

PLANT PATHOLOGY

**OPEN POST
ACADEMICS**

+HCI+FRENCH LIT-

ERATURE+MARINE SCI-

ENCE+LINGUISTICS

+THEORETICAL

LEAVING THE ACADEMY

PHYSICS+MUSICOLO-

GY+NURSING+NEURO-

SCIENCE+ART HISTO-

RY+MATHEMATICS+BIO

TECHNOLOGIES+EARTH

SCIENCE+INFOR-

MATICS+GEOSCIENCES

+MECHANICAL ENGI-

**June
2023**

LEAVING THE ACADEMY ACADEMY

Open Post Academics

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Written by Beth M. Duckles (co-lead), Borhane Blili-Hamelin (co-lead), and Mrinmoyee Bhattacharya.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Angela Okune
Avigail Oren
Beth Duckles (Co-lead)
Beth Seltzer
Borhane Blili-Hamelin (Co-lead)
Brenna Wolf-Monteiro
Cara McComish
Chris Hartgerink
Jacob Hagelberg
Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein
Jennifer Polk
Jiahao Chen
Jillian Powers
Kathryn Lum
Kimberley Healey
Kristal Jones
Mary Loveday
Megan McFarlane
Melissa Black
Mitch Haslehurst
Mrinmoyee Bhattacharya
Shifra Diamond
Tricia Irwin
Victoria Rickard
Wendy Jacinto

CONTENTS

Executive summary	6
1 . Mindset	8
Overcoming Departure Resistance	8
Start Now, Don't Wait	10
Optimism	11
Career Reframing	12
2 . Practical Strategies	15
Career Exploration	15
Skill Reframing	16
Networking	18
Informational Interview	20
Job Application Process	22
3 . Realities	24
Money	24
Industry Positions	27
Conclusion	30
Methods & Dataset	31
Openness	32
Our Dataset	33

Demographics	34
Survey Questions	35
Resources	38
Credits	40
Authors	40
Contributors	40
Who We Are	42

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this paper we report the results of an open participatory research project that surveyed 209 people with a Ph.D. who have left academia. In this paper, we share the advice they had for people who have not yet left their academic position.

We found significant themes in the advice we heard from respondents:

- We heard advice that folks leaving academia need to shift their mindset when thinking about transitioning out of academia. This mindset shift includes reframing the choice to leave as something that is beneficial as well as beginning the process now and not waiting. We also heard a sense of optimism and positivity around leaving academia as well as suggestions around how to reframe one's career.
- Folks leaving academia have found a wide variety of practical strategies helpful during their career transition. These include how to explore careers, how to reframe one's skills, the importance of networking, informational interviews, and to consider the differences in doing job applications outside of academia versus a CV and cover letter inside of academia.
- Finally, we heard advice on the realities of leaving academia in the form of frank advice around money, value and worth as well as a discussion of the differences between academic work and industry positions.

Our hope is that the discussions of the mindset, practical strategies and realities of leaving academia will be inspiring to people looking to gain insights on the choice to leave academia and the honest realities from those who have experienced the shift.

There are two outputs from this project, this paper and the open dataset. This paper is meant as an entry point into the insights of our survey respondents. We strongly believe that this survey data will yield further insights from further qualitative analysis. We hope that by releasing the dataset openly, we can empower other researchers to surface further insights from this research. More information about the methods and dataset can be found in the Methods section.

1. MINDSET

A central theme in the research that we conducted is the importance of one's beliefs, feelings, and experiences as a vital part of the career transition. We heard clearly from our respondents that one's mindset matters when considering leaving academia and we heard this in a variety of themes such as departure resistance, optimism, and reframing how we think about our careers. We also heard a particularly strong exhortation for folks who are still currently in academia to "start now" with pursuing a non-academic career.

Overcoming Departure Resistance

We found that many folks in our study emphasized the theme that we're calling "departure resistance": the beliefs, feelings and experiences that prevent people from taking action towards non-academic careers. We heard advice that specifically addresses and responds to departure resistance. In particular, respondents addressed the belief that equates leaving academia with "failure" and critiqued the system of labor that encourages people to remain.

Our respondents were strongly opposed to the idea that leaving academia was a failure or that it was settling for less, and they responded to this idea with their thoughts:

"Definitely release yourself from the guilt if you have it of leaving, and don't listen to anyone claiming things like 'selling out.' No path is an easy out, it's just about what's right for you."

"Leaving academia doesn't mean intellectual death, and it's classist to think so. You will still have many opportunities to pursue your field of

interest in whatever ways you would like to do so. (Obviously this is dependent on field.)”

“Leaving academia is still viewed as a failure and settling down for [a] lesser option. That is entirely untrue.”

Graduate advisors are professors who have by definition been successful in academia and often may not have professional experience outside of academia. Respondents reminded us that this can mean that folks who listen primarily to their graduate advisors can believe that there are no additional options, even though there are.

“Don't listen to those that try to tell you that you are making a mistake leaving academia. These are likely the people that have never left.”

“I often think that academia only functions because academics don't realize how good it can be elsewhere. The intensity of the work, which tends to dominate your thoughts, can give you tunnel vision.”

“I think a lot of people stay in academia because they don't know what else to do.”

Respondents in this study brought up issues around labor in the academy and commented that there are more opportunities than the academy would have you believe.

“...there is more fulfilling opportunities out there and that there is more to you than just your research. Also you don't have to take the abuse and the demand of free labour that gets guilted onto adjuncts when told you are not doing enough despite working 80 hrs weeks on a part time contract.”

