SUMMARY

THE PROFESSOR IS IN

KAREN KELSKY

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Summary of “The Professor Is In” by Karen Kelsky

Written by Lea Schullery

The Essential Guide To Turning Your Ph.D. Into A Job

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Introduction

Author Karen Kelsky recalls attending a retirement party for a long-time professor bidding farewell after 25 years as a university professor. As the ceremony unfolds, he tells “stories of the students he taught, the programs he built, the family he raised, and the pleasures of his years of sabbatical travel.” From the outside, it all looks so beautiful and soothing. However, the story being told is already a relic of the past. The author looks around at the many graduate students in the crowd - all of whom hope to live this very life someday - and wonders if they know that the life of the retired professor is no longer feasible. That's because “The American academy is in crisis. Decades of shrinking funding and shifting administrative priorities have left public universities strapped for cash and unable to sustain their basic educational mission.” In fact, states spent 28 percent less per student in higher education in 2013 than they did in 2008. Eleven states have cut funding by more than ⅓ per student and two states have even cut their higher education spending per student in half! As a result, public colleges and universities are drastically raising tuitions, causing some states like Arizona and California to see increases in tuition rise more than 70 percent between the years of 2008 and 2014.

Of course, this also means that student debt is only climbing. And in 2014, the average graduate’s debt was $57,000. And in the midst of this crisis, universities are choosing to increase hires at the highest end of the pay scale - university administration such as deans, provosts, and the like. And according to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of administrators hired between 2001 and 2011 increased 50 percent faster than the number of instructors. With fewer teachers and more students, the question becomes: who is teaching the classes? Temporary faculty called adjuncts. Today, adjuncts have replaced traditional tenure professors; in fact, in 2013 approximately 75 percent of university faculty were contingent and only 25 percent were on a permanent tenure track. As a result, graduate students are finding it more and more difficult to find a job, and not only are adjuncts struggling financially but mentally as well.

Thankfully, *The Professor Is In* reveals how to navigate the job market, how to make informed choices about your career, and how to protect your financial security and mental health.

The Harsh Reality Surrounding the Academic Job Market

Thousands of Ph.D. candidates enter the job market each year, each one searching for the elusive tenured professor position. It isn't until many years later that they realize just how difficult it is to find a job in academia. Graduate students often have unrealistic expectations about the academic job market and underestimate their competition. For example, in popular fields like English, a single job opening can attract as many as 1,000 applicants. Even worse, graduate students aren't receiving the support they need from their advisors.

For instance, author Karen Kelsky remembers the advice she received about the job market in which the department head stated, "You'll never get an academic job, so don't even bother trying." And when Kelsky finally secured a tenured job, she and her tenured colleagues rarely spoke of the job market or the need to train their graduate students to prepare for it. Shockingly, whenever Kelsky brought this topic up in conversation, none of her colleagues were willing to investigate the problem further. As a result, Kelsky took matters into her own hands and began to seek out clients who needed help navigating life after graduate school.

As it turns out, thousands of graduate students sought her advice because they didn't feel like they were receiving support from their advisors. One client from Yale, for example, told Kelsky, "My advisor told me everyone in the program gets good jobs, but I know the cohorts of the last few years, and only two made it onto the tenure track. He's delusional, living in some outdated fantasy of institutional prestige." Like this client from Yale, thousands of others experienced advisors who were either delusional or just too kind to warn their students of the harsh reality of finding a job.

Even more, graduate students hold onto a number of myths about the academic job market. They tell themselves things like, "I am judged by my ideas not by what's on my CV," "I know a guy who got a job without any

publications," "I don't need a fancy CV for a simple teaching job," "My advisor is famous in the field, so I don't need to worry," and "My passion sets me apart." Graduate students also make the mistake of trying o appear "realistic" about the job market by downplaying their passion and ambitions. They say things like, "I don't need much money or a high-ranking position, and "If I can teach at a small college, then I'll be happy." As a result, they decrease their likelihood of moving beyond being an adjunct professor.

