Introductory Remarks:

Thank you all for coming to our roundtable: Anthropologists on the job market: How Job Seekers and Departments Can Respond to the Employment Crisis

This roundtable grew out of dialogues on the Professor Is In Facebook page, and to some degree on Twitter, as a group of us from different institutional locations, both inside and outside the academy, all trained as anthropologists, realized that we had a lot to say about the disintegration of the academic job market and the failures of anthropology graduate programs in training graduate students for the real conditions of the new economy.

A preliminary remark: the disappearance of the tenure track career is not a crisis, because the word crisis means an abrupt, sudden calamity signifying a decisive turn of event. What we are seeing is permanent, systemic change, the outcome of decades of systematic choices on the part of university administrators, reflective of the permanent defunding of universities as a public good, by the state. This a new world order. It is only a testament to the insularity and denial that characterizes the academy, and the profound veil of shame that kept adjuncts laboring in silent obscurity for all these years, that kept this multi-decade transition hidden in plain sight for so many years. But it’s out in the open now. But graduate programs are not responding, or are responding too slowly. Far too many programs continue to operate as if the tenure track academic job were a viable and realistic option –indeed the only option to be spoken of---for most of their Ph.D. students.

This roundtable is meant to initiate dialogue on what departments can do differently and what job seekers can do differently, in order for the profession as a whole to take an intentional and ethical stance toward the training of graduate student for gainful employment.

The order reflects a kind of inward-out orientation—we’ll start with things that can change within anthro departments to prepare grad students for a range of different type of work, and work our way out to possibilities for working outside anthropology and outside the academy entirely

(Kirner), then the need to prioritize teaching for different types of college teaching positions (Griffith), then applied training for work inside and outside the academy (Hannibal), and then address anthro’s slow response to the digital turn and how digital tools can be used for a range of different jobs (Martin), then how anthropologists can write for the public (Kendzior), and finally to bailing on the academy entirely as an entrepeneur (Kelsky)

Karen Kelsky’s talk: Dependency, Fear, and Entrepreneurship

In my work at the professor is in, I am constantly asked by readers and clients, if I can help them apply for non-academic jobs. And I always say no, because I feel that my path was
idiosyncratic. What I did, was go from being a tenured professor to being unemployed to working half time for a small federally funded program on the UO campus, to being an entrepreneur and starting a successful business. I don’t know how to apply for a non-academic job.

But, as the years have gone by, I have come to feel that the path from academic to entrepreneur is actually an important one in its own right, and it’s one that few ever talk about when they are introduce alt-ac and post-ac career tracks, at least in the humanities and social sciences. In the sciences and business they do a lot! And so I want to talk about that today.

After leaving my tenured position and returning to Oregon, and after a year-long period of profound, paralyzing depression, I got a half-time job on the UO campus in the McNair program, a federally funded program that trains first generation and underrepresented undergrad students to apply to graduate school. It’s a terrific program; I believed profoundly in its mission, I had worked with McNair undergrads as a prof, and I was happy there.

However, I was paid almost nothing. Really, peanuts. And The McNair program was in a state of siege due to federal budget cuts. The program cut services before I got there, and continued to do so, the whole two years that I was there. Year by year we cut the number of students served and the amount of services we could provide.

It was while working at McNair, I opened the business The Professor is In. That business took off, instantly. I immediately began to make money, more money than I ever dreamed could come from this little business idea.

One day, I was talking to my mother on the phone. She is 85, old school, raised in the Depression.

“Mom, my university part time job is taking up time that I want to spend building the business. I make pennies at this job, and it’s keeping me from having the time to devote to grow the business the way I want to, help all the people who are asking for help. I think I need to quit!”

My mother said, you can’t quit! You can’t possibly quit a university position to put all your eggs in the basket of this new business! It’s too great a risk.”

And I believed her. And I agreed with her. Because I was a true blue academic, and an academic isn’t really real, unless she’s on a campus right?

But time went by, my business continued to grow and I looked at McNair, watching the bottom crumble quarter by quarter. I didn’t even know how long my half time position was going to last.

One day, I had a moment of almost frightening clarity: the risk did not lie in leaving, the risk lay in staying. The risk lay in being too frightened to let go of the institutional campus location, the institutional identity and the institutional paycheck however miniscule, and go out entirely on my own.
Have any of you seen World War Z? Do you remember the nice Latino family that was too afraid to leave and ended up eaten by the zombies?

If you’re in some precarious relationship to the academy, you’ve got zombies on your tail. You are not safe. You do not have security in the academy. Staying is the risk.