One respondent reminded us that the system itself was created for a different time.

“The system has no interest in your well-being. It was designed 400 years ago for wealthy men with independent means who had wives and nannies and servants, to do science as a prestigious hobby or 'calling'. Not nearly enough has changed since then.”

Overall, respondents gave advice to counter the departure resistance idea and indicated that even with resistance, there are benefits to leaving academia.

Start Now, Don't Wait

We heard a very strong convergence of advice encouraging people to start pursuing non-academic careers as soon as possible. A sample of some of these responses:

"Just do it as soon as possible. Life is short, don't waste it hoping for a job that's frankly not that great."

"Get out" "Don't wait", "Do it and don't look back", "Just get out." "Do it now", "Don't walk, run", "I wouldn't hesitate" "Do eeeet", "You won't regret it."

Some respondents did acknowledge that the specifics of leaving can depend on one's situation, although they still would encourage people to leave.

"It's hard to say. My gut feeling here would be to say "do it!" but it really depends on peoples' circumstances."

Folks in the STEM fields said that you can go back into academia if you want to, but no other subfield said this.

"I wouldn't hesitate. You can always go back. I know many who have gone back so it's not a done deal to leave." (STEM)

Another commonly given reason to leave quickly was that the toxicity and difficult environments are not likely to change.

"Academia is not going to get any better"

"Leave. Don't let people bully you into doing something that is killing your soul; life is too short."

"If you are trans, leave."

This focus on encouraging folks to leave was clear and strong in this research.

Optimism

Another key theme we heard was a general sense of optimism about what leaving the academy looks like. A lot of the advice that we heard in the study was encouraging and signaled a sense that there is a meaningful life outside of academia. There is also a sense that the person leaving does not need to have all the details figured out in order to make a shift in their life.

The optimism we heard had several sentiments behind it. First was an encouraging tone related to the sentiment that finding another job was doable and that there are possibilities. Some examples:

“Try things!” “It’s easier than you think! Don’t be afraid to put yourself out there.” “You have options!” “Go easy on yourself.” “You have more skills than you realize”, “There are so many options”

Another sentiment that echoes what we heard in the departure resistance theme above, was that the person leaving academia should reframe their leaving as something that is not failure or loss, but rather something positive for their future and a success for their life. This was repeated in several different ways, but essentially the advice was to assert: “This is not a loss or a failure”

“Definitely don’t think of yourself or your path as a “failure,” as long as you’re doing something you are passionate about, you are a success!”

“Embrace this new career whole-heartedly, and not with a sense of failure.”

“This is not a loss or a failure but an opportunity to widen the aperture of what is professionally possible.”

Respondents mentioned that they see people finding happiness outside of academia and one respondent said:

“I don’t think I know a single academic escapee who regrets it. “

Another form of optimism was an assertion that the work outside of academia can be meaningful intellectually and scientifically.

“There are many ways to be a valid and valuable member of the scientific

community - academia is only one of those ways (despite what we're led to believe)."

"You can still have a rich intellectual life and a fulfilling career working outside the academy."

Overall, the tone from a lot of the advice we heard was positive and optimistic towards the idea of leaving academia.

Career Reframing

We also heard advice that we're calling "career reframing". This was often a less specific suggestion of what to do, but could be read as an encouragement to adopt a different mindset or orientation towards one's career. In this theme, our respondents encouraged folks to be open-minded and curious about what they might do or what the next steps might be and to develop new frames for thinking about their career.

Respondents encouraged situating their work within the larger context of one's life and what one needs as an individual. There were also responses about seriously considering one's mental health and well being when looking for new directions. Respondents also encouraged exploring ways to embrace the passion and strengths people have as academics in their post academic careers.

The encouragement to be open-minded was heard several times, for instance: "Be open to new things." One person responded by noting that their own closed-mindedness had kept them back from jobs they might have enjoyed.

"Be open-minded. I was really anti sales roles or marketing roles, and while I really enjoy what I do now, that was super close-minded of me and many of my favorite people I've met have been account managers."

One way that respondents suggested being able to get to this open mindedness was to develop a "curious attitude" or to consider the creative aspects of discovering new work.

"Bring back the curiosity that you had when you were a PHD student, or early in your graduate career, to the industry job search process."

"[T]he process of reimagining myself was also extremely fun and creative and tapped into all kinds of parts of me that were underused within the university."

"[Y]ou really don't need to have it all figured out at all before leaving."

"Experiment, thrive and stay curious."

One key attribute of this reframing work was to make sure that the decision you make about leaving or staying in academia will work for you and be beneficial for your life as you want it to be. Respondents encouraged looking at work with what a lens towards what you most want:

"Make sure you are doing the move that is best for you, and you alone."

"You should make the decision that works best for your WHOLE life - not just the life you (or perhaps your advisor or colleagues) envision as the "best life". It's okay to have a job that is just a job. It's also okay to want to feel fulfilled by your job and to do "meaningful work" - but remember you can find that outside of academia too. Finally - don't overlook the numbers and the job prospects available to you. There simply are too many PhDs for not enough permanent positions."

In addition to making sure the changes work for your life, survey respondents suggested that one's mental health was also important. In their advice, they encouraged people to take care of themselves and to consider their mental health needs.

"Your wellbeing is more important than anything, especially academia."

"Get a good therapist, especially one who knows a lot about academic employment."

