



A World of Career Options Available to Graduate Students

by Christine Fader

Students choose to pursue graduate studies for many reasons and with the variety of programs available, they can generally find a program that is well suited to their career aspirations be it in academia, in a profession, industry, management or the private/public sector.

Mary Chaktsiris (PhD'15, History) shows the flexibility of career options available, with her previous role as a Policy Analyst and Project Coordinator with the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). "A career for graduate students can be anything we make it. I know people with PhD's who have launched their own businesses, developed and launched software programs, worked in government, and become career coaches, among others." And, working outside academia, doesn't mean you can't return. Mary is now beginning a new position as the Cleghorn Fellow in War and Society, Assistant Professor, at Laurier.

According to a survey cited in University Affairs magazine, about 40% of graduating doctoral students initially intend to work in academia. That means that a majority of graduate students may be looking for career options in addition to, or outside of academia.

Christina Lamparter (PhD'16 Pharmacology) is one such student. While she was also interested in remaining in the academic world, when she was nearing completion of her PhD in Pharmacology and Toxicology, she saw a posting. "I jumped at the chance to apply to a position that would allow me to demonstrate the skills I gained during grad school." She ultimately secured the job as a Forensic Toxicology Scientist with the government.

The Public Service Commission of Canada is one example of an organization that seeks students from graduate degree programs. In fact, they have a number of recruitment programs that specifically value graduate student applicants including the Advanced Policy Analyst program, the Management Consular programs (Foreign Affairs and International Trade) the Performance Audit Trainee Program (Auditor General), the Science and Technology Internship Program (Natural Resources), and the Doctoral Research Stream (Finance Canada), just to name a few.

From the outset of her graduate degree, **Allison Chong** (*M.A.Sc.'15 Mechanical Engineering*) knew she wanted a dynamic career in an organization where she could apply her skills. "My graduate degree in Mechanical Engineering really challenged me to develop methods to solve problems with greater and vaguer unknowns" says Allison, who found that these graduate school experiences were a real asset when applying to her current role with the Engineering Development Program at Enbridge.

Sometimes, opportunities that alter your career path present themselves when students least expect them. Such was the case for **Alex Rosenblat** (*MA'13 Sociology*). During a visit to NYU to investigate possible PhD programs, she was introduced to a then PhD candidate on the basis of sharing Canadian common ground.

Staying in touch after the visit, he connected her to Danah Boyd, founder of the New York "think-do" tank, Data & Society. The value of maintaining connections and developing networks like this was quickly evident when Alex shortly thereafter became employee number three of an institute that she says is "now thirty+ strong." For more about Alex's career journey, (see pg 32).

A few months into her job at Enbridge, Allison has already noticed how her master's degree gave her skills that fit very well into non-academic work environments. "Currently, I have 4 large scale projects at work – all at different stages of completion. My experience as an involved graduate student doing research, teaching and volunteering, helped me get used to big responsibilities where people were depending on me – unlike my undergraduate experience where, while I had a lot of assignments, not doing them would let only myself down."

Furthermore, her current role in industry fits with Allison's longer-term career goals. "The engineer-in-training program at Enbridge is directly set up to help me get licensed as a Professional Engineer (P.Eng) and reach positions of technical and/or managerial leadership."

Christina also gained many skills during her doctoral program that she says map directly to her job with the government. "My PhD comprehensive exam consisted of a 3 hour oral Q&A period and then after, I had to write a review paper on a field separate from my research. This process really helped to solidify my theoretical knowledge of pharmacology and toxicology and writing ability, which will be essential for this new role."

She also noted that the opportunity to supervise a few fourth year student research projects was also extremely relevant and allowed her to demonstrate to employers that she knew how to manage other people and large projects.

Mary too, had many relevant skills to offer. "The ability to build consensus, whether it be among committee members or students, is an important part of my work. It is one of the aspects that I have enjoyed the most in my career so far, and one that was strengthened through the critical thinking, analytical, and relationship-building skills that I developed in graduate school."

When considering non-academic career options, many grad students have questions about how to get there. Allison's advice is: start early. During the first year in her master's program, Allison attended the Engineering & Technology Fair (see pg 17) at Queen's. "It was a great way to get information, without the pressure of having to find a job out of it," she explains.

Furthermore, she got to learn what types of positions companies had available, what skills they were seeking in their hires, and what career paths through their companies looked like. "It was like a dry run for when I knew I would return during the final year of my degree," Allison quips.

Christina advises other graduate students to be sure to learn how to write an effective resume and cover letter—one that's appropriate for a non-academic employer. "We develop many useful skills during grad school but if they aren't communicated in your application, then it might be difficult for an employer to see the fit between you and the job. I spent a lot of time at Career Services working on my application and then my interviewing skills." The School of Graduate Studies also offers specific workshops through the Expanding Horizons series and Career Week for Graduate Students (in October) which offer exposure to multiple career opportunities and ideas about marketing graduate skills effectively.

Mary echoed Allison's strategy with her advice to, "speak with as many people as possible about the work that they do. Conduct informational interviews and reach out to people who have jobs you find interesting and could see yourself doing."

She also reminded students that they are not alone. "Look to those that will help you along the way for guidance and support as you search out career paths for yourself. I have benefitted from strong mentors along my career journey who have taken the time to help me build on the foundations I developed in graduate school – including adaptability and resiliency – as I continue to grow and seek out new challenges and opportunities."

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When it came to applying and interviewing for jobs, Allison noted that one big benefit from her graduate degree was a boost in confidence.

“When I think back on my research, data collection, analysis and thesis defense, I remember all of the challenges that I had to overcome. Now, even when I feel totally lost in a project or at a dead-end, I know that I can overcome it all and produce something I’m really proud of.”

Allison also acknowledged that in thinking about career options after graduate school, it was important for her to find a balance between focusing on her research but, also understanding that there was a whole world outside of that. And, she has reassuring

advice for other students: “I don’t think it’s ever too late to change your mind about what to do after a graduate degree.”

Mary noted that graduate students push themselves all the time to think outside of the box, in the pursuit of research and innovation. “We can also apply this way of thinking to our own personal and professional development in Canada’s ever-changing, innovation economy.”

And, she added a final, hopeful reminder for fellow graduate school alum. “Job prospects available to graduate students are anything but limited. It’s up to each one of us to find our own way.”

Wondering about the range of career options for graduate students? Here are some resources:

Mygradskills.ca – Free, professional skills training for Ontario graduate students

Expanding Horizons – A series of workshops and seminars to support the academic, personal, and professional success of Queen’s graduate students and post-doctoral fellows

Career Week for Graduate Students – a week of career-building workshops and networking sessions, hosted by the School of Graduate Studies

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