land a job—one either on or off the tenure track—while trying to build their scholarly profiles. If unaddressed, the restrictions on new PhDs posed by shortages of time and money, combined with the competitiveness of the job market and the demands of career diversity work, will prohibit new scholarship.

The jobs crisis in history can be traced to several overlapping issues, but a growing reliance on adjuncts (part-time instructors paid by the course and rarely given health insurance) at colleges and universities is most salient. Many historians have already written about the repercussions that stem from their precarious circumstances, especially the crippling personal and professional anxiety.<sup>2</sup> The history of the profession's failure to protect its laborers<sup>3</sup> and its moral bankruptcy have also been subject to scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> The open discussion of these subjects has led to *some* reaction from the American Historical Association,<sup>5</sup> but most of the listed suggestions fall far short of the transformative change necessary for course correction. As it stands now, adjuncts and new PhDs face dire odds; their goals for research and writing will be nearly impossible to achieve.

It is difficult to say definitively how much "research" is necessary to land a professorship, though anecdotal evidence from advisors seems to suggest that informal requirements have gotten more extensive in the past twenty years. There is certainly a perception among every graduate student I've encountered that *several* publications are the bare minimum required for entry into the academy, and that perception drives young academics down an anxious and untenable path. There is evidence that the number of scholarly books has grown consistently since the 1970s (though the number of printed books and the

influx of digital publishing confounds an easy takeaway from those numbers).<sup>6</sup> Many of my colleagues—some with award-winning dissertations and several published articles—struck out on the job market, stymied at the application stage even *before* job postings were pulled due to the pandemic. The abundance of talented graduate students applying for jobs—added to the already tenure-bound academics changing positions—has turned what has always been a challenging career path into a crapshoot. So, what is a newly minted PhD to do?

For now, the answer seems to be a choice (when it can be a choice) between a postdoctoral fellowship, part-time teaching, and/or career diversity work. Postdocs have been a useful steppingstone for many graduate students—although the competitive job market can now make postdoctoral fellowships a long-term stop on the path toward being forced out of academia. Adjuncting can be a nice way for graduate students to earn some money while they develop their teaching skills, but it is not a sustainable source of income. Finally, the career diversity route has led many to try and jump to a neighboring field, hoping that a 9-to-5 job that's vaguely related to their skills as a historian will either help them pay the bills until the next academic job cycle starts or open up a new career path entirely. Some PhDs find full-time work *somewhere* while they adjunct on the side, keeping a toe in the field while they wait for an opportunity.

All the career paths above present challenges to the creation of a stable research agenda. Some of these paths and approaches are also mutually exclusive. If you decide to focus on being a specialist of some kind (teaching, writing, editing, researching, etc.), that time can't be spent on another specialty. In my case, becoming a teaching specialist and administrator has led me to gainful employment, but it has stalled my research. Such professional uncertainty is destabilizing and demoralizing; new PhDs might spend a good amount of time worrying that they made the wrong decision. So, in the end, any scholarship produced by precarious scholars is a pale shadow of what their work *could* have been—if they had the time to devote their full attention to it.

Historical research is exhausting and time-consuming work that generally requires institutional affiliation to be done properly. Gaining access to digital databases and archives is easy enough as a graduate student, but for a contingent faculty member, the lack of institutional support can close previously open doors. Many archives simply don't allow access to individuals, instead granting it to universities and organizations that then distribute it to students and faculty.<sup>7</sup> Beyond that, archival work requires travel and months (years, decades) of careful effort, with follow-up trips usually a requirement as well. A job in a non-academic field is simply not going to allow employees the time necessary to complete such work, limiting many new PhDs to the research they did for their dissertation or graduate study as the primary source to draw on for their new work.

Dissertation research generally produces enough material to spin off a couple of articles and potentially even a separate book, giving scholars room to refine rough ideas and follow up on loose ends that were just outside the scope of the dissertation. The dissertation, as we are often reminded, is not supposed to be your crowning achievement as a scholar; it is supposed to be your ticket for entry into the profession, a sign that you are a serious researcher and that you intend to build on this foundation. For other researchers, articles or dissertations on relevant topics are often a sign that a particular scholar is on a similar track, and tracing the development of that scholar's work (and their sources) is a crucial part of the research process. But what happens if there is no development? If scholars simply disappear after a thought-provoking dissertation or

manuscript? How many truly great ideas have hit a dead end before they could be worked into their final form?