Another aspect of the mindset of reframing one's work was to consider the perspective that academia is a job. One respondent commented: "Professor is just a job title, and there are many other fulfilling jobs that you would thrive in." Another said:

"Don't forget it's a job. Evaluate it like you would any other job: what are the opportunities for growth? How well are you paid? What kinds of hours are you putting in? Are you ready to do invisible jobs associated with the

role, and to do so without additional pay or recognition? Evaluate it as a job and put it next to other jobs people with your education are getting outside of academia. Which job wins? And if you stay, how can you bring that same clarity to your role and your life inside the academy?"

The issue is that to do this, we need to reframe the skills we have. One person commented that this was an “unlearning / relearning” process:

“One must prepare to relearn / unlearn several things. Refocus from backward-looking “what have you done” mentality to forward-looking “what can you do”

Another respondent offered this reframing in terms of the purpose that you have in your life suggesting that coming from a sense of purpose gave them confidence to make the changes that worked for them.

“[I] found it helpful to have a sense of purpose in what I was doing and work on understanding my own reasons, that way when people questioned my decision or subtly derided me for shifting path, then it affected me far less than I assume it would have done otherwise.”

All in all, the mindset of reframing one's orientation towards seeking a non-academic job was central to the advice we heard. Respondents encouraged combating departure resistance, doing it now and not waiting, a sense of optimism and an orientation towards reframing one's career.

2. PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

We also heard a lot of very practical and specific advice about the things one needs to be able to leave academia. Among these topics are how to explore careers, how to reframe one's skills, the importance of networking, informational interviews, and to consider the differences in doing job applications outside of academia versus a CV and cover letter inside of academia.

Career Exploration

One type of advice our respondents offered to people considering leaving academia was on how to explore and figure out a new career. This included a discussion of how to get experience and consider one's options. Again this was often tinged with an optimism and a sense of hope and encouragement that folks leaving do have possibilities.

One theme we heard was to spend some time investigating careers that they might not have heard of. There was a sense that approaching this work with curiosity and inquiry was a key aspect of finding new paths.

“Find activities that will let you learn about different fields. Take every opportunity to ask people outside of academia what their jobs are like. Be curious and respectful.”

“Spend as much time while still employed investigating other careers.”

“If they want to finish the PhD for personal reasons (I did), they should start researching job pathways as soon as possible, and prioritize that research over their dissertation research, grading, etc. Do not serve on committees. Do not publish academic articles. That takes too much time and nobody will care about it on the outside. Do the bare minimum to get the PhD.”

Many respondents in our study emphasized the need to “get experience” as the things they have done inside of academia may not be able to give them an ability to share their skills fully. Here are a few examples:

“Get alt-ac experience while you are still a Ph.D. student, such as an internship.”

“Try things out! I did some contract work for my current employer while I was a full-time VAP. It allowed me to try this out and have a smooth transition on the way.”

A common refrain was some version of the sentiment “you have more options than you think”. Respondents were clear that the skills and abilities that academics have are likely more impactful than they imagine. Some examples of this advice:

“Do a full, thorough search of all the options of applying your academic skills to industry - there are more than you think.”

One respondent articulated this in terms of striking a balance between being clear about the skills you have and the humility that you may still need to learn things to do the work.

“When looking for a job, you need to find the right balance between not selling yourself short (you have relevant experience and are probably able to adapt and learn quickly) but also not be arrogant and come it with unrealistic expectations (if you have spent 10y in academia, you will likely enter a new field at a lower level than someone who has just spent 10y working in that same field).”

The general sentiment was to open yourself up to more job possibilities than you might expect and to look for things that could surprise you.

Skill Reframing

Often discussed was the issue of reframing one’s skills from an academic market to a non-academic market and we heard many different approaches and suggestions on how best to do this. We share this advice on how to do this and what the benefits are.

Respondents encouraged the language of “reframing” skills or trying to

work through how the skills could be transferred to other fields.

“Make a skills inventory! You almost certainly have many transferable skills that employers look for and that many people don't have, but they require some translation for people not closely familiar with the work that academics do.”

“You DO add value. You just don't ‘make sense’ necessarily to the private sector. So it's about a reframe of your current work.”

“Think about the marketable skills you have. There are many.”

“You have more skills than you realize. You are not your degree, nor are you merely the product of your research specialty.”

Some folks gave examples of the ways in which different specific academic skills can be transferable, focusing on the kinds of skills that one might have.

“Your analytical, synthetic, research, writing, and teaching skills are entirely transferable.”

“If you teach, your ability to convey complex ideas [and] information to a non-expert audience can be very valuable. It's ok to lean on this, or draw on ideas you've developed for courses, in the job application process.”

We heard advice to encourage folks considering leaving to focus on their values and what matters to them in skill translation. In other words, to know what they want in a job and what they want to spend their time doing will help figure out what the best path is.

“You have skills and experience that the wider world wants and needs. Start by exploring your own values and what is important to you and the rest will unfold from there.”

There were also a number of additional pieces of advice we heard from respondents about the task of learning and articulating one's skills. People gave suggestions around creating portfolios, building skills in online training and realizing how much more important ones skills are over writing academic papers.

“Skills are more important than papers”

“As you learn the new skills, build an online portfolio (you can do that for free in Google sites) to showcase what you've learned.”

“Do a thorough assessment of your skills and see if there is an online training or course you can take if you think there is a deficiency.”

“You likely will not find a job in your discipline and that is ok!”

