

I Don't Want To Be a Professor. Now What?!

Chelsea Clark, *Chelsea Clark Consulting, LLC*

I completed my PhD at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 2014. The day after my commencement ceremony, I moved across the country to live in Carmel, Indiana—finally the same city as my then boyfriend (now husband). After nearly a year unsuccessfully job searching, I began writing about my experiences transitioning from the academy to the “real world.” The following are some of my early musings. You may have some of the same thoughts, hopes, and fears that I had. If so, be encouraged to continue pursuing your passion—within the realm of academia or beyond it!

April 2015: If you'd told me a few years ago I'd be living in Indiana and starting my own business, I never would have believed you. Before, I was looking outward at what possibilities already existed “out there” that I could safely choose from. That was tough—I struggled to find an occupation that I was truly passionate about.

I was never the kind of kid who “knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.” In high school, my jobs were completely unrelated (singing instructor; janitor; hospital record keeper). In college, I earned two majors (history and political science) plus two minors (philosophy and psychology). In grad school, I split my time between the political science and social psychology departments. My dissertation examined romantic relationships!

So of course when I moved to the Indianapolis area after finishing my PhD and began looking for a job, it was impossible to find a listing that matched my “diverse” educational and employment background. I did all the things I thought a good new graduate was supposed to do: plastered my resume everywhere; signed up for online job boards; applied to jobs I was way overqualified for; applied to jobs I was *not* qualified for; grabbed coffee to “network” with anyone who would give me five minutes of their day; created a weekly email update to send to contacts informing them of my search process and job prospects in case they had any appropriate connections; wrote, and rewrote my resume; wrote many versions of my cover letter; dressed up and went to job interviews I knew I was too qualified for; went to job interviews I knew I was *not* qualified for; read books about the job search process; read books on effective networking; got my hopes up that something was going to come through; got my hopes dashed because it didn't; was excited ... was depressed ... was bored ... was stressed...

Then along the way, I connected with two different organizations looking for contractual help. The first opportunity was with a consumer research firm needing someone to conduct

and analyze focus groups. The second opportunity was with faculty at a local university needing someone to design and run a leadership study. While continuing to job search, I also found myself playing the role of a home-based independent consultant, and I really liked it.

Didn't see that coming! Nor did I expect to enjoy the less than safe option of looking inward and building my own career path, instead of outward and choosing from the list of options that already existed. I had to stop and reflect on what I loved to do—what I was most passionate about: knowledge, research, people, relationships, and the social sciences. So I decided to start my own home-based consulting business where I could study the things I cared about.

How did a political scientist turned accidental entrepreneur learn what it would take to build a business? By doing research! I began my transformation process looking to the experts for information and advice. I hadn't planned to become an entrepreneur—and as it turns out—neither had a lot of other people who operate very successful home-based consulting firms today. In his book, *Start & Run A Consulting Business*, Douglas Gray (2010) defines a consultant as “someone who has expertise in a specific area or areas and offers unbiased opinions and advice for a fee. The opinion or advice is rendered exclusively in the interests of the client and can cover review, analysis, recommendations, and implementation.”

I broke apart this definition to see if I fit. Was I someone with expertise in specific areas? I had extensive knowledge of research design, data analysis, political science, the social sciences broadly, human relationships, and the scientific method. Could I offer unbiased opinions and advice? To me, that sounded a lot like the scientific method applied to real-world scenarios. Would my opinions and advice cover things like review, analysis, recommendations, and implementation? The work I performed for the market research company involved running focus groups (implementation) and going through audio/video footage afterwards to see what we'd learned (review, analysis, recommendations); the work I was performing for the university faculty members involved building a literature review of relevant books and articles (review), in-depth interviewing (implementation), examining the data collected from the interviews (analysis), and designing a survey instrument based on the interview findings (recommendations).

What I was doing and hoped to do fit well with Gray's definition. More importantly, it helped me begin seeing the transferable skills (developed in my former role: grad student) I could bring to the table (in my new role: independent consultant):

focus group facilitation; in-depth interviewing; literature reviews; data analysis; and survey design.

I started my transition from job seeker to career designer by thinking about what I loved and was passionate about. For me, that was a great start as it got me thinking about what could be, not just what currently was. But thinking only gets you so far. By breaking apart the definition of what it meant to consult, I was able to come up with a list of valuable services I could provide clients that became the foundation of my business plan.

So You Don't Want to Be a Professor Either...