Forget the Student Mentality and Adopt a Peer Mentality

One of the biggest struggles for a tenure track job seeker is transitioning from the graduate student mentality to the peer mentality of the job market. You see, search committees aren't looking for another grad student, they are looking for a faculty colleague. It is your job to become that peer. Luckily, author Karen Kelsky has laid out all the ins and outs of graduating from student to peer.

First, many graduate students drone on and on about their dissertation. The problem is, the search committee doesn't care about the dissertation that you wrote in graduate school. "What they want to know is how that dissertation accomplishes specific goals that serve the hiring department: that is, how it produces refereed publications, intervenes in a major scholarly debate, wins grants and awards, translates into dynamic teaching, transforms quickly into a book, and inspires a viable second project." So when it comes time to interview, learn to talk about your dissertation in short spurts, no more than a few sentences at a time.

Remember, interviews are a conversation, not a presentation. Think of it like a tennis match, the interviewers lob the ball, and you lob it back. Another mistake that many graduate students make is constantly repeating their main points. It is understandable that graduate students are insecure; after all, their status is insecure. However, seeing the topic of your dissertation in every single thing in the world and pleading for its importance is the hallmark of immaturity as a scholar and a potential colleague. Instead, they want someone who is confident that their topic is sound and who can show its importance to major debates in the scholarly field.

Additionally, graduate students often make the mistake of waiting for permission that will never come. For instance, many make the excuse of "My advisor never told me to publish" or they never attend conferences

because their advisor never suggested they should. Instead, you shouldn't rely on your advisor to give you permission. The responsibility for your job market preparation is completely on you. You should attend the national conventions and publish your writing to build a competitive resume.

Lastly, graduate students are often too submissive in interviews. They tilt their head, cross their legs, avoid eye contact, and use weak hand gestures. Instead, you should square your shoulders, straighten your back, lift your chin, and take up space in your chair. As Amy Cuddy states, "Our bodies change our minds, our minds change our behavior, and our behavior changes our outcomes."

How to Write a Successful Cover Letter

Out of the thousands of cover letters that author Karen Kelsky has read, nearly all of them start out *awful*. The problem is that candidates work so hard on making their CV perfect, that they often neglect the cover letter. Luckily, there are "a few basic rules that, if you follow them, will ensure that your letter is properly formatted and organized, includes appropriate information, and avoids the worst errors of tone."

First, your letter must be on letterhead if you have a current academic affiliation of any kind. This small step will make you look instantly more professional. Kelsky advises that you do everything it takes to obtain a letterhead. "You may steal the letterhead. You may Photoshop the letterhead. Do what you must, but send out letters on the letterhead of the department with which you are affiliated." Next, you should follow normal letter etiquette, like having the date written out in the upper left, just under the letterhead, then a line space, then the full snail mail address of the recipient just below the date. Then a line space, and then the salutation: "Dear Professor," or "Dear Members of the Search Committee."

You must also ensure that your cover letter is not too long. It should be two pages in length if you are a junior candidate and searching for your first or second job. Your text must be 11-or-12-point type in standard professional fonts like Garamond, Verdana, and Times New Roman. Margins should be 1 inch wide. Next, remember that you are *showing* not *telling*. Avoid empty claims like "I am passionate about teaching." Instead, write something like, "I used new technologies to create innovative small group discussion opportunities in my large introductory classes." In other words, back up your claims with evidence.

You should also devote no more than one paragraph to your dissertation. Remember, people on hiring committees don't want to hear about your dissertation! Instead, include a second research project you plan to work on that is somehow related to your dissertation and how it shapes and

motivates your teaching. Avoid using phrases like “I love teaching.” Instead, your cover letter should only include facts that show that you are an effective teacher. You can do this by naming specific courses and specific methods of teaching you plan to use in them.

Next, you’ll need to do your research. Read the work of the faculty and be explicit in how you can contribute. Identify potential collaborators, not mentors, and explain how you might collaborate with them in the future. Finally, read the description for the job opening and tailor your cover letter to help you clearly communicate how you will fulfill the role they are seeking.