One respondent gave suggestions on how to consider doing the reframing and parse one's existing skills as well as the skills that are needed to reframe for a new job:

“To research job pathways, just go on LinkedIn and look for jobs you might be qualified for, even if you're not ready to apply. Also search for jobs that look interesting, without worrying about whether or not you're qualified. Paste the job ads into a document and put the qualifications into two columns: “things I can do now,” and “things I need to learn.” The “things I can do now” column is your current skillset. Jobs may care about things that you didn't even think were skills. It's motivating to watch that column grow over time”

Finally, folks who have left said that there are challenges in this process and it will take some time.

“Leaving academia is a long journey. It will take you some time to find your place since I have found it to be mostly true that people don't care about your academic background so long as you can use it to tell a story about yourself.”

This act of reframing skills is helpful in part for the next aspect of the work which is to network.

Networking

By far, the biggest advice we heard over the course of this research project is to network. This is unsurprising. Our respondents who had already left academia were very clear that conversations and networking were incredibly important in the post ac transition and they said over and over again how important networking is to figure out what you want to do, to get more community, and to find jobs that you might like to do

outside of academia.

The basics of this advice was some version of “talk to people”. A few examples we heard:

“Talk to people. Other academics who have left, or are considering leaving. Your friends and family. Your neighbors. That random guy you knew in college but haven't spoken to in 15 years who has an interesting job halfway around the world.”

“Talk to people. This is how you get jobs. For every 1 job application you submit blindly online, you should talk to 5 people who are not in academia.”

“Networking is really the key for anyone whose field doesn't have a direct professional application (and even then, networking is still key).”

“Take every opportunity to ask people outside of academia what their jobs are like. Be curious and respectful.”

For several of our respondents, we heard the sentiment that talking to people opens doors, sometimes in ways that they hadn't expected.

“There are so many opportunities outside academia, but you kind of need to meet a few people that are outside and have them open doors for you. For example, my opportunity to leave came because I met someone at a conference dinner and we exchanged emails. A few months later we were talking about moving and so I reached out to her to have an informal chat and then next thing I knew I had a job working with this person.”

Several folks suggested also reaching out to fellow post-academics in your networking as a way to find people who will understand what you can do, your challenges and who can help you learn how to articulate your skills inside of a new field.

“Get help and advice from people who have made the transition already, and focus on figuring out the norms of other fields and careers so that you can translate your experience and skills to the language of the new areas.”

“If you are uncertain about next steps, reach out to your network and conduct informational interviews with people who have a similar academic background and are working outside of academia.”

“It can be especially helpful to interview people who have a similar degree so you can ask about how they described their skills and credentials.”

One respondent discussed things you can do with folks you are connected to and shared ideas such as requesting to work on short-term projects, asking for references, and acknowledging the time they give you.

“Finally, leverage your connections. A lot. Make new connections, but also nurture the ones you have. Talk to people you know who have left or are still in academia about projects you could get involved in or jobs that they know about. Ask if they can give references. If you see a job you’re interested [in] at a contact’s organization, let them know you’re interested in applying for it. Ask if connections would be willing to help you with resumes or cover letters, but be sure to let them know you value their time by offering to pay them for it.”

Informational Interview

Hand in hand with the suggestion to network was the suggestion that folks do informational interviews. These interviews are conversations with people who have a job that you see as interesting, who are doing something that you are curious about. The point is to learn about their background, build up a connection and ask them who else you might talk to that could give you more information. The goal of informational interviews is to make a connection, and to learn about the field you are interested in and typically in such a conversation, you do not ask someone for a job. That said, folks do find that making connections through informational interviews can lead to getting a job in the end.

“Informational interviews are worth more than any publication from your thesis work.”

Folks talked about their approach to these informational interviews as being low key and focused on using zoom and doing a “coffee” chat:

“I had coffee or zoomed with at least two people a month during my freelance period. I let them know that I had no expectations about jobs or referrals, but wanted to learn more about what they did and how they used their degree/academic experience.”

“There are so many options and people are usually happy to chat about their experience - schedule informational interviews with people whose work sounds interesting.”

Several people mention using social media and in particular LinkedIn to find folks to talk to.

“If you're even the slightest bit curious about industry careers in your field, actively start reaching out to people you know (or find in LinkedIn, Twitter, etc) to ask them about their work. The more you know, the better you can make an informed decision, and we are always happy to chat!”

“Find companies in your desired field (LinkedIn is a fantastic resource here) and get in front of as many actual humans as you can.”

One of the key benefits of informational interviews is that you'll learn about career paths that you might not have known of.

“There are so many paths that you've never heard of and tons of great jobs working in the sphere of research, science, impact, etc. that you've never even heard of.”

As we have already discussed, skill translation can be a really challenging aspect of leaving academia. Respondents suggested that informational interviews can help you learn more about the way that people talk about skills you already have within the fields they're in.

“Translating your skills can be a real challenge so the best way to figure that out is to do a lot of informational interviews”.

“Right from the beginning look for internship opportunities or part time work in industry to gain experience. Carry out as many informational interviews if you don't know what options exist and even to learn more about the options that exist.”

We heard at least one person who shared that networking was not a helpful way for them to find a job. Even with this comment, they still recommend networking.

“I have been told that networking is important for finding an industry job, but I have found this to be useless. However, it can help to call professionals in fields you are considering to learn about their jobs. Don't

be shy about contacting strangers, generally people are happy to help and talk about themselves.”

We heard consistently that informational interviews were a key part of the process of leaving academia.

