

What I Wish I Had Known: Post Academic  
Women and Their Advice for Leaving the  
Academy

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## Introduction

I asked eighty women what they wished they had known before they left the academy. My goal was to better understand what advice they would have given themselves with the benefit of hindsight. I gave them a short survey as well as space to write their own thoughts on the following questions:

- “What do you wish you had known before you left?”
- “What advice would you give someone who is considering leaving?”

*I was unprepared for how honest and thoughtful the responses would be.*

The women who answered were frank in their reflections about the state of the academy. They were also realistic about finding work and what it took to transition their skills. They shared wise and encouraging words without pulling punches about what happened along the way.

Once I read these responses, I knew that I wanted to share their words and thoughts verbatim. I wanted their voices to be heard.

While the survey didn't ask why they left academia, it's clear that reasons varied. Some didn't get a job, some were denied tenure, others had contingent positions that were not renewed and some chose to leave of their own volition. I found respondents through online forums, groups, and an online community of women I founded called The Athenas. More information on joining that community can be found at the end.

## Emotions and Identity

Many respondents described leaving academia as emotionally fraught. Some felt as if they were not only leaving their career and trying to find a new livelihood but also abandoning their identity along with it.

“I wish I had known how long the transition would take, and how high the emotional toll would be. I lost a major part of my identity, though now I am learning that many of the things that made me love academia—it satisfied my unrelenting curiosity, allowed me to work through ideas in long-term projects, helped me constantly raise new questions—are still part of my life and work. I am now trying to find new ways to define myself, and it is frightening but also exciting.”

“Your self-concept has to change, and that is a huge undertaking. It will take time. Be gentle with yourself, be hopeful and optimistic, and find a support network to keep you going when it's hard. Don't settle for a life that's less than you want. There's a whole world out there.”

“DO IT!!! It's so much better out here. But be prepared to totally overhaul your beliefs and values and dreams too.”

*“Your whole identity will change.”*

Respondents wished they had known they would face emotions like anger, sadness, shame, loss, and grief. They said that those emotions lingered throughout the process of leaving and even beyond the transition.

“You're not worthless, and neither is your degree. Academia is great at convincing us we have no value. If you can get yourself to a place where you see the value in yourself and your abilities/education beyond academia, you'll start seeing possibilities again. And that's a really hopeful, abundant feeling.”

“The tremendous sense of loss and grief and anger that I'd feel. How lost I would feel, for years. And that it's relatively common for post-acs to experience this.”

“How angry and betrayed I would feel.”

The transition took longer than respondents expected. They described the shift being more than just “adjusting to a new job” and said that they needed to look at the change in terms of years rather than months.

“Also, don't think this will be a quick transition. So many people told me it takes 3 to 6 months to adjust to a new job, but none of those people understood that a transfer out of academia is far different from switching jobs. Anticipate the adjustment taking no less than a year, but likely several more.”

“Prepare for the transition, read others' stories, know that it may take 3 years before you feel ‘normal’ again.”

Some also described finding a “new narrative” to understand or explain their story and indicate that this changed the way they thought about their career and their work.

“Bridging occasional academic work and journalism can be quite challenging because they're such major mindset shifts. More than I anticipated. While I enjoy consulting from time to time and teaching a class here and there, I find I no longer have patience for the way that academia sucks you in, demanding such intensely deep but narrow attention. Part of what I love about freelancing is I get to learn about a lot of things while constantly working on my skills as a writer and interviewer. I'm sometimes not sure if doing both is sustainable for me long-term.”

“The biggest ‘aha!’ I've had since leaving the academy and starting a business is that, whether the business succeeds or fails, I have changed my narrative. Any interview I walk into

after this, I walk into as an entrepreneur—it's my choice to talk about my academic background or not.”

Respondents discussed needing to find ways to express their own worthiness and the value of their degree. Some found ways to see their choice as valuable even as the academy may have deemed them not worthy.

“I think that what is important is not to pin your self-worth on academic accomplishments. I tell my students, don't wait to ‘start your life’ when you graduate, because it will always be different versions of the same. Live now the way you want to live.”