The “research downward spiral” is where new PhDs find themselves as they try to navigate a bleak post-graduation landscape. With a full-time alt-ac job, it is impractical to find new sources to broaden dissertation research and difficult to find writing time in general. The further you get from your time in graduate school, the more damning your dearth of scholarship looks on your CV, and that decreases your chances of securing an academic position.

This pattern was referenced directly in the 2021 AHA Jobs Report: “Over the past three academic hiring cycles, 53 percent of the 162 assistant professor hires about which we have data were no more than one year out from finishing their degree. Past this point, job candidates became steadily less likely to be hired as assistant professors.”<sup>8</sup> The desperation to produce something, *anything*, to make you employable leads to shoddy work, scholarship that would be vastly improved if it was approached from the comfort of an academic position. In my case, there are at least two articles that I have yet to write that address gaps in my dissertation. Both, however, require a bit more research before I can begin writing, and so they sit. I imagine the thousands of new entrants in the job market have a similar story, and the more those numbers grow, the more devastating the loss of scholarship feels. While the downward spiral of research is most obvious in the way it impacts individual scholars, the long-term damage to the field seems unsustainable.

There aren’t easy solutions to this problem either, as the biggest issues are systemic and require coalitions of faculty and grad students mobilizing together, with the support of their institutions and professional organization. But one concept that I think requires challenging is the idea that new PhDs are on their own once the dissertation is submitted. To make a clumsy analogy, history has long treated its new graduates as teens going off to college: they help pack the bags, load up the car, and send them on their way. This generation, however, might need to move back home for a bit before they can get settled, or at least borrow the car and some money.

The relationship between new PhDs and their schools should, I believe, be extended into the first several years of a scholar’s career. Support for these students can be split up into two categories: expensive and free. On the expensive end, departments could potentially redirect funds from new graduate cohorts (which, theoretically, they would reduce to a smaller number to compensate) to recently graduated students, provide research/travel funding, or healthcare. Providing funds and support for those graduates could help vulnerable researchers add to their CV and figure out their next steps. On the free (or at least low-cost) end, departments can help recent graduates maintain library/journal access, explicitly create recent graduate cohorts (or support groups, depending on their mood), offer writing/editing support, provide a stable “.edu” email address, and offer alt-ac job placement assistance and even academic job app support.

These are all half-measures, aimed at addressing the symptoms rather than the causes of the jobs crisis, but they could provide a lifeline to desperate researchers. If history departments are interested in extending a hand to young graduates and preserving the flow of research so necessary to the field of history, these changes are a good place to start. It is the very least academia can do.

#### Notes:

1. Erin Bartram has some great essays on this topic, and “Why Everyone Loses When Someone Leaves the Academe” is most relevant for its melancholic discussion of the loss of so many scholars in the field. Erin Bartram, “Why Everyone Loses When Someone Leaves Academe,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-everybody-loses-when>

[someone-leaves-academe/](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168/).

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

3. Charles Peterson, “Serfs of Academe,” *New York Review of Books*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/03/12/adjuncts-serfs-of-academe/>.

4. Daniel Bessner and Michael Brenes, “A Moral Stain on the Profession,” *History News Network* (blog), April 26, 2019, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/171873>.

5. “Improving the Status of Non-Tenure-Track Faculty: Recommendations for History Departments (2020),” *American Historical Association* (blog), January 1, 2020, <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/improving-the-status-of-non-tenure-track-faculty-recommendations-for-history-departments>.

6. Mary Lindemann, “Partners in Scholarship: A Historian’s View of Trends in Scholarly Publishing,” *Perspectives on History* (blog), October 26, 2020, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2020/partners-in-scholarship-a-historians-view-of-trends-in-scholarly-publishing>.

7. James Grossman and Becky Nicolaidis, “Research Access and Scholarly Equity,” *Perspectives on History* (blog), January 10, 2020, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2020/research-access-and-scholarly-equity>.

8. Dylan Ruediger, “The 2021 AHA Jobs Report,” *Perspectives on History* (blog), January 20, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/aha-jobsreport2021>.