Job Application Process

Respondents gave more specific advice about the job application and search process, highlighting the difficulty of this part of job seeking. In particular, sometimes in the private sector, folks don't know why having a PhD would make you a compelling candidate and it can be challenging to help them understand your academic experience.

One recurring theme among respondents is to make one's past experiences and skills legible to the hiring manager. This process often includes translating one's skills to a language that the industry understands and speaks. An important step in this process involves getting clarity on what kind of position is qualified for, is interested in, and preparing

“A lot of hiring managers in the private sector don't understand what a PhD brings to the table, so it's incumbent on you to make them understand.”

They noted that the process involves not only looking for jobs but also figuring out how to talk about your work

“You'll get an email with a gazillion jobs a day. You can use that to figure out what exists, what you don't want, what you do want, what you're qualified for, and so on... Figure out what the terms mean. Figure out how to talk about your work.”

Folks reminded us that interviews and applications are different than they are in the academic world.

“Apply and interview: the process is different so it's important to practice, review how to ace a case study type interview.”

While it was helpful to use the contacts you already have for finding a new job, respondents also cautioned against thinking that a contact will

automatically be able to help you get a job.

“Don't expect a contact to be able to automatically find you a job, especially if you have no experience in the field. A recommendation/connection goes a long way but really only if you have some basic experience, even if it is in a voluntary capacity.”

The application process for non-academic jobs is different, but the advice from our respondents seems to be to learn what those differences are and to do your best to reframe your skills.

3. REALITIES

The third area we heard advice from our respondents on was regarding the realities of leaving academia, such as money, value, class, career stability and the norms within industry.

Money

A theme in our data is the earning potential in industry jobs and the challenges that PhDs face around valuing themselves and getting enough money for what they do. Respondents shared that industry values expertise and skills more than academia does and many respondents encouraged PhDs to seek opportunities that understood their skills and training.

Respondents reminded us that although no workplace is perfect, quitting and looking for better opportunities is considered okay and normalized in the industry. Survey respondents remarked that industry often offers more career stability and the flexible nature of certain jobs opens the possibility to pursue other interests. Generally we heard that it's possible to do impactful work when one's needs are taken care of.

Respondents also talked frankly about money, and the way that academia gives disproportionate advantages to people with generational wealth. Some argue that it's not worth risking the possibility of a stable financial future by staying in academia.

One common theme we heard was that PhDs have more skills and value than those acknowledged by academia or, sometimes themselves. Respondents encouraged folks to seriously consider the long-term earning potential and flexibility offered in an industry position.

"You can stay, leave, or enter any industry if it gives you the highest value

for your time and efforts.”

“You can earn more than a professor within a few years of transitioning (no postdoc required!) and your long-term earning potential is much higher over the course of your career.”

“Outside of academia is not perfect, but you DESERVE to be paid what you are worth. Just because you land a coveted tenure track position doesn't mean you are locked into that role forever.”

“You can stay, leave, or enter any industry if it gives you the highest value for your time and efforts.”

“Do it. Your skills are valued and you get paid more.”

“Ask for \$30K more than your starting offer. You're worth AT LEAST that much”

Several respondents voiced the idea that academia is not a viable career option for those without cultural capital or generational wealth. Folks pointed out that there are multiple structural barriers and constraints for those who do not belong to an academic family, mentorship or economic support from non-academic sources. Contrary to the classist notion that fulfilling intellectual lives are unlikely outside academia, many respondents found that intellectual activity is also present and possible outside the academy.

“Every single person I know with a 'good' TT [tenure track] job or arts/culture position comes from really significant inherited wealth, and mostly from the kinds of families that have members in academia and cultural fields. Grandfathers who are famous authors, aunts who are literal nobility, uncles who are professors. They grew up with money, support, and knowledge of the social and political game. Every one of them.”

“If you're not rich, don't go into academia. The odds are overwhelmingly against you.”

“Marry rich. I kinda think "writing consultant" and alt-ac consultant are over-saturated. Sorry I don't have more.”

“Leaving academia doesn't mean intellectual death, and it's classist to

think so”.

Respondents also mentioned that many non-academic positions offer the possibility of both career stability and flexibility. They also noted that supportive online communities facilitate job search and transition between jobs. However, respondents urged PhDs not to sacrifice their financial well-being by languishing in jobs that don't value their skills or expertise.

“You'll have career stability because there are enough jobs that it is easy to leave one and find another if you want or need a switch.”

“I think a lot more people can do software engineering than realize they can. It might take you about a year to go from zero to getting a job. Go through a bootcamp and/or study on your own using the ample resources and supportive learning community online. It's a huge, varied industry, and there are many good jobs where you are doing something at least mildly useful for the world (plenty of the jobs are non-evil, don't be misled by headlines), and where you have lots of flexibility, including unlimited paid time off and great benefits. You'll have career stability because there are enough jobs that it is easy to leave one and find another if you want or need a switch. (In academia, by contrast, it's typically a complex process to up and leave your post and find another.)”

“In the end, you will most likely work way less while making more money.”

Respondents talked about academia as financially precarious and suggested that people consider the realities of their monetary situation as they look at leaving.

“Do not put your finances in jeopardy for a PhD. It won't be worth it.”

“I'd advise people to be practical and articulate their financial needs.”

“Have some savings so that you can spend time on an independent project and have time to look for grants without being in a rush to look for a job and salary (living cheaply helps savings last).”

The advice we heard included a frank discussion of finances and the suggestion that one might actually make more money outside of academia.