This is the old economy vs. the new economy. In the old economy institutions like universities and the federal government provided security. In the new economy, they provide very, very little. This is not an era where you find job security from either a university or the federal government.

Granted, my McNair program was soft-money, fed funded. If you do land a tenure track position, you have a modicum of security and predictability. I’m not addressing myself to those of you who have achieved the TT position. I’m addressing myself to those who are adjuncts and precariously employed, still grad students wondering what the future holds.

So many of you are going to have leave. You’re going to have to figure out an alternative career, a plan B. My purpose in this talk is to ask you, when you look at your other options, you consider starting your own business as an entrepreneur.

But to do that, you have to confront a truth about the academy and your own training within it. It’s not a pleasant one. The academy is fundamentally risk averse. The whole set-up, from grad school on, inculcates a position of dependency. You gain your legitimacy, your standing, your funding, your resources and your salary, and frankly your identity—all from this institutional teat, from which all good things flow.

For those who have a steady, regular position in the university—i.e., grad students in good standing and tenure line faculty, the university is an all-encompassing institution, that provides all needs. A rather thin trickle, perhaps, for the grad students, a stronger stream for the professors.

The upshot for both, is, though, that academics are company men. Totally tied to and dependent on the institution. This shouldn’t be that surprising an insight, except for how profoundly this fact is mystified in a discourse of radicalism. The self-image of so many professors, particularly humanists, as radical risk takers is really extraordinary considering it all takes place in an entirely risk-free environment, in terms of the financial foundation and legitimizing structure. Academics sit with their palms out waiting for their pay and their grant money and their “support.” I was a department head, and faculty were always lined up whining, ‘where’s my money? Where’s my funding?”

Sure there is intellectual risk and intellectual bullying. But the paycheck pretty much keeps coming. As does the all-important institutional affiliation.

It is this dependency, and the fear of risk that it inculcates, that holds Ph.D.s back from imagining the FULL RANGE of alt careers. What my readers and clients have shown me, is that when Ph.D.s try to imagine alternative career track, they keep looking for another replacement teat—the source of all funding, the source of all legitimacy outside themselves—in some institution that’s out there. Where is the funding faucet? Where is my salary faucet?
And that stops PhD.s from thinking like entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs start out from the premise that they will generate their own institutional location and income. It’s really hard for someone fully indoctrinated into the standard PhD training model to make that leap. And that is cutting off your access to tremendous possibilities for reinvention of your identity, and your relationship to money and self-support.

I want to end with a three step process for putting entrepreneurial risk into your list of option, when you consider your own plan B. Step 1: look at your state of dependency on institutional validation and ask yourself what role that plays in your thinking. Just naming a thing lessens its hold on you. Ask how you might divorce yourself from it. It is not easy. The reason that so many keep clinging to a campus affiliation for so long is that we’ve ALL be led to believe that we’re failures if we lose it. So ask: If I were to imagine myself as my own funder, how would that feel? Sit with that.

Then step 2: ask yourself, what skills do I have? Academic or not. My first business was making and selling jewelry. I made that jewelry from Japanese paper, that I had collected for 30 years of involvement with Japan. Japanese papercraft that was a shadow skill that accompanied my years of scholarly involvement with Japan. I never thought anything of it, it was just a hobby. I never intended to make it anything else. That’s where if learned how to build a website, write a blog, handle PayPal, and do marketing. My big toe in the water was the jewelry, I created a tiny business, I discovered I could do it.... Think about your skills that may be different than the ones valorized in your PhD program, in the eyes of your advisor! (Darcy Hannibal on the panel told us how she has found herself asked for statistical analysis help, which has become a side business for her).

Step 3: Try. It can be little and tentative. You may not need to gather capital and investors. I started with a server fee and a box of manila folders.

You do not have to be perfect to try. I am still not great at business! I make a mistake every single month. But I bring home more than the average full professor salary in the US.

I don't what your skills would be. Anthropologists have a lot of skills. Language and cultural expertise, our fieldwork skills, many many things. The thing about creating your own business is that you don’t have to please or satisfy external judges like your advisor, your committee or your discipline. You satisfy yourself. Hang out a shingle, and try.

I think that the word entrepreneur is a scary one. But it doesn’t have to be. It is just grasping that you have a skill that others value, and making that skill available for pay.

To conclude: the dependency that Ph.Ds have on external validation and institutional location and security squelches entrepreneurial risk taking. As you conceive of your alternative career path, be willing to embrace the possibility that you can live outside the institution, that you can be your source of funding, legitimacy, and identity.