

# Shaping New Narratives about PhD Careers: A Communications Resource to Advocate for Career Diversity

The Council of Graduate Schools' *PhD Career Pathways* project is a multi-phase initiative to improve doctoral education through data collection, information-sharing, university networks, and resource development. To date, 75 doctoral institutions have joined the project as awardees or affiliates, working together to gather data about PhD careers and to use resulting information to broaden and improve doctoral programs. Whether or not your institution joins the project as an awardee or affiliate, all doctoral institutions in CGS's member network are encouraged to join us in supporting the value of career diversity for PhDs in their campus communications.

We invite you to use this communications resource to advocate for career diversity on your campus or in your program. This resource is intended for anyone who works to communicate about PhD education on their campus—faculty, deans, PhD students and other staff members. We also encourage you to download and use [CGS's Research Briefs](#) on the PhD Career Pathways project, which provide data and insights on specific fields and PhD career pathways. Data from the briefs are indicated throughout the resource.

## Rethinking Common Terms about PhD Careers

Graduate deans, faculty, career services, and graduate students can play an important role in helping to shape ideas and narratives about PhD careers on their campus. Sometimes our language—and logic—indirectly undermine the idea of career diversity. We provide these tips to avoid assumptions and loaded language in your own communications.

- **Pay close attention to the language used to describe different types of careers.** *Promising Practices in Humanities Professional Development*, a CGS publication, provides strategies on avoiding terms that suggest that careers outside the academy are second-best. Many of the terms are also applicable to STEM fields. (See [Figure 1](#) on page 2.)
- **Avoid language that reinforces the assumption that PhDs can only work in one sector and that their careers are linear.** Express awareness and support for non-linear careers, or careers that may cross different sectors of employment. Recent data from the Council of Graduate Schools suggest that PhD careers are less linear than we often assume them to be, with alumni from all fields moving between academia and other sectors. Prepare students for lifelong learning and the possibility of multiple career pathways. Avoid language that there is only one job and one path in their future.
- **Pay close attention to the language used to describe different skill sets.** For example, sometimes terms used to describe social skills such as collaboration and communications (“soft skills”) imply that these skills are less important than traditional academic skillsets. Some institutions use the term “essential skills” to put these skills on an equal footing.



- **Avoid common assumptions about careers outside of academia.** These assumptions are often unquestioned and may include:

- **“The ‘best’ students get academic jobs.”** This assumption overlooks the fact that many talented students seek careers outside of academia, and that the academic job market can be difficult for the most successful. It also overlooks the fact that women and underrepresented minorities often face bias and other hurdles in their path to academic employment.
- **“There aren’t enough jobs for all PhDs.”** When communicating about jobs, be sure to indicate what types of jobs. If you intend to call out a lack of academic jobs, be sure to specify this.
- **“PhD students don’t have time for additional professional development.”** We often hear the idea that if a student pursues additional professional development training, the quality and depth of their research training will be diluted or that time-to-degree will become longer. While it’s important to acknowledge that time for career preparation is limited, avoid reinforcing the assumption that professional development dilutes or threatens academic training. Professional development opportunities may boost a student’s morale and sense of purpose, supporting their productivity, and help a student acquire skills and confidence that will enhance their academic learning and training.

Figure 1: Inclusive language options for talking about humanities PhD careers\*

Instead of...	You could talk about...
The Profession	Professional careers Humanities careers Academia (one possibility among many)
The job market	Job markets The <i>academic</i> job market (one possibility among many)
Nonacademic careers	Careers beyond academia Pathways beyond the professoriate
Alternative careers	BGN careers (Business, Government, and Nonprofit)
Non-professional careers	
Plan B	Career of choice
Backup options	Broad options Career diversity Flexible career paths Versatile humanists Career horizons/pathways Repertoire of possibilities
Networking	Building (intellectual/professional) communities Building connections Building relationships
Job placement	First position First destination Career entry point
PhDs as produced	PhDs as earned

\* There are innumerable ways to translate well-used language into more inclusive terms, and this should not be considered an exhaustive list. Please note that a number of these terms were coined by or are frequently used by others. For example, Sidonie Smith often uses the phrase “repertoire of possibilities,” and Patricia A. Matthew uses the phrase “building intellectual communities.” For thoughtful discussions of the term “alt-ac,” its history and continued utility, see Nowviskie (2012), Sayre et al. (2015) and Rogers (2013). The AHA champions many of these suggested terms and phrases through their Career Diversity initiative.

Source: McCarthy, M. (2017). *Promising Practices in Humanities PhD Professional Development*. Council of Graduate Schools.  
[https://cgsnet.org/publication-pdf/5049/NEH\\_NextGen\\_LessonsLearned.pdf](https://cgsnet.org/publication-pdf/5049/NEH_NextGen_LessonsLearned.pdf)



## Messages that Highlight Diverse Options and Student Agency in Navigating Careers

Reshaping assumptions about PhD careers—and opening up new possibilities for thinking about them—also, of course, requires consideration. CGS has compiled the following list of messages about career diversity and related topics to help you advocate for career diversity on your campus. These messages are designed to be adapted; please feel free to select the messages that are best aligned with your institution's or program's mission and goals.

