AFTER THE PHD

Although increasing numbers of PhDs in English now seek jobs outside academia (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 year, a committee of faculty headed by the Placement Chair provides individual and collective mentoring to graduate students who are on the academic job market. Additionally, the placement committee maintains a detailed job placement guide, replete with deadlines, sample applications, and advice on everything from generating the job application letter to negotiating one’s first job contract. Placement meetings start in early fall and run through the beginning of spring term; they cover topics such as interviewing, writing samples, and professionalism. In December, the committee holds mock job interviews in preparation for the MLA convention, followed by mock job talks. In addition to working with the placement committee, 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 to develop the skills and qualities that will make you attractive to potential employers well before the final year of study. 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 job opportunities outside the teaching profession. A number of PhDs are now pursuing careers in academic administration, nonprofits, business, and government. Students are strongly encouraged to explore these “Alt-Ac” and nonacademic career opportunities. The Graduate College Career Services office, which is headed by one of our PhDs, offers excellent programming and advice on the full range of career opportunities for our graduates. See https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/professional-development/careers. We strongly advise our students to take full advantage of this resource.

Updated on January 3, 2018