“You will likely have a greater sense of self worth and that your intellect matters on the outside and just bc u leave academia doesn't mean you don't use those skills or write etc.”

“Self care is not a luxury. And from what I witnessed, politics (and male-bonding over golf) usually have more to do with professional success than actual performance and accomplishment, so don't judge your own merit solely on rewards you may or may not have received.”

*“You are so much more valuable than the academy deems you. Get out and do things in the world!”*

## The Broken Academic System

Women who responded to this survey referred directly and indirectly to the challenges of the academic system as they wrote. For a number of respondents, the discussion began with descriptions of the academic system as “broken,” “unfair,” and “not a meritocracy.”

“Academia is a cult—don't drink the Kool Aid! It is not the only worthy life. And while it's worth it to yourself to get out, finding a job can be difficult.”

“That academia is profoundly unfair. I knew it, but didn't quite believe it.”

“I am always thinking of the systemic violence in academia that forces the most progressive and creative people either to quit or get marginalized (because getting silenced is not an option for them). Sometimes if there is a chance to remain in academia, maybe you can consider it (part time maybe?) because the students need mostly the people who cannot bear academia. Sometimes this chance is impossible so it is better to continue being a scholar outside academia. You never stop being a scholar.”

“Know that the academy routinely expects sacrifices that may be untenable and that it's not the only place where learning and teaching happen.”

“That getting tenure is like winning the lottery, that the system is broken/bankrupt, that there are meaningful ways to use these skills away from the traditional tenure path.”

Some respondents addressed gendered income disparity, toxic environments, anti-intellectualism, and structurally encoded racism.

“It would have been easier to leave earlier if I had understood how white corporate structures work. Only one person told me

that the institution failed me, and that happened to be a woman of color. No one else would admit there was a problem with faculty evaluation. And no one would admit there was a deeply entrenched racial equity problem.”

“That I could have left sooner; that staying in toxic dynamics have long-term effects & it's better to get out sooner than spend extra time recovering. Also, that (at least where I am in the U.S.) a pervasive anti-intellectualism exists that sometimes makes me feel like my intellect and education are stigmatized. But maybe that's because I'm a woman and our culture seems to have a problem with smart and confident women.”

“The huge income disparity between men and women and the ease of mobility for men vs. women in the professional environment.”

Women also discussed issues of misogyny, the abuse they experienced and the uncertainties and financial realities of job searching.

“the pervasive problem of sexual harassment; the impoverishment of an extended job search; the life cycle changes that come with aging throughout the academic process and associated values changes; the extreme difficulty of parenting as an early-career academic.”

“I think that there are multiple processes of becoming ‘post-ac’ but not that it is always a clear cut. I think that neoliberalism has created a fragmented university in which they really benefit from the fact that people are willing to sacrifice so much... because of how it plays into identity, passion and how we see ourselves in the world. This is precisely why we get set up for abuse. However, it is also sometimes not orienting ourselves to play the game in the way the implicit rules are set up—perhaps putting mentoring or teaching ahead of publishing in a way that ultimately sets us up to be squeezed out of the academy.”



*“That the instances of misogyny are endemic, not just one-offs. Also, it’s not a meritocracy as it likes to think it is.”*

## Outside the Academy

Respondents reflected on how people viewed them once they had left their academic positions. Most suggested that people they worked with outside of the academy didn't believe it was negative to leave.

“No one in professional life outside the academy thinks it's weird to leave the academy.”

“It only seems like a big deal as long as you are in academia. ... you are certainly going to ask yourself what it was all about and why it seemed like such a difficult thing to do.”

“I work in a library and have found my colleagues there to be smarter, more engaged, more open-minded, and more giving than the vast majority of academics.”

“I'm a post-tenure post-ac. I don't regret leaving at all, as I wanted to pursue other things. But even if you are leaving before that, no one outside academia sees it as bad.”

“There is no shame in it, it's a perfectly legitimate career path.”