Industry Positions

One recurrent theme among respondents is that there are different timelines and expectations in non-academic jobs when compared with academic positions. Note that we are using the term “industry” to describe these jobs even though there was variation in what respondents mean by that term. When using this term, some folks are discussing more than just corporate jobs and may include nonprofit or government work even though this may not be technically accurate. Though we recognize this is problematic, we are using the term industry because it seems to be the language we heard in the responses.

Leadership and team culture often shape job satisfaction as collaboration is an important aspect of most industry jobs. Respondents encouraged job seekers to get a feel of the company and team culture before joining an organization. There was a sense that industry jobs, although fast-paced, are rewarding in terms of remuneration and visible impact. In fact, some have argued that industry jobs offer “greater job satisfaction, higher salary, better benefits, workplace harmony, less workplace politics, better work-life balance.”

However, it’s also important to be clear-eyed about one’s own expectations and values. Relationships in the workplace impact job satisfaction and it’s important to get as much information about the manager and team as possible before signing up.

“Find a position that has a good manager and who genuinely cares for their employees.”

“Over here, it’s so much easier to have work/life balance and get compensated for your work in a sustainable way (not only grant funded!). However, you don’t always have complete control over your time. Understanding the benefits of each can help you decide where to go and what matters to you.”

“You can find similar research work (maybe not teaching) in government and industry.”

Some respondents reminded readers to not count industry jobs as “fallback options” or think of them as less competitive. Respondents with social science background commented on looking at one’s own

values and not discounting the possibility to work for the government, non-profit organizations, or in higher education as an administrator.

“Industry is much more competitive than you think - it is not a fallback option, and you will be up against very smart people with more experience than you.”

“Consulting isn’t for everyone and neither is industry, although either or both may be right for you. Nonprofits, government, and even university admin might be a good fit for you if you’re not into capitalism, if you want student loan forgiveness, if you want to serve the public, or if you want solid work-life balance and the position is unionized. Maybe you want to make a lot of money and build cool stuff. If so, industry is probably more for you than it was for me.”

Respondents reminded readers of the possibility of doing impactful, challenging research outside academia. In fact, the research-to-product pipeline is shorter in some industries and many researchers witness the world-changing effects of their work. Respondents have shared the sense of accomplishment that they have when they see their work making a real impact instead of having to dedicate their time to write numerous grant applications.

“Many areas outside academia are doing highly impactful research directly and immediately reaching the stakeholders versus academia where research is mostly aimed towards feeding into [a] vicious cycle of publication and grants. Many of the non academic jobs are highly rewarding (greater job satisfaction, higher salary, better benefits, workplace harmony, less workplace politics, better work-life balance, etc). So don’t be afraid to build on your academic skills and explore a whole world of more impactful research that can change the world.”

Folks gave the advice that there is a different pace in industry and that there is an adjustment period. Respondents had different and varied experiences with regard to the expectations and time frames needed in their work.

“Generally, industry is extremely slow and cushy compared to academia. You spend most of your time waiting around in between meetings. It is difficult mentally to adjust from accomplishing things daily in a PhD to accomplishing nothing every other week at meetings in industry.”

“Realize that the timelines and expectations are faster in industry.”

“It is faster-paced. You don't own your own ideas. You work with a team for whom getting it done well enough is more important than getting it 'right'. There is no fig leaf of 'science' between you and your actions - you have to own the work with all of its ambiguity of how it interacts with the world.”

The realities of working outside of academia were highlighted by respondents to our study and they gave advice on the way that money works outside of higher education as well as the realities of working in industry.

Respondents reminded readers about the intellectually challenging and satisfying work happening in industry. They also encouraged transitioning Phds to reflect upon how being in a “state of being always-already fired” impacted their work, emotional and financial stability and view of industry. Some respondents likened academic culture to “a sect” and observed that resistance and opposition to industry jobs comes from fear. We heard that belonging in a supportive team, clear goals, actionable roadmap, and stable working conditions are staples of a healthy working environment.

“Academia functions a bit like a sect, with people inside pretending that the only intellectually interesting work is inside academia. But actually, most academics are simply unable to work outside of academia. So they speak out of fear.”

“Honestly, I had no idea how accustomed I was to unhealthy working environments until I took my new job. Having clear expectations, even a modicum of stability (not being in the state of being always-already fired as I had been as an adjunct/VAP), and a team that supported me rather than cutting me down were all new experiences.”

“It is going to be a roller coaster of emotions. There will be days you want to return because, despite feeling hopeless, you have been working and studying hard for many years. Other days you will be happy to have left and find a way out of it.”

CONCLUSION

The advice we heard was generally quite clear about the need for academics to shift their mindset when making the transition out of academia. We heard a clear need to reframe the act of leaving academia away from idea that it is a “failure” to leave to a more beneficial and optimistic approach. We heard the advice in many forms to “leave now” as our respondents were clear that the time to start the process of leaving is before you leave. In this vein, we also heard an optimistic tone which conveyed a measure of positivity about leaving academia and a sense that it is not only doable but also a good idea. Finally, we heard suggestions about reframing one’s career and skills.

Respondents also offered a variety of practical strategies to help in the career transition including a sense of how to explore new careers and to reframe one’s skills. We heard advice on the importance of networking and doing informational interviews as well as the distinctions between doing job applications in academia versus in non-academic settings. This advice is quite practical in nature and is meant to offer specific suggestions to help those considering jobs outside of the academy.

Finally, we heard advice on the realities of leaving academia in the form of discussions about the money, value and worth of one’s skills and abilities. We also heard a discussion of the realities of working in academic positions versus industry positions.

