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**You Have the M.A. What Now?**

***Some career-planning tips for master's students who decide to leave academe without a Ph.D.***



*Image: Brian Taylor for The Chronicle*

By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong

As career counselors for graduate students, we often hear from people who are (or were) in a master's program and are uncertain about their career options. Some of them intended to seek a Ph.D. but opted to leave academe with an M.A. or M.S. We thought that in this month's column, we would focus on evaluating career goals for such students.

**Jenny:** We are focusing here on "research" master's degrees—programs designed to expose students to higher-level graduate study. Students in those programs either are interested in going on to pursue a Ph.D. or view a master's degree as an added credential to help their career in a nonacademic sector. (We're not referring to professional master's degrees, such the M.S.W., J.D., M.B.A., or M.Ed.) Although there are differing opinions on the value of the master's degree within higher education, research-master's-degree programs do often provide students with an engaging curriculum and a chance to test whether further study is the right choice for them.

In a research master's program, you can deepen your knowledge of a field that has sparked your intellectual curiosity. It does not, however, always make for a linear career path. Take the time to consider whether earning a master's will further your career goals. (Ask the department some pointed questions about alumni and outcomes.) Be sure it will be the right choice for you financially.

**Julie:** Employers won't immediately recognize the value of a graduate degree, whether it's a master's or a Ph.D. That attitude is illustrated in a recent [*Dilbert*](http://dilbert.com/strips/comic/2013-05-24) comic in which a character says, "I have no real-world experience and I am incompetent at everything. But unlike any of you, I have a Ph.D., and that means you have to take me seriously."

The skepticism with which these degrees are greeted is incredibly frustrating for people who have worked hard to attain one. You know your degree has enhanced your skills, in ways that may not be obvious to an employer. It's the job seeker's role to make clear to employers—in résumés, cover letters, and in interviews—how this degree sets you apart.

**Jenny:** If you are pursuing a research master's degree (or thinking about it), you need a career plan that goes beyond applying to a Ph.D. program. Graduate study is very different from undergraduate work, and you may discover during your master's program that you do not want to pursue a doctorate at all. You may find that an academic career is not the best fit for you. And even if you do seek a Ph.D., you aren't guaranteed to get a tenure-track job—quite the contrary.

So think carefully: Where are you hoping this master's will take you? What skills do you hope to gain, in addition to deepening your knowledge of an academic subject? Be sure to read what others think about graduate study—from William Pannapacker's [columns](http://chronicle.com/article/Graduate-School-in-the/44846) to Dan Rather's recent report [*PhDDon't*](http://www.axs.tv/ui/inc/show_transcripts.php?ami=A9779&amp;t=Dan_Rather_Reports&amp;en=808), and everything in between.

**Julie:** We often see students who have entered a master's program with little or no previous work experience. If that is your situation, you may find that your search for full-time work post-degree will be challenging. So make sure you are taking steps to advance your career as you work on your studies. Take the time to do an internship to enhance your résumé. Begin networking and informational interviewing now. Find out what M.A. graduates of your program from the last few years are doing. Make connections with people who are working in fields of interest to you. Be systematic—give yourself a goal of connecting with one new person a week, and see where that takes you.

**Jenny:** If you are currently employed and are hoping the degree will help you to move in a new direction, be sure that you've done your homework on that. Do you have a precise sense of what you'd like your next career move to be? Are you hoping to change industries or job functions? What skills do you need to gain to do that? It's possible that a master's is not the only qualification you need to make a change; you may have to do an internship or take a lower-paid position in a new field. Is that realistic for you?

**Julie:** For those of you who had planned to pursue a Ph.D. but are now considering leaving with only a master's—you are not alone. We've seen students leave graduate programs and go on to exciting and engaging careers. But that, like any career transition, takes time and planning. There are plenty of resources available on your campus to help you map out your next step.

**Jenny:** For those who came directly to graduate school after their bachelor's, leaving a graduate program after a year or two will often mean looking for entry-level work in a new field. See if your institution has an on-campus recruiting program in which you can participate, or whether you can use resources available at your undergraduate alma mater. Those opportunities are often in the for-profit world—a place you may have been trying to avoid by going right into graduate school. But there is something to be said for developing financial stability while you are young and seeing where it takes you. I think of my sister, who spent 15 years in HR in the banking industry, only to leave it all behind to become a Bikram yoga instructor. We live in an era where people will change careers several times in their lives; your first job will not be your last one.

**Julie:** Students who are leaving graduate school after two or more years will need to strategize carefully. As we wrote in a [previous column](http://chronicle.com/article/From-CV-to-1-Page-R-sum-/138739), you'll want to make sure your résumé accounts for your experience in graduate school. Nothing will raise more flags with potential employers than a résumé that starts with a job from four years ago.

Depending on how much employment experience you have, you may find that you have to start with an [internship](http://chronicle.com/article/Finding-an-Internship-to/137007) or other part-time, entry-level work in your chosen field. That can be a difficult pill to swallow, but it is often something that can be done while you are still enrolled in graduate school.

**Jenny:** Read job announcements closely and note what resonates with your degree program and your goals. In fact, this is something all graduate students should be doing regularly, even if they are not looking for a position. Get a sense of what's out there, so you are prepared to take your next step.

Julie and I know that when we say this to students, they think it is lackluster advice. But as professionals who are constantly reading job announcements—both those we post and those students bring to us—we can tell you that reading those ads is a good starting point for understanding what employers are looking for.

**Julie:** As career counselors, we always find ourselves repeating this mantra: Networking and [informational interviewing](http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Do-an-Informational/44793) are crucial to any job search. Anyone can build a network and conduct informational interviews. And it's important to start doing both long before your graduation date. What you learn in such semiformal interactions can help you better understand the language of the field that interests you as well as see where your skills, knowledge, and accomplishments can fit.

**Jenny:** As you apply to openings, shape your résumé to reflect the field and the jobs to which you are applying. If you did a project that is relevant in some way to the position, talk about the work in your cover letter. These interviews can be a good time to get feedback. You may find someone who is willing to look at your résumé and tell you what works and what doesn't.

**Julie:** It is also a good idea to join a professional association. That gives you a chance to learn more about what's happening in a particular profession, see new job postings, participate in workshops and conferences, and meet people. A master's in art history who is applying for grant-writing jobs in museums and cultural organizations may find it helpful to join the [American Grant Writers Association](http://www.agwa.us). An M.A. in anthropology applying for a research position at a center, institute, or museum may learn about openings by joining the [American Alliance of Museums](http://www.aam-us.org). And the M.A. in English hoping for a career at a university press could benefit from joining the [American Association of University Presses](http://www.aaupnet.org).

**Jenny:** Don't wait until the last minute. Too often we see students who have postponed their job search until after graduation, or until the month before they will need a job. We recognize that it is challenging to balance academic responsibilities with networking and applying for jobs. Spend some time planning your next career step from the beginning of your master's program onward. Set aside a few hours a week to work on your career. Doing so will make you a more confident and more informed job seeker who can articulate your value and fit to potential employers.

*Julie Miller Vick recently retired as senior associate director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jennifer S. Furlong is director of the office of career planning and professional development at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. They are the authors of "The Academic Job Search Handbook" (University of Pennsylvania Press). Send your career questions to careertalk@chronicle.com, or post them in the comments section below.*

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