AFTER THE PHD

Although increasing numbers of PhD’s in English now seek jobs outside the academy (see below), many still pursue employment at colleges and universities. The Department of English cannot guarantee such employment, but it can promise vigorous and wholehearted assistance. Each fall the Department offers a Professional Development Practicum to help students prepare for careers both inside and outside academia. The Practicum offers practical advice and information about the entire job search process, from compiling a dossier to interviewing to giving a job talk. The Practicum is suitable to be taken before the final year in the program and can be repeated. In addition to enrolling in the Practicum, students can take other practical steps to enhance their opportunities for academic employment. Probably the most important advantages are to have the dissertation close to completion when seeking employment and to build a record that includes presentation of papers at conferences, publication of essays and reviews, and evidence of distinction in teaching and scholarship. It is crucial to cultivate expertise in a broadly defined historical and/or critical field as well as in the narrower area(s) of your dissertation. Experience in different kinds of teaching--Rhetoric, General Education, writing and reading labs--is also extremely helpful. The best general advice is to begin well before the final year of study to develop the skills and qualities that will make you attractive to potential employers. Strong course work will ensure strong letters of recommendation, wise planning will create coherence and definition for your program, and an excellent dissertation will be read by academic employers as representing both your achievement and your promise.

A few general remarks about timing might be useful if they are not misconstrued as requirements. Recent experience shows that most students at Iowa who receive job offers have completed the dissertation at the time the offer is made. Because employers are hesitant to hire persons whose dissertations are incomplete, students should aim to complete the dissertation between December and mid-spring of the academic year in which they seek a job. It is important, then, to predict your rate of progress from the Comprehensive Examination through the completion of the dissertation, to hold a prospectus meeting promptly, and to allow sufficient time for the writing of the dissertation.

Because there is no certainty that all PhDs in English will find continuing academic employment, it is crucial to remain open to the opportunity of jobs outside the profession of teaching. A number of PhDs are now pursuing careers in academic administration, nonprofits, business, and government. Students are strongly encouraged to explore these “Alt-Ac” career opportunities through the resources available at the Graduate College, which offers career services, advising, and special events for those interested in nonacademic careers. The MLA website also contains helpful advice and information on the topic of developing a nonacademic career.