

## MODULE 4

# Starting the Conversation with the Faculty and Administration

## Introduction

Faculty members' attitudes about humanities careers outside the academy vary widely. Some faculty members are very open to the idea or have even had other careers themselves; others believe that the only reason to get a PhD is to become a faculty member, and they are willing to say so to their students and faculty colleagues. Many fall somewhere in the middle.

It is expected and indeed desirable for there to be diverse opinions on this issue, and it is important that everyone be heard. This section is structured around three common faculty concerns you may encounter and some ideas for responding to them.

## A Note for Department Chairs

In addition to providing guidelines for helping students and changing departmental culture, one purpose of this tool kit is to jump-start the conversation among faculty members about career pathways for PhD students. It may take more than simply sharing this tool kit to persuade faculty members to read it. One way to stimulate faculty members to engage with the tool kit is to ask them to read it for discussion at a faculty meeting, perhaps choosing one or two modules to discuss in depth. Opening the conversation and addressing uncertainties and anxieties among your faculty are necessary first steps.

## Common Faculty Concerns

### 1. "I don't need this. My field is fine, and my students find academic jobs."

It is likely that your colleague is making an inaccurate assumption; there are very few departments—if any—in which all graduate students land tenure-track academic jobs upon graduation. Respond to this with data that is specific to your department about where students have ended up. If data for your department is not available, share the **statistics** provided in the introduction to this tool kit.

Another way to respond to this objection is to shift the focus away from the current state of the academic job market. Even in fields where academic positions are plentiful, such as Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese, postsecondary teaching jobs may not be the best fit for all students—for a variety of reasons. Modern language PhDs have frequently taken employment outside the academy, and indeed students with expertise in emergent languages such as Arabic and Chinese may have even more opportunities outside the academy than their colleagues in French and German.

**2. “The PhD is a research degree, not a professional degree.”**

The PhD is (and has been for a long time) both a research degree and a professional degree. It has always prepared students for a particular profession: the professoriate.

This objection is often a way of expressing concern about maintaining the intellectual value of the PhD. In this case, ask your colleagues if they believe that humanistic research and teaching has value outside the university. You might point out that every PhD who finds work outside the academy demonstrates the public value of the humanistic research space, which, in itself, is an argument in favor of maintaining the advanced study of languages and literatures.

**Alumni panels** can make this point very effectively. Alumni can often speak quite eloquently to how their PhD prepared them for their current careers—and why they are glad they did not go to law school instead.

**3. “I support my students in doing this, but I don’t know how to help them. Isn’t this what career services is for?”**

No one expects faculty members to become career counselors or to develop a whole new area of expertise. Ideally, **career services** will be a strong ally for you, though that is not always the case. But even if your career services center has a robust program for working with humanities PhDs, it is important for departments to take some responsibility. This tool kit is designed to help. Let your colleagues know it is available and that it contains specific strategies for faculty members, mentors, and dissertation advisers working with doctoral students.

## Talking to and Working with Your Dean

Faculty members often remark that it is difficult to advocate for broadened career horizons because university administrators continue to use placement in tenure-track positions in research universities as the measure of program success. There is a concern that calling attention to graduates who pursue careers beyond postsecondary teaching will make their programs vulnerable.

This concern is genuine. However, there is also risk involved in either not knowing or not acknowledging the outcomes of a program. A proactive approach to tracking alumni and redefining positive outcomes for current graduate students will allow you to have a more pro-

ductive and positive conversation with your dean than the one you might have if the office of institutional research collected the data. Your graduates are your best argument.

Here are some questions to consider as you approach a conversation with university administration:

- How are your program's graduates putting their humanistic training and expertise to work, either inside or outside the academy? How is that work serving the mission of your institution?
- Who among your graduates has been particularly successful and might be willing to contribute to the university?
- What are your peer institutions doing around this issue? What are your aspirational peer institutions doing around it?
- To what extent will broadening career horizons for your graduate students affect your curricular and admissions decisions?

Remember that administrators look to departments and departmental faculty members to signal the norms and standards their fields are operating under. Disciplinary norms evolve. The humanities have been singular in the high percentage of doctorates that follow the professorial career path. The [resources section](#) of this tool kit contains several documents, including the [Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study](#), that will be useful to you in conveying to your administration that disciplinary norms are in flux.