

Off the Tenure Track: Experiences of PhD Graduates in Academic Administrative Positions

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Abstract: Advice for PhD graduates seeking to leave academia has proliferated over the last decade, but little attention has been paid to those who continue to work in universities in administrative positions. This study employs a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of twelve people with PhDs who have taken this alternative career path. Although participants expressed satisfaction with their careers, they also revealed that they faced obstacles to obtaining administrative positions because of misconceptions about the value and purpose of a PhD. The study concludes with policy recommendations for universities and avenues for future research.

Key words: Academic administration, career planning, doctoral education, qualitative methods

Word Count: 4515

Introduction

An increasing number of people with PhDs are not entering traditional fields, including tenure-track and research academic positions. In 2018, United States universities awarded 55,195 doctorates (NSF 2019). Overall, data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) shows an increase in earned doctorates over the last fifty years (NSF 2019). At the same time, tenure-track professor positions have not increased to meet demand (McKenna 2016). For example, in 2016-2017, the number of History PhD graduates was more than twice the number of visiting and tenure-track faculty positions in History, leaving over 600 PhD graduates to find work outside traditional career paths (Ruediger 2018). In 2018, only 43% of doctoral graduates with a secured job indicated they would be working in academia (NSF 2019). Other data suggest that less than 50% of PhD graduates work in academia and even fewer (only 15-25%) in tenure-track positions (Fruscione and Baker 2018). Tenure-track professorships in the United States are positions with a pathway to guaranteed, permanent employment at the university. Within PhD granting institutions in the United States, tenure-track positions are generally considered paradoxically the ultimate and only acceptable career achievement. Increasingly PhD graduates who do not secure tenure-track positions are employed by universities through short-term, lower-paying contracts, referred to variously as contingent or adjunct faculty or lecturers.

In response to these trends, popular advice for people wishing to find alternatives to the traditional, tenure-track academic path have proliferated. Alternative suggestions include government, non-profits, and the private sector work (Brown Urban and Linver 2019). Scholars have paid far less attention to people with PhDs who work in higher education as administrative and student services professionals. Even articles that explore non-tenure track jobs in academia primarily discuss research positions at university-affiliated centers (Powers and McCabe 2019). One recent article highlighted the potential advantages to both university employers and employees with PhDs of creating hybrid positions for 'administrative scholars' who can bring unique skills and creativity to administrative positions in ways that bridge the divide between the administrative and academic sides of the university (Kaplan 2018). There are even fewer studies of the lived experiences of PhD graduates who have transitioned into administrative positions in higher education (Bundage, Gregory, and Sherwood 2018).

The purpose of this study is to explore the career histories of people with PhDs working in university administrative positions. We employed a phenomenological qualitative approach, which researchers use to investigate how people understand their experiences. This study highlights some of the common experiences the participants shared. Based on these experiences, in the concluding discussion, we offer a number of recommendations that can be adopted at all levels of the university, from HR and individual colleges to departmental hiring committees.

Methods and materials

We interviewed twelve participants for this study. All participants have a PhD and are employed at least 20 hours per week in an administrative or student services position at a four-year college or university in the United States. None of the participants were contingent, tenure-track, or research faculty. Additionally, at the time of the interviews, two of the twelve participants held positions for which a PhD was recommended, but all participants had started their careers in academic administration positions that did not require, or even recommend, a doctoral degree. Three participants have PhDs in History, three in English/Literature, and one each in Hispanic Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, Transformational Learning and Change, Genetics, Higher Education, and Family Studies and Human Development.

At the time we conducted research for this study, we were both employees of the University of Arizona. We recruited some participants from our own university via email and others from around the country via social media. A contact with a large Twitter following of potential participants posted messages on Twitter, inviting interested and qualified participants to respond to the tweet if they were interested in participating in the study.

