Advice for mentors for treating mentees who leave academe with respect (opinion)

Submitted by Robert Alford on January 15, 2020 - 3:00am

My story is pretty typical for a Ph.D. who chose to pursue work beyond the academy. I loved my research and teaching, but I grew more and more disenchanted with academe the longer I was on the job market and experienced the asymmetry between what the industry requires and what it provides in return.

I experienced a couple of breaking points, the first being the realization that I wouldn’t want to professionalize anyone into a career that would probably treat them poorly. The second point came when my mentor suggested I pursue adjunct work until the right visiting assistant professor position, until the right postdoc, until the right tenure-track job and so forth. I had already explored other career options by that point, and that exchange only confirmed that such a liminal and conditional life wasn’t for me.

The good news is that I’m happy with the outcome, and I’ve found work that is rewarding to me. I’m now a member of the advancement team of my undergraduate alma mater, a leading liberal arts college. The most important thing for me is supporting higher education, and with this work, I play an integral role in helping an institution I love fulfill its educational mission. I also get to find creative solutions to problems on a day-to-day basis, see them take effect, collaborate productively with colleagues and lead a more reliably nine-to-five life -- all things I value that are significantly harder as an academic.

I always knew, however, that my choice to shift away from the academic track would have consequences for my relationships with past academic mentors. This reality recently presented itself to me in full force when I was catching up with a former mentor who led our conversation with, “I imagine you must not
be using your brain very much at work, and that must be nice so you can focus on other things.”

Needless to say, I was insulted and hurt. Exchanges with friends who made career choices like mine have revealed similar experiences, and many have excommunicated themselves from the academy because they didn’t want (or need) to negotiate the fallout. Indeed, one friend said that I suffered from being “too close” with this professor for my own good. To be fair, I’ve also had many positive exchanges with former professors about my path, but these have largely come from relationships without the same level of investment.

There are many possible causes for the exchange I had with my mentor, one being that fundraising is often stigmatized in higher education despite the work it makes possible. But the more germane issue here is that many academics, especially humanists, have difficulty negotiating the boundary between personal and professional life -- or between the work they can envision for themselves and the work they see their students pursuing.

To be fair, the profession doesn’t really encourage such a division. Those who succeed often have to give up control over where they live and add considerable complication to important relationships. At its core, scholarship is also about developing and iterating one’s own views and persona for other scholars, and many of us who found a place in the humanities did so to explore issues that are personally meaningful. It is profoundly easy to lose track of the division between personal and professional identities in this field, which only makes the work of professionalizing one’s students and navigating what many have described as an “erotics [1] of pedagogy [2]” all the more complicated. Given all of the sacrifices that academe requires, I can empathize with those of you who are mentors that it may feel like loss, disappointment or even a breakup when a promising student chooses not to continue down the path you’ve presented to them.

As one of those students, however, I can also say that it isn’t reasonable, fair or appropriate to conflate the choice to pursue other careers as failure, betrayal or laziness -- and doing so only adds insult to injury. After all that has been written on the subject, I don’t think I need to make the case that the academy graduates far more scholars than can find worthwhile work, or that
many feel that they aren’t prepared for other types of work and end up settling for jobs that lack security and proper compensation or benefits.

It is ethically and morally important that senior academics change their views of what constitutes success for Ph.D. graduates. To that end, I’m offering some compassionate takeaways for academic mentors to think about moving forward. For anyone directly impacted by the state of the market over the past 10-plus years (as either a mentor or mentee), my recommendations will not seem especially surprising. But if you are a mentor, I hope they help you consider the reality of academic overprofessionalization and the perceived loss of your mentees.

**Pursuing a Ph.D. must be understood and framed as a path for professionalization along multiple tracks.** Unlike many grad students, I was lucky enough to benefit from a professionalization seminar that prepared me for academic positions by teaching me to publish in respected journals, develop a strong teaching portfolio and complete an appropriate amount of service work. Any concern about the scarcity of suitable work was deflected with a range of responses, including: “If you follow these steps you will not have to worry about that,” “it may take longer than you would like, but it will happen eventually” and “the right job will turn up.” But these tenets grew less persuasive for me after I had exhausted the teaching work guaranteed to me as a graduate student and learned that many of the “right jobs” were posted with candidates already in mind.

Pursuing a Ph.D.-level education is not a zero-sum game contingent on an eventual tenure-track job, and it will set students up in a much better position if you consider the worst-case scenario (which should really be that your students end up feeling unhappy and unprepared after a very long degree program) rather than focusing on the best possible outcome. Anecdotally, most faculty feel ill prepared to advise students for jobs beyond the academic track, but that should not keep you from addressing the reality that many people who pass through your program may pursue other work.

As individuals, no one expects you to somehow change how the academy works, but your students will be grateful if you make clear that it’s perfectly acceptable and potentially wise to think of other options. It’s also important that
this messaging comes from faculty members directly, rather than through occasional emails from department managers or other administrative staff about the activities of the career office. If the thought of this messaging coming from you turns your stomach, that’s probably a good indication that you still need to come to terms with the state of the profession and that you may be causing harm despite best intentions.

**Students who leave the academy as scholars are not failing themselves, the field or you.** Secure and well-paying jobs are on the decline for academics, but at a structural level the academy has been slow to respond. No one is personally responsible for the loss of promising scholars, and it doesn’t mean that anyone has failed (yourself included) if your students pursue other work. If you’re doing your best to prepare your mentees for a range of possibilities postgraduation, and they are trying to find the right audiences and employers for them, everything is on track.

If you are concerned about your discipline’s loss of a certain voice, try to use whatever influence you have to redirect the field or to support the publication of work by those who leave the academy. As someone who is an intellectual product of interdisciplinarity, I can speak personally to the need for more stable work within area studies and emergent fields; those jobs are far too rare for the many scholars whom the academy produces but can’t house as employees.

**Your students will always be your students. If they enter administrative roles in the academy, they can also be your allies.** You don’t need to lose the relationships that you spent years building because your students choose to pursue other kinds of work. Many of the skills your students gain over the course of their studies -- especially writing, editing, teaching and project management -- are transferrable and valuable in other fields. Likewise, they will continue to use the frames for thinking that you helped them develop to approach and interpret the new contexts they enter.

Given that higher education is one of the few areas where many of your graduates will have actual domain knowledge beyond their research specializations, some of them may ultimately enter the field in an administrative capacity. Someday you may be lucky enough to have them as colleagues (albeit in a role you probably never imagined), and they can be
some of your most vocal administrative allies. But if you give them the impression that you think this kind of work is somehow disappointing or beneath them, it will be harder for both of you to have a productive and rewarding working relationship.

**Respect the choices your mentees make.** If you could respect your mentees as scholars, you can respect them as people who aren’t scholars. It may be hard to accept, but if a mentee chooses to leave the academy, they are likely acting in their own best interests, and you can be sure that their decision-making process was difficult and complicated. Just because it’s a choice you didn’t or wouldn’t make yourself doesn’t make it any less valid.

This issue is far bigger and more complex than I can address properly in one essay. But I do hope that it helps continue to spark an important conversation, and I welcome thoughts and responses from mentors and mentees alike.

**Author Bio:**

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