## Conclusion

Carl Watts

Readers of this *Passport* forum will be under no illusions about the extent and severity of the crisis in academia. Indeed, everyone should be alarmed, as no one is safe. I was a “permanent” member of the faculty at my last (non-tenure-granting) institution. At the end of 2019, after I had served for seven years, my position as department chair was eliminated. I recently discovered that the entire college of education is being wound down. It turns out that insufficient numbers of prospective K-12 teachers can be induced to incur heavy debts for a four-year degree to qualify for a career in schools that are mired in bureaucracy and pay atrociously.

In their pieces, Henry Fetter and Michael Franczak both acknowledge that the origins of the jobs crisis in higher education stretch back many decades. And yet, as Fetter writes, there has been a “very belated, and still grudgingly inadequate, recognition by the historical profession of a crisis that is now fifty years old.” In our own professional corner of diplomatic history, it may be that the attempt to “reboot” the field, coupled with the ongoing defense of its relevance, shunted aside important questions about the state of the job market.

Such questions are now inescapable, thanks in part to the quantification of the problem by the American Historical Association. Unfortunately, as the AHA acknowledges in its most recent jobs report, next year’s market will likely make the past decade look quite rosy by comparison. As several contributors to this forum underlined, the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating longer-term negative trends in higher education. There can be no doubt that without some far-reaching, even revolutionary, solutions, student enrollment will continue to decline, budgets will continue to shrink, and tenure-track jobs will continue to disappear.

Yet trying to conjure concrete solutions to the jobs crisis is difficult. Susan Colbourn’s point is well taken: historians often, and rightly, feel overwhelmed by the structural problems in academia that seem to present insurmountable obstacles to stable employment. As Franczak makes clear

in his piece, the prescription that those with a PhD should seek either an alternative academic career or a career outside of academia is by no means new. This is a path that many would-be academics have taken and will doubtless continue to take. However, as the "Careers in Business" program demonstrated in the 1970s, the psychological impact of abandoning an academic career will forever impart a sense of professional loss in many people.

Frustratingly, the decisions made by SHAFR, or any other organization, cannot address all elements of what is at base a structural crisis. As Emily Whalen makes clear in her piece, for decades the United States has witnessed a "commodification of higher education" that has transformed how Americans think about college. This is a cultural problem that no disciplinary organization has the resources or ability to confront. Nevertheless, we scholars are not powerless, even if we sometimes act as if we were. As Larson argues, professional associations must begin to apply political pressure at the state and federal levels to reverse the trend of ever-decreasing university budgets.

Meanwhile, on the supply side, we will likely have to scale back graduate education, though this is admittedly an "ugly solution." Graduate programs will also need to focus on teaching students skills that will enable them to make a convincing case to non-academic employers. Certain revolutionary transformations might have to be promoted, including, as Michelle Paranzino argues in her piece, the abolition of tenure. While that may seem a step too far for some, doubtless many members of SHAFR would agree with Paranzino's broader point that we have a duty to push back against the misuse and abuse of history that recently has characterized U.S. political discourse.

So, what should SHAFR do? Freshly minted PhDs obviously have an imperative to publish if they are to have any hope on an increasingly hopeless job market. Colbourn therefore suggests that SHAFR implement a subvention

program to help authors defray book publishing costs, which would mirror what some other professional associations already do. Larson, for his part, contends that SHAFR should do more to make the organization more welcoming to scholars not on the tenure track by inviting adjuncts into society governance. Finally, Michael Koncewicz encourages SHAFR to take active steps to support the work of those employed in non- or para-academic settings like archives, libraries, and museums.

For my part, I suspect that many universities cater rather too easily to graduate students seduced by the prospect of an academic career. Institutions could therefore do more to educate prospective students about the jobs crisis in higher education. If students want to proceed with their eyes fully open, then they should be equipped with the skills required to succeed in alternative academic careers, or outside academia altogether. Senior SHAFR members are in a position to make this case within their own institutions. As an organization, however, SHAFR should craft opportunities for early-career academics and those who are not in traditional academic employment.

It is clear that the problem of academic jobs is of enormous magnitude and that there are no easy solutions. It is easy to feel a sense of paralysis, especially as members of a relatively small academic organization. Nevertheless, SHAFR should do *something*, because if it does not, it contributes to the normalization of a situation that is unacceptable. There is an analogy here to the use of sanctions: they are widely perceived as useless because they generally do not produce an observable change of behavior in the target state. However, this instrumental perspective fails to acknowledge the expressive purpose of sanctions, which is to signal when norms have been breached. SHAFR must send a signal that the current state of affairs is not acceptable.

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