All interviews took place in-person or over the phone and lasted between 30-60 minutes. We conducted all interviews between September and November of 2019. After hearing the informed consent script, participants gave oral consent and chose a pseudonym. In all cases, we have used pseudonyms and removed identifying information, such as the names of the participant's employer and alma mater, and other potentially identifiable references. With the participants' permission, we recorded and transcribed their interviews. We followed the same interview structure for all participants and finished the interview by asking participants for any additional thoughts on their experiences (see Appendix A). We coded the data by identifying themes that capture the essence of the experience. Following Saldaña's (2016) recommendations for themeing the data, we used an iterative process to identify seven essential themes. In the discussion of results below, each subheading represents a theme. We occasionally edited out natural hesitations and repetitions in speech for flow and readability. Rather than citing each interview in text, we have provided a list of interview dates, modes, and participants' job descriptions in Appendix B.

Results

The seven identified themes are: not every PhD graduate's goal is tenure track; the importance of support; work-life balance and the appeal of flexibility; obstacles; satisfaction with their decision; transferability of skills; and the downside of academic administration.

Not every PhD graduate's goal is tenure track

It is a popular perception of American universities that every PhD student's end goal is a tenure-track position. However, study participants were mixed on whether they ever wanted faculty positions, ranging from actively pursuing tenure-track positions to never wanting one.

Three participants clearly went to graduate school with the end goal of becoming a tenured professor. All three interviewees went on the academic job market; two were unable to secure tenure-track positions. Paul explained, 'I went on the faculty job market for two years and did not get a job.' Carlos, who pursued faculty jobs for multiple years, noted 'I've applied for jobs in every state other than Iowa and New Jersey over the years and all the Canadian states and most of those multiple times.' In contrast, Bailey did secure a tenure-track position immediately following graduation, but when she failed to get tenure, she moved to academic administration.

Other participants considered tenure-track positions, but it was not their set goal. Samantha explained, 'I'd gone [into] the PhD program assuming I would come out and go back out into nonprofit work or maybe government work...I had actually not assumed I would stay in academia [but] finishing my PhD program, [I was] actually thinking that I might want to stay in academia. And I did apply for faculty jobs, which mostly convinced me that I didn't want a faculty job.' Jane had not even planned to earn a PhD but had taken advantage of the university's employee tuition reduction program. Despite her opportunistic decision to pursue a PhD, when asked if she considered tenure-track positions, Jane said, 'I did. I don't know that it was a goal, but it was a consideration.'

Some interviewees had considered the tenure-track route, but were discouraged by experiences in graduate school. In describing her feelings about academia, Hannah explained, 'I could never really shake that feeling that maybe there was something else out there, something that was healthier...I think we lie to ourselves sometimes, or at least I did in my case, where I was like, oh, I'm hyper intellectual and I want to research, and please, sew that patch on my elbow, you know?' Willow explained why she decided during graduate school not to pursue the tenure-track job market: 'I made my choice...I saw really incredible hostility between faculty colleagues and they weaponized grad students against each other.' She also added, 'I don't see university tenure as being something that's going to be sustainable, in sort of this neoliberal climate where frankly research isn't valued if it's not STEM and the social sciences seem to be shrinking.'

Other interviewees expressed that they never desired to go the tenure-track route and were not convinced otherwise in graduate school. Nora explained that she never wanted tenure, but her program clearly thought that should be her goal: 'I didn't go to grad school wanting a tenure track position...I had a particular intellectual interest that I wanted to pursue and wanted to be in a community of people who were interested in similar topics and spending some time doing that...so, [being in a PhD program] was pretending to want a job that I never actually sought and didn't really want.'

The importance of support

All interviewees spoke about their support systems that offered encouragement and assistance in their pursuits of academic administration positions. Many participants found support in family and friends. Angela received help from a PhD friend who had not pursued a tenure-track job. Nora spoke about the support she received from her family. Her husband gave up his job and moved to Southern California with her, and her parents offered financial support. Willow spoke about the network of female friends who supported each other through graduate school and beyond. She said, 'we would sit down and talk about theory together, for fun. We would talk about, you know, how to address the power dynamics in the workplace.' As they brought new members into the group, their professional networks grew. Samantha commented that friends in and outside of academia supported her. Regarding her graduate school friends, she

said, 'just the fact that we were all looking for jobs at the same time was, you know, we could support each other' and how her non-academia friends provided equal moral support although they had 'no clue' what it was like to apply for academic jobs.