*“Follow your passion and believe in yourself. The people who care most about academia are inside it. No one else cares. This realization can be liberating.”*

Respondents addressed the importance of learning how to talk about their departure from the academy and how to market themselves.

“Do your research & have a plan how to ‘tell your story’ of your life in the academy to non-academic colleagues & employers.”

“That it was all about marketing and strategic relationships.”

Several women also discussed how valued their skills were outside of the academy and how much their credentials and skills helped them when they left.

“That I would still have the opportunities to use many of my skills from academia, but for much wider audiences—and have much more fun using them! I also wish I'd known that academic validation was not the only form of validation or measure of self-worth.”

“How valuable my skills and knowledge are—along with my degree. I heard **constantly** during grad school that a PhD was a bad thing to have on your resume if you left academia—it sounded like b-s to me then, and what do you know, it IS b-s!”

“That there's a big wide world of opportunities out there and that ‘Plan B’ is in no way inferior to academia.”

“That it would feel so liberating, and that people would take me so seriously.”

“You will also find many people in the business world who respect your past and many who simply cannot relate to it. Many don't think highly of professors, sadly.”

*“How much potential clients would still value my academic credentials. They love it that I have a PhD!”*

For some it was surprising that they would be seen as impressive outside the academic world. They learned they had skills that were much more marketable than they imagined.

“And when you do begin working outside of academia, know that it is going to feel very, very uncomfortable for a while. You are not just getting a new job, but making a career transition and creating a new identity for yourself. This was disorienting to a degree I could not have anticipated. But, because you are equipped with a number of unique skills, have high-

level training, and are likely extremely thorough in your work, you will impress those around you—even if you actually have no idea what you're doing.”

“My non-academic work, volunteering on university-wide committees and a graduate fellowship working in an administrative office, were absolutely key in securing my first alt-ac job. Don't neglect opportunities to develop ‘non-academic’ skills while you're still in the academy.”

“If you've weathered academia, you are pretty tough and capable. Know that going in to whatever you are going to pursue and don't worry too much about your ‘lack’ in specific expertise or a set of experience. It might take time, but you are sure to succeed.”

Several individuals throughout the survey expressed confusion about being in or out of the academy. They didn't feel the lines between the academy and outside of the academy were clear.

“I'm confused as to where ‘higher education administration’ lies (inside or outside the academy). I also am not sure what it means to leave it, or at what point you've definitively left or decided to stay. I feel like these categories need more fluidity.”

“I'm not sure if I'm inside or outside the academy.”

## Advice

When asked for advice on what they wished they had known, women who had left the academy were clear on how important networking and finding a community was to the transition.

“Build as vast a network of friendly and professional contacts as you can, because that is likely how you will find work outside of the academy.”

“I should have built more professional connections to enable finding a job in the field (and there were still no guarantees...)”

“Don't be afraid to. And don't be afraid of networking—it's just talking to people in your field or in your circles, and including your career story (and theirs).”

“start networking. there are a million opportunities out there, it's exciting! the best way to find those opportunities is to talk to people, find out what they're doing, pass out business cards, do informational interviews.”

“Ask questions from ‘academics’ in applied practice.”

“Network, network, network. There's no reason current academics shouldn't go to meetups (social, professional, or otherwise) anyway, and that's the most likely way to get that first private sector job.”

“I wish I had known there were networks of people that actually got each other jobs/gigs. That networking actually could have tangible \$ outcomes. And also that the world is so interested in what I have to share about what I learned during academic research if I can share it in an accessible way.”

Respondents also discussed the importance of social media to find new networks and job opportunities.

“Start networking yesterday!! Learn to use LinkedIn and do informational interviews to figure out what fields look interesting to you.”

“And get active on social media before you go...”

Respondents talked about finding support through informational interviews, finding mentors, as well as working with career counselors, therapists, coaches, and others who focus on people with Ph.D.’s leaving academia.

“1. Do many informational interviews with those who've already done it. 2. Identify a mentor or mentors. 3. Know what you like and don't like about academia and what you want to change about your specific situation. 4. Be open to what you may find outside of academia. 5. Fly!!”