In June 2015, I founded Chelsea Clark Consulting, LLC, a relationship research design and analysis consultancy. Six months later, I have had the opportunity to consult on projects in the academic, corporate, and nonprofit sectors. I love the flexibility of working from home and making my own schedule. I can say “YES” to projects that excite me and “NO” to projects that either don't mesh with my skillset or aren't aligned with my vision for my company. And no two days are exactly the same!

Granted, the life of a consultant is sometimes chaotic, as you're constantly pulled in many directions juggling multiple projects. Consulting also lacks the stability and certainty that comes with a traditional job (especially a tenured professorship!). But if you've decided to branch out and pursue a career outside of academia and you're willing to take risks, consulting might be the perfect opportunity for you to use the research skills you've been developing over the past five plus years while pursuing your PhD.

HOW POLITICAL SCIENCE DEPARTMENTS COULD PREPARE STUDENTS FOR JOBS OUTSIDE ACADEMIA

Although I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life post-grad school, I knew that I didn't want to become a professor. I had some fabulous instructors in college and grad school. My dissertation advisor at UNC was especially engaging and supportive. But teaching is not my calling and a life filled with syllabi, power point lectures, and grading was not what I aspired to. For this reason, I knew I needed to leave the academy after I finished school.

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The #1 thing that political science PhD programs could do to better prepare their students for jobs “outside of academia” is to acknowledge that not all students seeking PhDs aspire to the professorship—and that's ok! In fact, given the current academic job market and limited number of placement opportunities, having some of your grad student population seeking alternative employment opportunities is a good thing and may even improve PhD program job placement rates.

I don't know how it is in every political science department across the country, but in my department and in other departments where I had friends studying, announcing that you weren't planning to pursue a career in higher education was academic suicide. For this reason, I hid my true vocational intentions from faculty in my department. It was assumed that everyone wanted to be a professor. Anyone who didn't aspire to this calling was a second-class citizen and could at least expect to be marginalized within the department—if not worse. Earning your PhD is a daunting task already. Having to hide your true career goals and toe the “academic track” line for five years (or more) for fear of retribution is discouraging and exhausting.

Moreover, not being able to share your career goals with department faculty and staff means you fail to receive any job training or placement support during your grad school career. The second most important thing that political science programs could be doing for their students is providing opportunities for students to learn about alternative career options, to explore their individual interests, and to prepare for the non-academic job search process.

Simple things would go a long way. Departments could host resume writing workshops. In grad school, we're taught how to write our CVs, but a resume is an entirely different animal. Outside of the academy, very few people care about your conference presentations, teaching experiences, or even publications (shocking, I know!).

Departments could also provide career counseling services or courses that would prepare students for careers outside of the academy. At Carolina, I was required to take a semester-long teaching course where we learned how to develop a syllabus, lead a class, and deal with student issues. There were also academic placement services that helped students prepare for job talks, search for academic jobs, and create application packets to send to schools.

Since I had no intention of becoming a professor, more useful courses or seminars could have focused on describing the career opportunities for political science PhDs in non-academic sectors, how the business world differs from the academy (including things like different lingo and definitions of “success”), and advice about how and where to begin looking for alternative job opportunities.

At the end of my fourth year, I finally told my dissertation advisor that although I was intending to complete my dissertation and graduate the following year, I wasn't going on the job market because I wasn't planning to pursue a career in academia. My advisor was sympathetic. While he would have liked to see me become a college professor, he knew I needed to do what was right for me. He offered to support me in any way he could, but admitted that he really didn't have many connections outside of academia nor did he have a lot of advice

for pursuing alternative career opportunities. If political science departments developed resources (courses, workshops, even a reading list or job search database for non-academic careers), they could share this information with their students and help them transition from the academy to business, the nonprofit sector, policy institutes, or wherever the students' career aspirations led them.

In the meantime, for any of you currently pursuing a political science PhD who knows you're not interested in becoming a professor, start exploring alternative career opportunities now—while you're in school. Don't wait until you graduate (like I did) to figure out what you want to do and how to do it. Talk to career counselors at your university. Learn how to network in the non-academic world. Read many books and

articles about job opportunities for PhDs, like this article: <http://cheekyscientist.com/phd-jobs/> (Hankel, n.d.). Write your resume and cover letter and have people review it. And whatever you do, don't let anyone change your mind. If you want to be a political science professor, fantastic! I wish you the very best. But if you don't, figure out what you love to do—and then go do it. ■

REFERENCES

Gray, Douglas. 2010. *Start & Run a Consulting Business: Learn from a Successful Consultant How to Get People to Pay for Your Opinion*. Canada: Self-Counsel Press.

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