Other interviewees spoke about the support they received from their dissertation advisors. Esther commented, 'I think I was really lucky because I know people have horror stories about their advisors being really sort of narrow-minded about their career paths. My PhD advisor was really, really supportive.' Hannah also spoke about her dissertation advisor's support: 'she, I think, was supportive in that she herself saw other opportunities across the quad even for her own career trajectory, so she wasn't shut down at all to the idea of me, you know, going off the track, so to speak.'

Others found community on the internet. Angela spoke of the helpfulness of the internet; she said, 'Twitter really actually helped me feel like a much more normal human being going for this. Because it's weird when you go through it in some way, you are an N of one ...and then, you know, the power of the internet to help bring together all these stories and be able to see, you know, lots of people are doing this.' Hannah also commented on how the internet helped normalize her experience. Esther talked about specific programming that helped graduate students explore non-tenure track careers. She said, 'I think one reason I felt really empowered to leave the tenure line and go into an academic administrative job is that I went to a lot of alt-ac programming when I was in grad school.'

Work-life balance and the appeal of flexibility

Participants reported a common desire to balance the demands of their careers with the obligations and desires of their personal lives. Several reported that their desire to choose where they lived was a primary reason for seeking non-tenure-track jobs, particularly when the location of a job might negatively affect their relationships with life partners. Esther reflected, 'I knew that faculty tenure-line jobs wouldn't give me a ton of flexibility in terms of where I would live and where my partner would get a job. We realized that we couldn't both get academic jobs and even think about living in the same city.' Hannah recalled, 'I was in a serious relationship with someone who couldn't live just anywhere. So, the thought of having to go to some far-flung place to get a job that I was only halfway excited about just became really less and less appealing.' Samantha, who had a career in non-profit work before beginning her doctoral program, remembered thinking, 'all of my family is on the West Coast and I'm not really interested in moving to a small town in some part of the country where I've never been before.'

Others reported that they evaluated their own personalities and skills and determined that they did not want tenure-track jobs. '[I wanted] an environment that was healthier for me and an environment, or you know, a work scenario in which I could gain different skills, and really lean on the skills that I actually had and wanted to develop,' recalled Hannah. 'And there was just this moment of reckoning where I was like, 'you are a hyper social, creative, and kind of a quirky person. Is the career path that you've chosen for yourself, is it really going to support that?'' Samantha, in contrast, came to see tenured professors in her doctoral program not as hyper intellectuals but as teachers locked into monotonous teaching schedules. 'I was a grader for one of my advisors and it was an Eastern European survey course. His teaching was really dynamic; he's just such a great lecturer.... But I was sitting there thinking, he's been teaching this class for twenty-five years. And I thought I would be so bored. I just need new things.'

Obstacles

Many participants expressed that they faced obstacles to securing an administrative position that were directly related to the fact that they had a PhD. The perception among PhD and non-PhD hiring committees that they would not be satisfied with an administrative position dogged many participants throughout their job searches. In some cases, participants found that staff members without PhDs did not seem to understand why they would apply for administrative jobs. Carlos, who began searching for administrative positions after years of applying for tenure-track positions, commented that staff without PhDs who sat on hiring committees did not seem to want to hire him. 'I don't know why; part of it is they think that you're overqualified, that you'll be difficult, or it's just probably that they don't understand what the job market is like. They think, 'He's just gonna use us for four months until he gets a tenure track,' not realizing that person has been trying to get *any* job for the last seven years.' Nora, an associate director at the time of her interview, witnessed the ways that preconceptions about applicants with PhDs influenced hiring committees. Another participant found that she had to overcome the misconception that she would not work well on a team or communicate well because she had a PhD.

Participants stressed that faculty also expressed skepticism about PhDs who sought administrative positions. Often, faculty within their own doctoral programs questioned and negatively judged their decisions to pursue work off the tenure track. Esther enjoyed the support and encouragement of her own advisor but noticed that other faculty in her doctoral program were less supportive. Not until she landed a job at a prestigious university did her alma mater ask her to participate in events with prospective graduate students. Another participant, Raven, faced a hostile hiring committee that, while perhaps not the norm, illustrated the perception among many tenure-track faculty that PhDs should not hold positions that did not require a doctorate. Raven was shaken at the reception of the faculty members who interviewed her for a position she described as 'a million percent my job.' 'They rolled their eyes. Their arms were crossed. They were actually hostilely aggressive towards me and made statements like 'we don't even get why you would even consider this position,' and 'you've been teaching for so long, why would you step down to this level?'

