

# Changing Directions:

FEATURE

**Customize Your Career Path**

By Stephanie Nijhuis and Sharday Mosurinjohn (PhD'15 Cultural Studies)



Your time in University directly contributes to your career path but it doesn't necessarily define it. Your degree is valuable and provides you with the skills needed in order to succeed at a variety of careers but it is not the only factor that determines what work you will do. Rather, career direction tends to be influenced by a combination of education, employment, extra-curricular activities, values, needs and interests.



Siobhan Powell B.Sc.E '16

Like many students in professional programs, **Siobhan Powell (B.Sc.E '16 Applied Mathematics)** began her university career hoping to get a job in her technical field once she graduated. Before choosing her engineering specialization in second year, she discussed her options with many upper year students and others and, hearing that many students in Applied Mathematics went directly into industry, decided to choose that program. However, after her first year at Queen's, she realized she enjoyed the theoretical approaches more than some of the practical, applied courses.

"Instead of immediately switching my career plan from applied engineering to theoretical, research-based engineering, my first approach was to investigate working in finance," Siobhan explained. "As a Summer Analyst at CPP Investment Board, I worked with a group that focused on Infrastructure investments, and throughout those projects it confirmed for me that I really was more interested in the technical aspects of the infrastructure projects than in the financial side."

Following this revelation, Siobhan decided to pursue technical research in the summer between her third and fourth year. She was able to find a position working with the research group Athena at INRIA (l'Institut National de Recherche en Informatique et en Automatique) in France.

From her experience at the research institute, and her third and fourth year engineering projects, Siobhan decided that research was something she would continue to enjoy. "My latest plan is to earn a Master's and PhD working on projects focused in renewable energy, and then to do similar research-based work in industry after graduation," she said.

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Throughout the evolution of her career goals, Siobhan's biggest challenge has been overcoming her nerves and trying new things. "I felt nervous every time I had to redefine my plan or path, and I still feel unsure about where I will end up. At each step, with each new path I tried, I worried that I would be closing other doors, and I was unsure if I would ever find the right fit," Siobhan explained. "Thankfully I had a lot of support, not just from my own network of friends, family, and professors, but also from all of the people I worked with who encourage me to reflect and keep trying to find my right place."

Now, a recent graduate, Siobhan is happily following her customized career goals and interests in research to graduate studies at Stanford University in California. There, she will be doing research into renewable energy applications in fluid mechanics.



Alex Rosenblat, MA'13

*What will police-worn body cameras see that police won't? Do anomalies in Uber's visual representations produce phantom cars? Who's watching you at work?* These are all questions about the social, legal, ethical impact of new technologies that Queen's alumna **Alex Rosenblat (MA'13 Sociology)** is asking as a researcher/technical writer at the New York "think-do" tank, Data & Society.

Unlike Siobhan, Alex was very interested in research from the outset of her degree(s) and was considering PhD studies after her Queen's Sociology MA. She shifted paths when a current PhD candidate at her school of choice took note of her interests and introduced her to Data & Society founder, Danah Boyd.

A non-profit supported by the likes of Microsoft, Data & Society fulfills the dream of many of the newest generation of grad students – its writers get published in *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian*. Offline, Data & Society's audiences often include policy makers and technologists at invite-only conferences and workshops. Now working in an institute that is 30+ strong (it had only three people when she started there), Alex even saw language from her first assignment, a primer series on the social, ethical, and legal impact of big data, appear in a presidential policy report

"The goal is to ground conversations that people are having in research," says Alex. "Media, policymakers, and academics all have different language for talking about the way, for instance, the algorithmic curation of public space affects democracy. They might share values but not know the histories of these issues."

With a background in Sociology as well as History, Anthropology, and Jewish Studies from her McGill BA, Alex was already fluent, so to speak, with issues of translation and context. The language she needed to learn for her new career path was the one to use when you're suddenly the media's expert yourself. An article on Uber's "phantom cabs" at Vice's Motherboard recently propelled Alex into a round of media interviews, as did an article on police accountability and body cams at the Atlantic "because these data issues are all so new that for six months you're *the* expert on them."

As Queen's own Vice Provost and Dean, School of Graduate Studies, Brenda Brouwer recently wrote, "given the growing complexity of global issues and an increasingly competitive knowledge-based economy, we need a robust supply of highly trained talent infiltrating all sectors and amongst our political and business leaders to drive growth." Alex's finding her home in an alt-academic research environment is proof of the "highly trained talent" that Canadian PhD holders bring to society and the labour market.

About her change in career path, Alex comments, "I enjoy the freedom to work on multiple topics at once. The remarkable thing that happens is that you wind up deriving insights from linkages you would never have seen before." And, her current role allows her to apply her doctorate on a daily basis. "The mix of empirical research and knowledge translation in my job is actually a lot like doing a PhD," she says.