Changing Gears in a Difficult Job Market

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Editor’s Note: There are so many stories about the difficult academic job market that it’s easy to forget some people do occasionally get jobs. Every once in a while, a tenure-track job is awarded to a lucky candidate, but more often than not, getting a full-time job in academe requires a shift in focus toward what is now commonly referred to as an alternate academic, or alt-ac, career. Sometimes this shift is only a slight pivot, but it can also mean going back to school and earning a new degree. Brian Flota’s “alt-ac narrative” falls into the second category. The English literature tenure-track market just wasn’t working for him, so he reinvented himself by returning to school and becoming an academic librarian. His story is a good example of how to take a bad situation and change it into a better one. Following is Brian’s alt-ac story that grew out of a discussion between he and Joe Fruscione. Maybe it will help others who are thinking about shifting gears while on the job market.

In 2006, I graduated with a Ph.D. in English, and the Great Recession happened. Five years later, I’d had nine interviews and zero job offers.

I sat back and watched peers with virtually no publication history from more prestigious universities get tenure-track positions. After a few years on the market while teaching as an adjunct, I was “damaged goods.” There’s that perception that if one does not have a tenure-track job five years out from the Ph.D., the “dream” is probably not going to come
true. Getting fewer nibbles on the job market year after year became demoralizing. Realizing this, I began to seriously entertain other career options. Given my research background and some experience working in libraries, I started thinking about getting a Master’s in Library and Information Science (LIS).

This seemed like a great option, although the library job market is just as fraught with peril as the tenure-track English one is. I applied to the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I was accepted, but decided to defer my enrollment into GSLIS for one year so I could test the English Lit job market one last time.

That last year, I only had one job interview. Two months passed without hearing back, and I realized my goose was cooked. I was no longer wanted in the profession I had devoted the last dozen years of my life to. I declined an offer to adjunct again the following year and, with a mixture of relief and terror, went all-in for library school. Switching careers gave me the opportunity to pay attention to the things I overlooked the first time I was in graduate school. When I started the Ph.D. program in 1999, I was a young, idealistic student who wanted to soak up as much great literature, theory, and research as I could. Getting a job wasn’t a primary concern, even though I was a first-generation college student from a middle-class background. I hadn’t taken advantage of the opportunities to professionalize that I should have, and I’m confident these oversights hurt me on the job market.

I was determined to do things differently the second time around. In fact, in a now-infamous 2012 article published by Forbes, the LIS degree was rated the “No. 1 Worst Master’s Degree for Jobs.” I learned along the way that having a degree from a top-tier school made a huge difference. As a result, I chose to attend UIUC, the school with the top-ranked library program in the country. I began my new life by immediately relocating to Champaign in order to take advantage of the school’s knowledgeable librarians and numerous libraries.

While I waited for classes to begin, I took every volunteer gig I could, and one of them eventually became a graduate assistantship. Before my first class at GSLIS, I met with six librarians to introduce myself and share with them my goals and ambitions. One of those informational interviews led to a second assistantship at UIUC’s Literatures and Languages library.

Once coursework began, I took courses that covered a wide swath of specializations within librarianship, such as reference, cataloging and metadata, databases, displays and exhibits, archives, special collections, and administration. One of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of a PhD is specialization. With this second degree, I wanted to avoid the specialization of my PhD program, so that my marketability wasn’t confined to a very small segment of the profession.

Throughout the two-year process, I was often seized by doubt. I asked myself: “Have I made the right decision?” “Is this worth it?” “Will it work out?” “Am I a failure?” Much of this can be traced back to the amount of loan debt I acquired. I also asked myself, “Will I be able to get a job that will allow me to make my loan payments?”
Once it was time to go on the market, I overcame my self-doubt and applied to 50 jobs, ultimately securing seven phone interviews. This was great compared to my previous job market experiences. After a dodgy first interview, I got much better. But still no luck landing a job. I was competing with much younger, more tech-savvy applicants. Undaunted, I solicited advice from recent hires and asked them how I should approach the interviewing process. With the sixth attempt, I netted my first campus visit, which resulted in finally getting a tenure-track position: Library Liaison to the English Department at James Madison University at the rank of Assistant Professor.

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