METHODS & DATASET

Our motivation for this project was the sense that academics considering leaving academia often feel isolated from others who have left and do not have as much information as they might want. We wanted more research on the realities of leaving an academic position and advice that was specifically applicable to those who might be considering a career outside of academia or higher education. We wanted an honest discussion of the possibilities and challenges that can come and to give space for actionable advice from people who have already left. We believe academics looking to other careers should play an active role. We believe this information should be freely available.

This project is also a follow up to [Beth M. Duckles' 2018 project on women who had left academia](#). Since that paper was written, much has changed about higher education due to the global pandemic as well as a shift in higher education. We felt that now was the right time to investigate the insights that folks who have left academia would offer to folks considering leaving and we wanted to broaden the discussion to men and to people from more parts of the world.

At Open Post Academics, we believe in open participatory research projects. Through **participatory workshops**, we invited our community to shape every critical step of the project: research questions, survey design, and data analysis. Relying on participatory workshops for community input is unusual in survey-based research projects. To us, well-scaffolded workshops offer a uniquely accessible way for a large number of community members to orient research toward the questions that matter to them.

We also believe that releasing the data openly will empower researchers in different communities to answer their own questions from our survey data. In a space where differences in experience shape vast differences

in questions, we believe that open qualitative data has a major role to play.

We relied on a primarily qualitative survey, designed with the help of several collaborative workshops, to collect our data. Our community worked together to surface the themes and ideas that were most important to use for the survey design. We also built the survey questions together, pre-testing them as we went. We released our survey on Nov 28, 2022 and closed the responses about a month later. We received 209 responses. Our data cleaning shows that the majority of this data is significant and interesting. We also took extra steps to make sure that no identifying information would be shared, which we will describe below.

We encouraged anyone in our community who was interested in doing qualitative analysis to join us in creating the survey instrument, doing the qualitative coding and writing up the results. We formulated the themes below by doing collaborative qualitative coding using Taguette. We then grouped and reorganized the themes into three sections: Mindsets, Tools, and Realities. Where we found it helpful, we indicated whether the quotes we provide came from one of three groups: Social Science, STEM fields, and everything else (humanities, arts, etc.). One direction for future data analysis may be to do a deeper analysis of the distinctions between fields.

Our final products for this project are the cleaned, open qualitative **dataset** and this **white paper**.

Openness

Our cleaned dataset and this white paper is released under a CC BY 4.0 2023 attribution license. The materials will remain available to anyone who wishes to do more with it. This will allow for researchers to extend and build on this work. It will also respond to the need for open qualitative datasets.

Our Dataset

[Download our dataset on github: https://github.com/openpostac/LeavingTheAcademy](https://github.com/openpostac/LeavingTheAcademy)

[Or on R= https://www.researchequals.com/modules/ms4e-e4vf](https://www.researchequals.com/modules/ms4e-e4vf)

During data cleaning, we realized that a few of our questions surfaced too much information about participants for us to be comfortable making the data fully public. Even though respondents consented to the data being shared openly, we want to minimize the risk that our public dataset could be misused in ways that harm our respondents. The fully public version of the dataset includes all of the questions we asked except for the following questions as these were the answers where respondents were most likely to share identifying information:

- “Tell us about the work you do now”
- “What discipline did you get your PhD in?”
- “Along which dimension(s) do you self-identify as underrepresented? (Select all that apply)”

We will be making a non-public version of the dataset (including answers to these questions) available for researchers under much stricter rules. If a researcher would like to use this data, they may contact us with the following provisions:

- Sharing the non-public dataset is strictly prohibited.
- We require a description of the research project to be submitted for our approval.
- We reserve the right to deny access to projects that do not sufficiently align with Open Post Academics’ mission and values.
- Projects that were granted access have full responsibility for rigorously pseudonymizing any data they quote in their research outputs.

Answers from respondents who did not **explicitly consent** to their answers being shared publicly have been fully removed from the dataset.

Demographics

To give a sense of the demographics of our respondents, we share some aggregate information below to describe our sample. We had a total of 209 responses to our survey.

What general field or fields do you have a graduate degree in?

Social Sciences	40%
Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM)	34%
Humanities	31%
Pre-professional (JD, MD, PsyD, etc.)	2%
Other	2%
Art	1%

Which of these best describes the region of the world where you live?

North America	80%
Europe and Central Asia	14%
East Asia and Pacific:	2%
Latin America & the Caribbean	1%
South Asia:	1%
Middle East and North Africa	0%
Sub-Saharan Africa	0%

Along which dimension(s) do you self-identify as underrepresented? (Select all that apply)

Gender:	53%
Ethnicity, race, or skin color	17%
Sexual orientation	13%
Ability	10%
None of the above	38%

Discussion

The demographics indicate that we have been able to reach people from a cross section of fields of study as well as a balanced perspective on gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and ability. We do have a very small percentage of respondents with pre-professional degrees, but given that this was not the focus of our research it is not surprising.

While we do have international representation in the survey, the sample is strongly skewed towards North Americans which is where the majority of the contributors are located. We recognize this has implications on the relevance and use of these findings in places outside of North America as well as the language usage. Terms that are used in North America may be different from those used in other parts of the world.

Survey Questions

Here is a full list of the survey question we asked.

Experiences questions (long text answers)

- Tell us why you left academia
- Tell us about the work you do now
- What advice would you give someone who is considering leaving academia?
- Is there anything you wish you had known before you left academia?