### Career Diversity for PhDs

- PhD alumni make valuable contributions to a broad range of professions in academia, industry, the non-profit sector and government.
- Many national organizations and agencies have recognized the value of career diversity for PhDs, including the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the National Academies, the Council of Graduate Schools, the Association of American Universities (AAU), and disciplinary societies in both the humanities and STEM fields.
- Universities and programs often benefit from supporting the success of students in their chosen career pathway. Benefits may include:
  - Better student morale as they face a broader variety of options for their futures.
  - The ability to recruit talented students who aspire to have a research or research-related career outside of academia.
  - The ability to demonstrate the impact of PhDs in all sectors of the workforce.
  - Alumni-driven internships and other experiential learning opportunities for current graduate students.
  - Opportunities for future collaborations with industry and other sectors.

### Student Career Preparation and Professional Development

- PhD education offers relevant training that prepares graduates for jobs both inside and outside of the academy.
- Greater awareness of career options and intentional professional development benefit all students—including those bound for academia.
- Career preparation is not “one size fits all.” PhD candidates and their advisors are responsible for developing a professional development plan that aligns with their goals.

- PhD candidates benefit from time and opportunities to identify and pursue professional development opportunities that are aligned with their career plans.
- Conversations about career preparation should happen early and often as a student's goals and circumstances evolve.
- Based on *recent data from CGS*, the transition to the first career can be most challenging, especially in the humanities. Well-informed career preparation and intentional professional development can help make the adjustment smoother.

### Preparation for Different Types of Careers

- Many students go on to teach and work in universities different from the ones where they train. Many students go on to have an important impact as teachers at liberal arts colleges, master's focused institutions, community colleges, and K-12 schools.
- Students aspiring to academic careers can benefit from learning about the variety of higher education contexts where they may teach over the course of their careers.
- According to recent data from CGS, the types of skills and knowledge that are important in different institutional contexts may vary. For example, teaching skills are considered more important by PhDs working in four-year colleges and community colleges, whereas research skills are considered more important at institutions of high research intensity.
- Supporting students who want to have an impact at small four-year institutions or in community colleges aligns with our institution's (or program's) diversity goals. Many four-year institutions and community colleges are pipelines to B.A.'s and advanced degrees for underrepresented and first-generation students.



## Collecting Data on PhD Careers

- Collecting and sharing data and information on PhD careers helps both prospective and current students make more informed decisions about their career plans.
- By gathering career pathways information, universities and programs can be more aware of the skills and preparation that their alumni have found most valuable to their careers.
- Many national organizations and agencies have recognized the importance of gathering and making transparent data on PhD careers.

## Contribute Stories to CGS's GradImpact Project

CGS's *GradImpact* project is a great way to share the stories of your current students and recent alumni with a national audience and demonstrate that graduate education matters not only to degree holders, but also their broader communities. Our goal is to help the general public better understand the kind of work graduate degree holders pursue and how that work can impact their lives. For more information, visit the [CGS website](#) or contact [Katherine Hazelrigg](#).

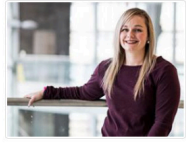
### GradImpact Submissions Gallery

The CGS GradImpact project tells the larger story of graduate education through featured examples from our member institutions. Our goal is to demonstrate the importance of graduate education not only to degree holders, but also to the communities where we live and work.

The GradImpact gallery includes our most recent stories. An [archive of past GradImpact features](#) is also available. Do you have a great story to share about the impact of master's or doctoral education? Visit the [CGS website](#) for more information.

#### Better Living Through Chemistry


**Kori Andrea**  
Chemistry, Memorial University  
North Sydney, N.S.



Kori Andrea didn't know how she would fare in graduate school. Though her parents are both public school teachers and had always valued education, the Memorial University student from Nova Scotia was the first person in her

#### An Advocate for Higher Education Equity


**Theresa E. Hernandez**  
Urban Education Policy, University of Southern California  
San Francisco



As a Latina first generation college student from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, Theresa E. Hernandez's research is inspired by her own experiences

#### Examining the Effects of Post-War Displacement on Women and Children

**Monica Burney**  
History, Eastern Illinois University  
Dix, Illinois



Monica Burney, a master's degree alum in history at Eastern Illinois University, was recently awarded the 2019 Robert and

## Using Social Media and Other Communication Outlets



Social media outlets such as [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#) can be important tools for communicating the value of PhD career transparency and diversity on your campus. Strategies for using social media may include:

- Posting stories of PhD alumni having an important impact in a broad range of careers.
- Communicating professional development opportunities for PhDs.
- Celebrating current students completing internships in industry and other job sectors.
- Sharing messages about the value of PhD career diversity with your campus (see below).
- Creating professional networking groups (via LinkedIn or Facebook) for PhD students or alumni at your institution.
- Celebrating faculty and staff who have worked to support career diversity in their programs or offices.
- Highlighting events to support career awareness and professional development among PhD students.

On Twitter, CGS members are encouraged to use the hashtag for CGS's PhD Career Pathways project, [#PhDCareerPathways](#) and to tag CGS in your tweets when appropriate: [@CGSGradEd](#). Using the project hashtag and CGS Twitter handle are good ways to help CGS notice your efforts to support career transparency and diversity, and will help us retweet and support your success.

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