How To Write a Stand-Out CV

Now that you've learned the ins and outs of a quality cover letter, it's time to focus on the CV. While there is no particular style, there are basic expectations of a CV that will produce a highly readable, well-organized CV on the American model. Candidates outside of the U.S. should seek experts for opinions on whether the American model will work. To begin, general formatting rules include the usual: one-inch margins, 12-point font, single-spaced, heading in bold and all caps, and subheadings in bold.

You should also avoid using bullet points, remember that this isn't a resume. Once you've completed the proper headings, it's time to focus on writing the CV itself. There will be a few sections that are more important than the rest. The first is education. Your education should always be the first section in your CV and should be listed by degree, not by institution. Do not spell out "Doctor of Philosophy," and the like. Instead, list Ph.D., M.A. and B.A. in descending order to avoid coming across pretentious. Then, give the department, institution, and year of completion - do not give starting dates.

Next, you should focus on any publications that you have written, like books, refereed journal articles, book reviews, web-based publications, etc. Then, after you've listed your honors, awards, and grants, you should focus on your invited talks and conference activity. In this section, you should include any conferences where you organized panels, presented papers or participated as a discussant on a panel. These entries will include the name of the paper, name of the conference, and date (year only) on the left.

Ultimately, you should also take into account the central organizing principle of the CV: the Principle of Peer Review. Things that are peer-reviewed and competitive take precedence over things that are not. So things like awards and honors reveal high levels of competition, as do fellowships and grants. Additionally, invited talks suggest a higher level of individual recognition and honor than a volunteered paper or conference -

which should be reflected in the order of your CV. Things like campus talks and teaching of courses are not competitive, so they should be listed later on. “Once your CV has been hammered into shape this way, it comes easy to judge the value of any potential new line.”

The Dos and Don'ts of Your Teaching Statement

The hardest of all job documents to write is the teaching statement. This is likely because the expectations are unclear and candidates often use the teaching statement as a reiteration of how much they love teaching. As a result, teaching statements are appallingly bad for many reasons. The first is that it is too long. Everything you need to say can be easily said in one page. You only need one page of 11-or-12-point type and one-inch margins, of course. Think of your teaching statement like you are packing for a trip. Fill your bags with everything you think you need, then take half of it out. Well, the same can be done for your teaching statement. Write everything you think you need to say, then go back and take half out.

Next, you shouldn't be telling a story. Many candidates believe they need to tell the story of their teaching life, but the hiring committee isn't looking for a story - they are looking for the "principles of teaching, and evidence that you exemplify these principles in specific classroom goals and practices." All too often, candidates use language that expresses how passionate they are about teaching, but that doesn't show the committee what they need to know to hire you. Furthermore, candidates often use excessively humble language, especially if they are female. Lines like, "I was honored to have the opportunity to be entrusted with the core seminar," and "I hope that my methods will encourage students to…" may seem charming, but they are overly submissive and "self-sabotaging."

The purpose of the teaching statement is to demonstrate that you are as self-directed, resourceful, and innovative in the classroom as you were in your research and writing. To do this, you should show the committee how you plan to make those connections. For example, "if you are dedicated to critiquing postapocalyptic fantasy in your research, then show how you have students deconstruct episodes of *The Walking Dead*. If you study the role of death in Shakespearean drama, then show how you have your

students stage one of the corpse scenes from *Hamlet*. Remember to always stay on message."

And like any professional document, you should always include a conclusion. Finish strong! Nothing is more deflating than reading an entire teaching statement only for it to end with "And I received positive feedback for that class." Instead, try something like, "In sum, all of my pedagogical strategies are dedicated to teaching the debates and controversies animating political life in ways that will remain with the student long after he or she leaves my classroom."

Lastly, some candidates will be asked to provide a teaching portfolio. The key here is to simply show that you know how to put a class together, you don't need to impress too much. Begin by taking a look at some of the current syllabi used by the university to get an idea about the workload. It should also be tailored to their department and campus., so if the job is for contemporary East Asia, don't submit a gender studies seminar, unless it is primarily based in East Asia.

