

Vocational Training Antoinette Burton

There's so much wisdom available these days on how to approach career diversity for PhDs in the humanities, arts and related fields. And there are a lot of models and best practices have emerged over the last ten years, offering both faculty and students a range of options and approaches to the question of professional pathways and how to shape them so that they are multidirectional between the academy and "the beyond."

I continue to be struck by the comparative lack of attention paid to helping students link their intellectual interests – the passions that bring them to graduate school in the first place – to what they'd like to do in the world. By intellectual interests, I don't mean a love of teaching or even history or literature as disciplines, though those are obviously important. I'm thinking rather the substance of what they care about: Andean cosmologies, Latinx health and wellness, environmental fiction, the visual art of the African American experience, trans histories of struggle and joy. It's those arenas of inquiry and knowledge which ideally serve as the foundation of vocational training – vocational in the sense of "a calling," the kind that never stops ringing in your ears.

Some of the most successful graduate training projects I've been involved in have revolved around the conviction that building career pathways both in and beyond the university are most powerful when they are rooted in something connected to the student's scholarly passions. One mechanism for this is what might be called the experiential research and learning RAship. I've guided PhD students in the humanities and related fields toward opportunities that place them in spaces in the university and in the community doing work that relates directly back to their dissertation interests. At the [Humanities Research Institute](#) which I direct, we've been involved in shaping a number of these RAships, and specifically in recruiting students whose research interests and orientations equip them particularly well for the work at hand. Two History PhD students, Priyanka Zylstra and Margarita Garcia Rojas, have worked with [WeCU](#), a campus unit at Illinois which fosters long-term, reciprocal partnerships with community organizations, to develop and support a [Humanities in Action initiative](#). HIA places undergraduate students in local NGOs and provides education and mentoring for those students around ethical community engagement.

We not only talk with the RAs about how this work connects to their scholarly interests, but how the RA experience itself impacts the way they think about their scholarly work. In some cases, their dissertation topics are well formed and they know how what the connections are. Priyanka is researching South Asian feminist community activists in 1970s Britain and she has learned a lot about community dynamics in her work with HIA. Margarita was still in coursework during her RAship but she knows she wants her dissertation to be about the intersection of history and community activism. I think it's important, too, to think beyond the legacy humanities disciplines as we carry forward this kind of work. In that spirit, HRI has also collaborated with the College of Education and a local community farm, [Sola Gratia](#), to support a PhD student in education to help the farm with data collecting and interpretation which aids their farm-to-school food projects – an initiative which is directly related to the RAs graduate training

and which by her own admission will shape it in important ways. It's also a deeply humanistic experience of the kind she may not have had access to were it not for this "[humanities without walls](#)" approach to graduate education.

These students are all still in the process of completing their PhD programs, so what impact the experiential research and learning RAship will have on their career choices is yet to be determined. And we have ongoing work to do to sustain the resources that have been made available, fiscal and infrastructural, so that the intentional ways these projects have been designed can continue to make their work possible. The dollars, while needed, are a drop in the broader university budget bucket. What makes this kind of experimental RAship doable in practical terms is labor and staff support – as well as time and attentiveness dedicated to guaranteeing that the intersection of proactively collaborative community partnership and student research is driven by partners' needs and genuinely serves them. Meanwhile, my experience so far is that when graduate students are socialized to see the connections between what they care about academically and the work it's possible to do responsibly beyond the walls of the university, there are few who would not sign up for that kind of vocational training. And if they remain in the academy, it's possible that the humanities will help to transform the ways that universities think about the most ethical forms of community engagement possible.