

Humanities Entrepreneurship

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Humanities PhDs can carve out spaces that don't already exist. Humanities entrepreneurship is not something I would have thought much about before going to the CUNY Grad Center in 2015; it is something that my students taught me by being openly dissatisfied with the options available to them, both inside and outside the academy. And when faced with dissatisfying options and the need to make a more-than-decent living — a situation I started calling “the capitalism cul-de-sac” — a number of them said, “Fine. We are going to make our own options.”

Sometimes that looked like starting a new organization. Sometimes that looked like pitching a job to an organization they knew well and helping to find funding for it. Sometimes it looked like starting a consulting business and doing it on the side while finishing their degree. In all cases, what attracted students to entrepreneurship was the ability to work creatively, to decide what work mattered to them, and to have flexibility — and for that, they were willing to give up a certain amount of stability.

Entrepreneurship has a bad reputation among humanists. People tend to think about tech and hockey-stick shaped growth charts, and for this reason, we don't always emphasize it as an option for our students the way we do nonprofit work, for example. But it doesn't have to *be* that sort of aggressive and ultimately destructive model. Entrepreneurship is about creating spaces that don't already exist, for people who may not be served well by the available options. It's about looking at the ecosystem and seeing the niches that are not yet filled and imagining how you yourself might fill them.

Now, this is not the right option for all students. Many students, either by circumstance or temperament, will not want the uncertainty or responsibility of running their own business or organization. But I think that leaning more into the idea that humanists *can* be entrepreneurs — and accepting that “humanities entrepreneurship” is *not* a contradiction in terms, as I have often been told — is something that can really work for us all. It has worked for me, and I am quite certain that I would never have had the courage to strike out on my own if my students had not already shown me the way.