How to Ace the Job Interview

Now that you have written all the professional documents, it's time to focus on the interview. In addition to the basic interview questions, you will eventually be asked to present your research and give a presentation, followed by a Q&A session. First, you should make sure the talk speaks to the job being advertised. Oftentimes, candidates are obsessed with their own narrow topics, so they forget to tailor the presentation to the position being filled. So if it's a nineteenth-century British literature job, then you shouldn't talk about your work in postcolonial literature!

You should then have a clear one-paragraph introduction that lays out the topic and sketches the basic plan of the talk. Stating something like, "Thank you for having me. Today I'll be speaking about X. In the talk, I'll be exploring X from the perspective of Y and will be relating it to Z. I will show that X derives from/causes/represents/signifies Q, and ultimately argue that X can be understood as P." This is something simple, yet important and many candidates forget about it entirely.

Throughout the talk, be sure to stay on point. You don't need seven pages in prefatory remarks, and you should be into the main topic of your talk by the end of the second page. Next, make sure that you create a clear and logical argument, and ensure that it is original and distinctive. You don't need to "shed light" or "contribute to the literature on," as your presentation should be your own original argument. Lastly, you should prepare for the Q&A session at the end of your presentation.

It is the Q&A that distinguishes the weak from the strong. This is where the hiring committee will directly challenge your presentation. At this stage, you should always acknowledge the value of the questioner's point but then turn the focus away from their agenda and back to your own. In other words, you should never respond, "Oh, wow I really wish I'd had time to talk about that and it's a total oversight that I didn't include it." Instead, say something like, "You raise a valuable point and one that I certainly

considered. However, my findings showed that the primary issue here is X, and so it was to that that I turned my greatest attention.

There Are Options Outside of Academia

It is OK to quit. You see, sometimes the people in the world of academia get sucked into it - it's like a cult. But it's OK to decide that you want to pursue a life outside of academia. If you make this decision, it might not be easy, but it is entirely doable and the first step is to disaggregate your skills from your identity. All too often, academics assume that they don't have the skills for a nonacademic job market, but that isn't necessarily true. Instead, all you lack is the experience in framing your skills as such. And while the business world might not be interested in your anthropology degree, they will certainly be interested in the skills you have in writing, public speaking, research, interviewing, administering surveys, data entry, and data analysis - to name a few.

Therefore, the first step is to "identify the skills and past experiences that are hidden, assumed, or taken for granted within your previous scholarly identity, and recognize each one as the achievement that it is." To do this, there are three categories that will align your university work with business. The first category falls under "skills," which is where you can include proficiency in qualitative data analysis, statistics, public speaking, and more. Next, you have the "Knowledge" category, where you include your areas of expertise, which may or may not be relevant. Say that you're specialty is Japanese gender issues, your knowledge might include a cultural knowledge of Japan and even knowledge of the language itself.

The final category is the "Achievement" category, which contains any achievement that you have accomplished, like organizing conferences, writing a book, or even running a lab. Brainstorm freely in each category and don't hold back, you don't have to show anyone this list but yourself. Give yourself permission to acknowledge all that you are capable of and you'll see that anyone with a Ph.D. has a long list of skills, knowledge, and achievements that would be attractive to any business. Lastly, you should understand why you want to do what you do. Ask yourself: What do I want?

Am I happy? Am I offering something of value to the world? Knowing your motivation can help guide you to the career you want to pursue.

Final Summary

The academic job market is one that is competitive and fierce. And the worst part? Academic advisors aren't always willing to acknowledge the challenges that graduate students will face or even understand the true nature of the job market. Throughout The Professor Is In, author Karen Kelsky laid out everything you need to know to be successful, and the key to success is preparation. Prepare a flawless cover letter, CV, and teaching statement and then prepare to ace your interviews by ensuring that you give exactly what the hiring committee is looking for. Of course, if you decide that a career in academia isn't for you, there are plenty of jobs that are looking for the skills you have. Academic skills can translate into almost any industry, so don't be discouraged if you feel that academia isn't for you.