Demographic questions

- What year did you leave academia?
 - Less than 2 years ago
 - 2 to 5 years ago

- Over 5 years ago
- At what stage did you leave academia?
 - After graduate coursework (ABD — “All but dissertation”)
 - After completing the PhD
 - After a postdoc
 - After an academic job/s (adjunct)
 - After an academic job/s (visiting)
 - After an academic job/s (tenure track)
 - After an academic job/s (tenure)
- What general field or fields do you have a graduate degree in?
 - Art
 - Humanities
 - Pre-professional (JD, MD, PsyD, etc.)
 - Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM)
 - Social Sciences
 - Other
- What discipline did you get your PhD in? (short text answer)
- Along which dimension(s) do you self-identify as underrepresented? (Select all that apply)
 - Gender
 - Ability
 - Ethnicity, race, or skin color
 - Sexual orientation

- None of the above
- Which of these best describes the region of the world where you live?
- East Asia and Pacific
 - Europe and Central Asia
 - Latin America & the Caribbean
 - Middle East and North Africa
 - North America
 - South Asia
 - Sub-Saharan Africa
- Is there anything else you would like to share? (Long text answer)

RESOURCES

Our open dataset

- Blili-Hamelin, Borhane, & Duckles, B. M. (2023a). Open Dataset (Leaving the Academy). Open Post Academics. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8014779>

Kickoff blog post & participatory workshops

- Blili-Hamelin, Borhane, & Duckles, B. M. (2022a). Leaving the Academy: A Participatory Open Research Approach (Kickoff Blog Post). Open Post Academics. <https://www.researchequals.com/modules/h2qy-qc0e>
- Blili-Hamelin, Borhane, & Duckles, B. M. (2022b). Workshop 1, Leaving the Academy. Open Post Academics. <https://www.researchequals.com/modules/rhqn-fphf>
- Blili-Hamelin, Borhane, & Duckles, B. M. (2022c). Workshop 2, Leaving the Academy. Open Post Academics. <https://www.researchequals.com/modules/rqcz-czt4>
- Blili-Hamelin, Borhane, & Duckles, B. M. (2023a). Workshop 3, Leaving the Academy. Open Post Academics. <https://www.researchequals.com/modules/n4yk-8tfy>

Our previous work

- Blili-Hamelin, Borhane, Duckles, Beth M., & Monette, Marie-Ève. (2022). Toolkit for Cross-Disciplinary Workshops. Open Post Academics. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.6026972>


- Duckles, B. M. (2018). What I Wish I Had Known: Post Academic Women and Their Advice for Leaving the Academy. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.7097360>
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CREDITS

Authors

Written by Beth M. Duckles (co-lead), Borhane Blili-Hamelin (co-lead), and Mrinmoyee Bhattacharya.

Names listed in alphabetical order of first names.

This document was designed and typeset by Borhane Blili-Hamelin, using *Piazzolla & Alegreya Sans* by Huerta Tipográfica .

Contributors

We believe that focused cross-disciplinary projects can have methodological specificity while welcoming the expertise of folks from diverse fields. As such, post-acs without qualitative research training played a key role throughout this project in addition to the lead research team which does have experience doing qualitative research. We have given credit to anyone who has attended our workshops, or who has participated in any of the following: creating of the survey (including our approach to data governance), cleaning the data, analyzing the data, or editing or writing the final white paper. While we attribute the written white paper to the three co-authors who did the majority of the writing work, we are very clear that we could not have done this project without all our collaborators.

Angela Okune
Avigail Oren
Beth Duckles (Co-lead)
Beth Seltzer
Borhane Blili-Hamelin (Co-lead)

Brenna Wolf-Monteiro
Cara McComish
Chris Hartgerink
Jacob Hagelberg
Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein
Jennifer Polk
Jiahao Chen
Jillian Powers
Kathryn Lum
Kimberley Healey
Kristal Jones
Mary Loveday
Megan McFarlane
Melissa Black
Mitch Haslehurst
Mrinmoyee Bhattacharya
Shifra Diamond
Tricia Irwin
Victoria Rickard
Wendy Jacinto

WHO WE ARE

[Open Post Academics \(OPA\)](#) is an international, interdisciplinary, collaborative, peer-led community for PhDs to bring their expertise to the world. We bring together folks with PhDs and other communities through open, cross-disciplinary spaces. We rethink how real world problems call for the expertise of PhDs from all fields.

We curate resources, maintain an open curriculum for post-ac career transition, and provide opportunities for networking, informal educational facilitation, and mentoring in an online community.

We run community events via our Open Workshops model which are designed to bridge best practices from the open science community and the worlds of social science, the humanities and inclusive pedagogy. Our workshops allow simultaneous multi-modal participation and create inclusive online spaces where a wide variety of voices can be heard and people can collaborate productively.

In 2021, with the support of a grant from [Code for Science and Society](#), we created a workshop series (Open Problem Workshop) rethinking the relevance of the expertise of PhDs from all fields to the monumental task of making our data driven world just, inclusive, equitable, safe, and accessible. We also created a [Toolkit for Cross-Disciplinary Workshops](#) to share our insights from these pilot workshops.

We held an eight week OPA Fellowship program in January of 2020 sponsored by [Mozilla's Open Leaders X](#) program with the cohort graduating in March of that year. When the pandemic emerged, the needs of the community shifted to collaborating on a range of online, peer-led workshops.

This project is an experiment in participatory qualitative research.



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