“Finding a supportive therapist and getting on (multiple) antidepressants was crucial for me. This is a major life transition and there were times when I felt nothing but an impending sense of doom. Take advantage of all the tools at your disposal to get through it, and you will land back on your feet.”

“See if your alumni office offers free or discounted career counseling or résumé services. Seeing a career counselor has been invaluable for me. Also, look for support outside of academia: one of my best connections has been with a local women's networking group. Lots of people are trying to make something new work for them.”

“Ask for help and support from other post-acs. Join groups like VPhD. They've been great for networking and emotional support.”

“Seek out support; specific-to-you support. I don't think I'd be where I am right now without working with a coach whose job it was to help me get over the emotional and mental hurdle of no longer being Professor.”

“Have something to hold onto to buoy you through.”

“There are communities and resources and much greater possibilities now than there were when I left 6 years ago. Leaving now feels like less a mark of shame than it did.”

*“Take the leap—we are out here to support you.”*

Some mentioned ways to do the research before leaving graduate school or an academic position, including thinking through what you want out of a new career and making a point to get new skills before you leave.

“While still employed, take your time to fully research alternative career paths and gain additional skills.”

“Find out about alternatives asap. Do informational interviews. Gain the skills you need to leave.”

“Give serious thought to the range of possibilities for work/earning income outside the academy, and do research about this. I see far too many academics thinking, for example, that they can readily find work as freelance writers or editors without adequate preparation for the nature of the work, how to look for it, and the levels of compensation. Know yourself, your goals, and your skills. Network, contribute, build contracts and resources before you leave. Yes, you can change your mind about what you'd like to do, but this sort of preparation will still come in handy.”

“How my skills, developed through my doctoral training, could be applied in other forms of work. How I could find work which is intellectually stimulating and challenging outside of academia.”

*“Do whatever you can to figure out what you want to do—and trust yourself. Then start researching that field, reading up, and reaching out to people. Ask for*

*help! But have a positive goal, not just a negative desire to leave a bad situation.”*

Respondents said that discerning what you like and don't like about the work you've done is a good way to make sure your next job suits you better.

“If you're feeling stuck, try to figure out if the problem is your job, your institution, your town, your colleagues, or what—as precisely as possible. Be brutally honest with yourself about what really makes you happy. And try to let go of status anxiety, as hard as that is for academics...”

“Take something in an area you want to be in now, quietly—and be willing to consider everything from intern to freelancer to expert talking head and see lands for your knowledge, style, etc.”

“If you are questioning it, something is telling you that it isn't a good fit for you. Listen to yourself and your needs and do what you need to do in order to feel respected, fulfilled, and happy. Leave.”

“1. What kind of life do you want to be living at age 65? How closely does your current life (especially circle of friends/acquaintances) resemble that life? 2. Consider the past two weeks of work you have done for this job. What percentage of it gives you a sense of purpose? What percentage of it can you picture yourself doing for the next 20+ years while maintaining mentally and physically healthy? 3. Consider your responses for 1 and 2, and decide whether or not it is wise to stay.”

“Do what is right for YOU. No one should pressure you to stay or go.”



*“Follow your gut. I ignored mine for years and suffered greatly. Leaving academia as I knew it wasn't easy, but I am so happy on the other side.”*

Many talked about the challenges of financial instability when leaving and the need for a “safety net” or a plan. Some relied on partners for help as they made the transition.

“Make sure that you have a very good safety net and that you have a good plan for how you'll generate income. Once you leave the academy (in my experience), it's hard to get back in.”

“Be prepared to cope with financial instability and the redefining yourself thing. But it's a set of conditions, not a reason not to leave.”

“My husband's work supports our family. That is why I am able to adjunct when I like, but I don't seek out with anywhere near the desperation I had right after grad school. It took 5 years for me to feel at peace with leaving academia. Now that I feel that way, I am teaching the classes I want to teach full time (adjunct) and my book is being published by an excellent press in my field. I'm fortunate that I can do this for fun, but I don't believe that anyone should receive a PhD for a hobby. Sadly, this is the direction the academy is headed—reserved for the wealthy few.”

