Essay on defining 'alt-ac' for new Ph.D. job searches

Submitted by Brenda Bethman and C. Shaun Longstreet on May 22, 2013 - 3:00am

First used on Twitter around three years ago in a conversation [1] between Bethany Nowviskie and Jason Rhody "alt-ac" was shorthand for "alternative academic" careers. At the time the term was, in Nowviskie's words, [2] "a pointed push-back against the predominant phrase, 'nonacademic careers.' 'Non-academic' was the label for anything off the straight and narrow path to tenure."

Three years later, the term "alt-ac" is commonly used to refer to "alternative" careers in (and beyond) the academy. Confusion remains, however, about what exactly alt-ac means, to whose careers it refers, and what alt-ac jobs are available (and in particular how it relates to another term recently emerging on Twitter, postac). In this column, we will give a working definition for our purposes. We are not implying this is the definitive word on alt-ac. Others would define it differently. Instead, we offer our definition in response to our readers who have asked what we mean when we say alt-ac.

In our work both here at Inside Higher Ed and through Alt Academix, [3] (through which we provide consulting and workshops on alt-ac careers) we primarily use alt-ac as an umbrella term to refer to full-time non-teaching and non-research positions within higher education. These can be staff or administrative positions, and these positions may (and often do) include teaching and/or research duties, but teaching and research are not the primary focus of the position. There are also comparable alt-ac positions beyond campus; many alt-ac types are found among public historians, librarians, museum curators, independent scholars, professional writers, etc.

To get an idea of the variety of things alt-ac and postac folks do, check out the weekly Q&A posts at From Ph.D. to Life [4]. In many ways, alt-ac is less about the position than it is about the person in the position, as the blog "How to Leave Academia" [5] has also pointed out: alt-ac "is interested in research, publication, and disciplinary conversation. 'Academic' is an active and meaningful identity to an alt-ac person." For us, alt-ac is ultimately "proof that there is a third way — that one can remain within the academy outside of a tenure-track position; teaching, publishing, and living the 'life of the mind,' are all possible if one is willing to consider the myriad number of staff and administrative positions available in the academy."

But what are those positions and what do folks in those positions do? As anyone familiar with higher
education knows, a variety of non-faculty positions can be found on any university campus. They are
located in different areas of campus and include many different titles and duties. Here is a (by no
means comprehensive) breakdown (note that the names of division and locations of positions may
vary by institution. The categories/positions below are fairly representative, however):

- **Academic affairs**: advising, honors/academic resources, admissions, recruitment, first-year
  experience, program centers, women’s centers, LGBTQ resources, abilities services,
  multicultural centers, libraries, digital humanities, educational technology.
- **Student affairs**: residence life, leadership, career services, student health/counseling,
  international services, "bridge" programs, Greek life, extension programs, women’s centers,
  LGBTQ resources.
- **Development and research**: Research offices, grant writing, fund-raising, development.
- **Business affairs**: president’s office, administration, office of the bursar, communications and
  public relations, community affairs, information technology.

What one does in those positions varies greatly, of course. For many of these positions, though, one
can expect to spend a fair amount of time in meetings (as Brenda likes to say, "Meetings are not an
interruption of your work; they are your work"), as well as coordinating and communicating with
many groups (students, faculty, staff, community members) across campus and with the local
community. For most administrative positions, one can add managing budgets, decision-making,
and supervising staff (see Monica Jacobe’s recent advice column [6] here on Inside Higher Ed). For
more examples, many of the pieces at #alt-academy [7] describe the varied work done by people in
alt-ac positions.

On some days, say, when one is stuffing envelopes with invitations for an event, this can feel very
far removed from the type of work done in graduate school. On others, the training provided in a
Ph.D. program does seem very relevant, like using one’s research and writing skills to build a case
for why the administration or a funding agency should support a new initiative.

Alt-ac folks are in all corners of the academy – and beyond it. Preliminary research conducted by
Katina Rogers at the University of Virginia, confirms this. Rogers’ survey focused on alt-ac workers
with humanities Ph.D.s – and the public database [8] compiled via that survey reveals people working
on campuses in positions ranging from teaching center director to librarian to university
advancement and beyond, including people in positions outside of the academy, working in
publishing, at technology websites, as entrepreneurs, and more. While we are not aware of a
database for alt-ac people outside the humanities, there is no doubt that they are also employed in a
variety of positions and fields.

It is this very wide variety of positions and different responsibilities within these positions that makes
simply defining alt-ac, let alone giving advice, difficult. And we try to bear that in mind whenever we
speak. One of the questions we hear when talking to graduate students or academics who want to
move into an alt-ac position is that they do not where to start looking for alt-ac positions. The fact
that alt-ac is so varied does in fact make it a challenge, since job-seekers will need to look in
multiple places. This is not the same as, say, looking for a job in French, which primarily involves
searching through the Modern Language Association Job List. To help alt-ac job seekers, for the
2012 Modern Language Association convention, Brenda compiled a list [9] of places to start looking
for alt-ac jobs (this list also includes other job search resources – and be sure to check out the job
listings right here [10] on Inside Higher Ed). That list can be expanded and we highly recommend
looking at the postings on individual universities and colleges human resources websites. We will
also say, again, **building your network** [11] is always an important step for any job search.

Starting on an alt-ac job search can feel daunting because of the sheer breadth of positions available. Do not let that discourage you. That breadth is what makes alt-ac careers exciting: there truly is something for just about everyone. Likewise, the large spectrum of alt-ac positions allows for more geographical flexibility for those who would like to, or need to, relocate for personal reasons. At the same time, we are not going to claim that landing an alt-ac job requires any less effort than landing a tenure-track position. There are many more alt-ac positions, but they still require effort, research, preparation, and, yes, sometimes luck. If you are interested in moving into alt-ac, putting your extensive research skills to work will certainly help you decide on the path you want to pursue.

**Author Bio:**

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*Bethman and Longstreet are the co-founders of and consultants for Alt Academix.* [3]

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**Links:**

[8] [http://altacademy.wufoo.com/reports/who-we-are/](http://altacademy.wufoo.com/reports/who-we-are/)