I’m a tenure-track assistant professor at California State University Northridge in the Department of Anthropology. I’m also representative of the long and winding road to a tenure-track job that often characterizes the current academic job market. I graduated with my doctorate in 2007 and – having already done two years of tracking the already-limited academic job market – had procured a practicing anthropology job as a grants specialist for a national corporation after I returned from fieldwork. While I had taught as an adjunct throughout my graduate career, I didn’t consider it financially feasible as an occupation, and so I made a full-time job my primary goal, teaching one evening class on occasion in order to maintain recent teaching evaluations and continue my professional development as an instructor. This decision fortunately prepared me for the coming recession and sharp decline in academic jobs while still keeping me positioned for a tenure-track job. Looking back at my own career, I can see that a number of factors were significant in leading to my ability to successfully navigate the current job market: advancing myself through the private sector ladder throughout my academic career; choosing a highly interdisciplinary and applied research question; self-promoting my skills as an anthropologist; and my doctoral program’s combination of a strong emphasis on methodology, classes that built broad-based professional skills, and the openness of my advisors to support a career path that prioritized my financial well-being.

Unfortunately, many doctoral students and recent PhDs are not so fortunate. It has increasingly become common to see conversations revolve around the poor academic job market and the abysmal working conditions of many adjunct professors – in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the Higher Education Advocate, and professors’ blogs across the nation. We are graduating more than twice the number of PhDs each year, overall, as we were in the 1970s – yet now tenure and tenure-track academics make up a mere 31% of teaching faculty. The challenge of a low number of tenure-track jobs is exacerbated in anthropology by the relative specialization required for any particular position, seeking to replace or augment existing faculty strengths. The result: many graduating PhDs are unclear as to their other options, afraid to be stigmatized for considering non-academic careers, and uncertain as to how to maintain an open door back to the university if they choose other employment. At the same time, the adjunct professor track is one that affords very little material benefit – most adjunct positions lack basic resources for teaching, much less health and other benefits.

Adjunct professors have been compared to Walmart and McDonalds workers in terms of their low pay and security, and my own experience testified to the poor working conditions of adjunct faculty – which was why I was determined to find another career path. However, the “dual-track” approach that I took – simultaneously building both practicing and academic careers – required far more than creativity and drive. It took support from my advisor, committee, and institution, and it is this support that I wish to advocate for now. To most effectively prepare for a dual-track approach, students need to be instructed early and often about the realities of the job market, coached into identifying their goals, and guided in how to obtain them.
The goals, therefore, of a dual-track approach to anthropology education are five-fold. First, we need to prepare students to see practicing careers as equally valid ways to be an anthropologist. Second, we need to help them to be realistic about the tenure-track demands and their academic competitiveness. Students also need to understand that given the limited number of tenure-track jobs, it is necessary to be prepared for “plan B” (no matter how brilliant they are). Third, we need to fill methodological gaps, build an interdisciplinary collaborative network and perspective, and help them to shift their emphasis from self-driven interest to client-driven concerns. Fourth, we must provide the critical hands-on experience that makes them competitive in a non-academic job market. Finally, we must translate their skill-sets and professional language to the non-academic world. To meet these goals, we can institutionally support our students in optimizing their education for post-graduate success – operationalizing success not as sacrificing everything for “the discipline” but rather as contributing to the discipline in any number of ways, while also prioritizing one’s personal needs and responsibilities.

How can this be done institutionally and what are the challenges? At CSUN, we have been attempting to build a pathway for students to simultaneously prepare for higher educational levels and for the non-academic market. We’ve introduced an applied anthropology course for upper division undergraduates to help them assess their suitability for academic vs. practicing positions and to identify the “next steps” in education and experience they need to be successful post-graduation. We have integrated applied anthropology across our curriculum, producing a number of other applied elective classes and will have a minor in applied anthropology offered soon. At the graduate level, we offer a Master’s in public archaeology and are considering creating a Master’s in applied anthropology. Currently, we tailor-fit sociocultural and biological students’ advising around their individual goals. For graduate students, we have also created extracurricular workshops to help them identify their career goals, assess their probability of advancement in academic anthropology, evaluate the appropriateness of doctoral study for their goals, and learn basic skills in professionalism. Finally, ongoing support for a brief period after graduation – including post-graduate internships in the nonprofit and for-profit sector, regular encouragement, and networking opportunities – can help encourage alumni through the sometimes difficult transition to a job or a doctoral program.

While this process has gone relatively smoothly for our department, there are a number of challenges facing students and faculty attempting dual-track preparation. There is a widespread culture of academic orientation in anthropology and this trickles down to student expectations. While we as professors are having conversations about the dismal academic job market, these are largely held in a sphere that students do not access. Students rarely realize that starting tenure track salaries are relatively low with a very high workload. For the high cost in time, financial resources, and social upheaval, the PhD is often not substantially of more value in the non-academic job market than the Master’s, and may even pose barriers. CEOs frequently assume that PhDs will require a higher salary and be too specialized to be efficient and happy in their work. Meanwhile, PhD graduates may lack the skills and experience that would have been much more valuable to their potential employer than those extra years of higher education and a usually irrelevant dissertation. Students often delay entering the non-academic market post-graduation due to the higher cultural valuation of academic jobs, even poor academic jobs, vis-à-vis practicing positions – and they may do this until they have spent too many years underemployed and underpaid to successfully negotiate for a well-paying full-time position outside of academia. Even when presented with information and support on the part of faculty, students may be rather resistant to using this information in their decision-making process.
At the institutional level, there are also significant barriers to optimal dual-track preparation. Risk management at the university may object to some relevant internships and service learning opportunities and many universities also do not view overseeing internships as a positive return on investment for paying for faculty time, so this work may be uncounted and uncompensated – piled on top of already increasing teaching loads. It can be an incredible amount of work to set up meaningful service learning activities and assess students’ progress. Finally, there are significant issues at the level of our discipline in assisting students in dual-track preparation. Programs that best prepare students for academic tenure-track jobs may not include sufficient methodology, guidance, and support for securing them the best practicing jobs and vice versa. Advisors reportedly vary widely in their willingness and ability to help students position themselves for practicing careers.

While I am not advocating for a standardized approach to preparing students for the realities of the job market, I am a strong advocate for students’ rights to effective career counseling. Pursuing the doctoral degree and an academic career is not only a decision that reflects dedication and passion – it is a financial decision. We need to recognize that avoiding seeing these decisions as financial arises from a position of privilege. CSUN is a Hispanic serving institution with many talented first-generation minority college students. I want to make sure that for my students for whom the graduate degree is not only a passion, but also a pathway out of poverty, that they are fully prepared and supported to meet both their academic and financial goals. The reality is there aren’t very many academic jobs, and the adjunct positions that are plentiful will not help my students break into the middle class. The dual-track approach takes into account not only the risks involved in the academic job market, but also is a humane (and sane) plan for students to explore the careers for which they are best suited, that will lead to optimal productivity and fulfillment in their lives. This approach has the added benefit of allowing underrepresented groups to claim a stake in our discipline that is uniquely theirs, rather than to feel they must conform to a set of narrow expectations of tenure-line faculty (expectations that often ignore the complex responsibilities and constraints such students have). This results in a richer dialogue – theoretically, methodologically, and in application – in our discipline.