Satisfaction with their decision

All participants expressed positive feelings about their decision to seek employment in academic administration positions, although with varying levels of joy and loss. The majority spoke about how happy they were with their decision. In regards to her decision, Angela said, 'I'm delighted. I feel like this is a much better fit for me. There have been moments where I kind of miss it...but I think a lot of what had appealed to me about academia was the opportunity to work with bright people and help young people succeed.' Ellie explained that a non-tenure track job was not a Plan B she was forced to take; she explained, 'I feel really good about the choices I've made, because the choices I've made align with who I am...I'm not somebody who, you know, chose this path because it was the default path or because, you know, I couldn't land the tenure-track job and that didn't work out.'

Other interviewees added that even from administrative positions, they had opportunities to pursue intellectual work. Esther commented, 'I feel good about this decision. Three years in, I largely feel like I get to do what I like to do...I feel appreciated by colleagues, I feel supported by my supervisor. I've even received enough support to continue doing some writing.' Nora said, 'I love that my job encourages me to write and publish, but does not penalize me for not doing so. And I appreciate the freedom that I have to pursue my interests but without the looming

deadlines; I don't feel that sense of pressure.' Samantha expressed that her job provided her with more intellectual stimulation than a tenure-track job would have.

Paul, who initially wanted a tenure-track job, said, 'Right now, I feel delighted to be in the position I'm in rather than a faculty position... and now in retrospect, I think I would have made a competent but unhappy faculty member, and I really think the administrative work I do now aligns more with some of my values.' Bailey said, 'I really love it! I love what I do. When I went from teaching to advising, I kind of thought maybe I would be devastated, and I'm really happy.'

Transferability of skills

All participants said they use the skills they learned in their PhD programs in their administrative positions. Their reflections contradict the common conception that administrative labor is menial and boring. For example, Herb Childress (2019) compared PhDs working in administration to PhDs working at restaurants, but participants spoke about the multitude of skills they used in their current jobs and the complexity, intellectual stimulation, and rigor of those positions. When asked about the skills she used in her job, Nora said, 'The research and the writing are certainly two of the strengths that I rely upon quite a bit, [and] strategic thinking. And so, looking across a landscape of differently networked individuals and how power moves...you read them and you either learn how to move through them or you don't.' Hannah said, 'I break down complex ideas...I'm working one-on-one with students and talking to them about their future...it's teaching, communicating, helping people to connect ideas.' Paul said, 'Every day I use a lot of very practical skills and capabilities I used in graduate school whether that's the ability to take in and process large amounts of information, identify patterns, analyze things...I'm also able to write quickly and pretty well...teaching in graduate school made me comfortable with public speaking which is an important part of my work now.'

Esther worked in the department where she earned her PhD, so she spoke about how she directly used her area-specific knowledge. Carlos worked directly with graduate students in the program where he earned his PhD and was able to relate to their experiences. While Bailey enjoyed her first administrative position, she changed positions so she could use her statistics knowledge. Angela reflected that, along with her communication and research skills, her PhD in Genetics gave her the perspective of having worked in expensive, and sometimes dangerous, labs. She said, 'My bar for a successful day is 'we're not going to hospital together. This is not life or death. Nothing in here is acutely hazardous.' Any mistakes that gets made can be fixed really easily...we're not going to accidentally kill something.'

The downside of academic administrative

Although participants overwhelmingly expressed positive feelings about their decisions to take administrative positions, they also identified downsides. A number of participants noted that they had overcome feelings of loss after taking administrative positions. Paul, who, after earning his doctorate, first worked at a nonprofit before accepting a career development directorship at his alma mater recalled, 'I think taking that time at the non-profit between the PhD and starting full time again at university was really important for giving me some distance from the frustration or trauma of the faculty job search and my association of that with the space of the university.' Bailey did secure a faculty position after finishing her PhD but transitioned to an administrative position at a university closer to her extended family after she was denied

tenure. While she did not characterize the transition as traumatic or negative, she acknowledged that she initially struggled with the loss of her identity as a professor and researcher in her field.