*“You don't need to have a grand plan. Just make sure you know how you're going to eat for the next six months, and make it work.”*

Several mentioned the challenges of job seeking outside the academy and noted that, while it is different than the academic job market, there are some benefits.

“It's hard to find a job outside academia, but there are also way more options and career moves possible. Don't expect any-

body to wait for your application, but be proactive in seeking people out who have careers that you find interesting to learn from them and to build a professional network.”

“Yes, you have no idea what else you could possibly do for work/as a career. But the thing is that MOST PEOPLE have no idea what they're going to do for work/as a career. Opportunities arise in a semi-random fashion and one is swept along in the course of events. Rather than being terrifying, this is a comforting fact. Nobody has it sorted out already. Amazing opportunities await that you could never have dreamed up yourself in a million years.”

“I wish I knew that the gig economy is huge and growing. It's utterly normal to just go into business for yourself. Jobs are scarce outside the academy, too, though not as scarce as they are inside it.”

## Connection to the Academy

Some respondents found more intellectual freedom outside the academy than within it. They felt they could still engage in intelligent conversations and continue to be a scholar without a committee's stamp of approval.

"That I do not need to be an academic to be smart, insightful, etc. and that there are PLENTY of non-academics who have curious minds, read books, and critically analyze the world."

"That there is so much more intellectual freedom outside of academia."

"DO IT. The world is bigger and more important than the petty ego games and minor squabbling of university life. You can publish your manuscript without pressure or fear because you wrote an interesting book that you can be proud of. Those on the TT make uncomfortable compromises, but so much is open to you!"

"There are a lot of ways of contributing to the causes and issues that we see as important, and academic contributions are just one."

### *"Post academic does not mean unacademic."*

At the same time, respondents did miss parts of the academy and expressed a longing for being inside.

"I do miss being around students and their energy—that is the biggest drawback for leaving academia."

"Be confident that you have lots of valuable skills and experience to bring to your work, but also be aware that academia is a highly stratified and elitist world, and that once you are 'outside' you are often fairly invisible to the 'inside' of academia."

"That I had a lot of power as an academic, and that I'd have a lot less afterward."

“How much I would miss it.”

“You may lose some of your community and ‘friends.’”

“Be prepared to make some major sacrifices.”

*“I felt like if you leave you cannot come back. But I no longer feel that way. Why couldn't you come back? Especially if you've remained active in producing knowledge in your field.”*

## Conclusion

For most of these women, the transition they faced in leaving the academy was emotionally challenging and involved an identity shift. Women learned to tell new stories about their post-academic lives and new skills to get jobs.

Many were critical of their experiences in the academy and while some had challenges finding work once they left, they found that their new colleagues were more supportive than expected, and they had more skills than they knew.

Finally, most women who I surveyed had a positive outlook about their choice. Many wished they had known that they could be really happy outside of the academy.

“I didn't have a choice: I wanted to stay in academy but couldn't find a job. Or at least wasn't willing to pursue post-docs outside the country in order to eventually get a job. I guess during the time I was feeling the height of that rejection I wish I knew how many smart people in my field who are outside academia and happy.”

“Follow your heart! If you aren't happy, make a change.”

“It's ok! It's really not the end of the world.”

“If you're unhappy, it's ok to leave.”

“Be patient, keep moving and do not feel guilty or undeserving of a better life and a nice job.”

## The Athenas

After I left my academic position, I met a lot of women who had found me because they too were considering leaving or had already left the academy.

The stories these women told me led me to understand how many were suffering from a great deal of pain. I heard stories of toxic work environments, university politics, and culturally encoded racism and sexism. I listened as excellent teachers and deeply skilled women talked about how few skills they had. I noticed that these women seemed incredibly smart, but they expressed a loss of self-esteem and sense of self-worth because of their experiences.

I didn't have many answers, but thought these people should hear from one another. So I created The Athenas, an online community of women who understand what it's like to leave academia.

If you are interested in joining our community, send an email to [postacathenas at gmail](mailto:postacathenas@gmail.com).