After settling into their administrative positions, some participants chafed at their lack of decision-making power as non-tenured workers. 'I see now ...that the hierarchies of higher ed are so entrenched that making changes to the institution from my kind of position feels nearly impossible. Tenure-line faculty have all the power... if you're a middle-level administrator like me, you can impact individuals on a daily basis, but you're never going to make systemic change,' reflected Esther. Furthermore, several participants noted that they had limited upward job growth potential in their positions. Willow, who worked in faculty affairs and was searching for a new position at the time of the interview, noted that the pace of raises and title promotions had been painfully slow: 'I'm still the least paid person with my role across campus, including the person that doesn't have a bachelor's degree... I'm unhappy with the bureaucracy that's limiting my ability to professionalize beyond the lowest paid, least titled PhD in this role.' However, even those who had made it to the realm of deans and provosts felt encumbered by their lack of tenure. Hannah, who held a variety of hybrid teaching and director positions before her promotion to Associate Dean acknowledged that, 'It is somewhat disquieting that I don't have more stability in [my current department]. And in that respect, my existence, or the role that I play in the department, feels precarious.' Jane offered a starker reflection on that precariousness: 'I've seen so many colleagues [and] superiors lose their jobs, right? Some of the strongest, most powerful women in power in this university are summarily dismissed because they don't have a tenured home. They have PhDs, but they're not faculty. There's no soft landing for them.'

Discussion of results

This study highlights several key findings. First, PhD graduates in academic administration positions are satisfied with their jobs, and many went into administration by choice, rather than because they could not land tenure-track jobs. They chose jobs in administration for their many benefits, including increased flexibility and work-life balance. Despite their satisfaction with administrative work, most participants encountered obstacles. While all job searches come with challenges, participants faced specific obstacles born from misconceptions about what a PhD should do, including perceptions of overqualification and lack of support from advisors and departments. Additionally, all participants spoke about transferability of skills, including critical thinking, communication, and problem solving, further illustrating the value of employing PhDs in non-tenure-track academic positions.

This study also leads to several recommendations for universities. First, at all levels-- from staff and faculty members who sit on hiring committees, to departmental and college administrators who write job descriptions and career services personnel who counsel exiting doctoral students— university personnel must resist the idea of 'overqualification' and the assumptions that frequently accompany it. People with PhDs who seek positions off the tenure- and research-tracks confront prejudices from faculty and staff alike that they are ill-suited for positions that do not make specific and intentional use of their expertise as scholars. At the core of this misconception is a fundamental lack of understanding about career and life goals and experiences of people who pursue doctoral degrees. As the number of traditional tenure-track positions continue to decline across the United States, it is likely that more faculty members will be forced to accept that their advisees' goals may differ from their own. Awareness about the severe imbalance between qualified applicants and traditional faculty positions will likely spread

to staff members without PhDs at a slower pace. However, aside from the lack of sufficient traditional faculty positions, this study illustrates that many PhD-wielding university employees intentionally sought, and feel fulfilled in, administrative positions. Future research studies could explore if this phenomenon of PhD graduate overqualification is prevalent in both academic and non-academic positions.

Second, this study provides evidence to support Rebecca Kaplan's (2018) call for the creation of 'hybrid positions' within universities. Whitchurch (2012) has studied the proliferation of these types of positions in what she calls, "the third space," where university employees engage in project-oriented work across administrative and scholarly boundaries. University leadership (deans, department heads, directors) could create hybrid positions that combine administration and teaching or research to leverage the unique skills of people with PhDs to meet the changing needs of universities. PhD graduates bring with them qualities that are valuable in administrative positions—writing, problem-solving, creativity, research, and determination as well as a knowledge of the learning and teaching-side of the university system. As institutions of higher education look for ways to become more flexible and efficient, they should place value on the degrees they grant and embrace applicants with the potential to serve a wide variety of the institutional needs, from running freshmen orientations and advising students, to supporting and developing technology, assisting faculty in teaching and research, and guiding strategic planning initiatives. In many cases, this new hiring schema will require institutions to break down rigidly defined employment categories that prevent staff from adjusting their responsibilities as the needs of their department, college, or university change. For example, rather than contracting adjunct faculty without benefits on a semester-by-semester basis, universities should create positions that provide stability and fair salaries to employees who can serve a variety of administrative and teaching needs.

Finally, all personnel who support PhD students (e.g., departmental advisors, faculty members, and career services offices) must reframe their expectations of doctoral graduates and create new strategies for supporting them in their career aspirations both in and outside of academia. Many humanities and social science programs rely almost exclusively on teaching assistantships to fund their graduate students. This tendency both ties the stability of graduate programs to enrollment in undergraduate classes and maintains the almost exclusive focus on teaching preparation. Furthermore, several participants spoke about how lacking career advice was for graduate students at their universities. Hannah said, 'I went to career services...once, and it was really terrible. I really hope they've upped their game.' In accordance with Hannah's wish, universities could 'up their game' and provide doctoral students with a myriad of career advice. Beyond the individual universities, there is a need for widespread, open access programs available to all doctoral students, as such the University of California's Humanists at Work and the United Kingdom's Vitae. An increase in this type of programming would help prepare students for life after graduation and the potential for hybrid academic positions. Instead of only focusing on research and teaching, doctoral programs could provide their students with opportunities to advise, develop programs, and work in student affairs.

While the twelve participants in this study offered important insights into the lived experiences of PhD graduates in academic administration positions, more research is needed to confidently generalize the results of this study. Future research could include quantitative studies based on these findings to determine the number of PhD graduates in academic administration and identify creative avenues for hybrid work. Additional studies could also provide in-depth

explorations into PhD training for non-tenure track jobs and hybrid academic positions. The need for this research is pressing.

With the decrease in tenure-track positions, underemployed PhDs, and universities in economic crisis, several problems could be solved by employing PhDs in non-tenure track academic jobs. Utilizing the most educated to fill hybrid positions would benefit universities while ensuring PhD graduates off the tenure track obtain fair compensation and benefits, rather than adjunct contracts. It is time for universities to cast off the assumption that the only place for PhD graduates within the university is the tenure track.

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Appendix A

1. What is your name? What pseudonym would you like to use for this study?
2. What is your current job title? What does that entail?
3. In what field did you earn your PhD? When? From what institution?
4. What prior positions have you held in academia, if any?
5. Describe your transition from academic work to your administrative position.
6. What factors played a role in your decision to take an administrative job, rather than a traditional academic job?
7. Did you encounter any obstacles to entering an administrative position?
8. What support systems (assistance, encouragement, connections) did you have in your pursuit of an administrative position?
9. How do you feel about your employment in an administrative job, rather than a traditional academic position? Have your feelings about your career path changed over time?
10. Do you have opportunities for career advancement in your current position?
11. Do you feel that you use skills you learned in your PhD in your job?
12. Do you have anything else you would like to share? Do you want to elaborate on anything?

Appendix B

Pseudonym of Participant	Discipline of PhD	Job Description	Date of Interview
Bailey	Social Sciences	Data and retention specialist	9/12/2019
Samantha	Humanities	Director of humanities center	9/13/2019
Carlos	Humanities	Program coordinator of graduate programs	9/19/2019
Paul	Humanities	Director of graduate career development	9/24/2019
Esther	Humanities	Instructional designer/technologist	9/27/2019
Angela	Sciences	Assistant Dean for Pre-Professional Advising	9/27/2019
Norah	Humanities	Director of research institute	9/30/2019
Hannah	Humanities	Associate Dean of Admissions	10/1/2019
Ellie	Humanities	Graduate career advisor	10/10/2019
Raven	Social Sciences	Life management counselor	10/11/2019
Jane	Education	Director of faculty affairs	10/17/2019
Willow	Social Sciences	Director of faculty affairs	11/7/2019