

**BUILDING UPON ALTERNATIVE-ACADEMIC
PROFESSIONALIZATION OPPORTUNITIES
FOR PHD HUMANITIES STUDENTS**

A Dissertation Presented for the
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Degree
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This work is dedicated to:

Alex—where would I be without my rock? Thank you so much for all the love and support. For all the little things that have made it possible for me to be here. For all the big things and cheerleading and food and caffeine and care.

Livie—thank you for empowering me with a newfound sense of strength, resolve, and determination that I didn't know I had. Thank you for all the smiles and love and support you give in your own special way.

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation titled, “Building Upon Alternative-Academic Professionalization Opportunities for PhD Humanities Students,” I have interviewed 10 UTK English PhD alumni who graduated from the program between 2013 and 2023 to understand: (1) what they’ve experienced in their transition from academia into alt-ac careers, (2) what skills from their time in UTK’s English PhD program have transferred into their alt-ac careers, and (3) what forms of alt-ac professionalization support participants recommend adding to the UTK English PhD program. Participants were initially given a short survey to determine if their careers coincided with this study’s definition of alt-ac; that they were either in non-teaching roles within academia, or any careers outside of it. The survey also determined that, of the 23 respondents, 15 thought the English PhD program needed to include more support for students’ alt-ac professionalization, and 10 responded that they were interested in participating in the study further, through three separate rounds of one-hour interviews. Irving Seidman’s (2006) phenomenological framework has been knitted together with several indigenous, community-based research methods , including story as methodology (Riley-Mukavetz, 2014; Donelson, 2018), the importance of space/place (Powell et al., 2014; Riley-Mukavetz and Powell, 2015), and reciprocity and collaboration (Wilson, 2008; Smith, 2021) to support ethical community-based research. Andrea Riley-Mukavetz’s model of “co-theorization” has been particularly helpful in thinking through collaborative meaning-making with participants (Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, 2014) and has led to the discovery of several important suggestions for increased alt-ac professionalization

support for PhD graduates, including task and job analysis, translating CVs to resumes, coursework collaborations, alt-ac alumni networks, and alt-ac internships. The suggestions given provide a range of possible professionalization opportunities for graduates hoping to go alt-ac, from participants who have successfully made the transition themselves and are therefore valuable guides for both graduate students and faculty mentors and advisors alike. The importance of recontextualizing (Baird and Dilger, 2017) graduates' skills as an invaluable form of adaptive transfer in the face of new alt-ac contexts was also identified and provides exciting opportunities for further research.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: MY OWN ALT-AC STORY

Introduction

In embarking on this research project, from the very beginning, I was seeking to solve a practical issue that I myself was experiencing, that I saw other graduate students around me grappling with, and that I also saw reflected in any research I conducted about the academic job market. This issue is of course that only 2% of humanities job candidates landed tenure-track jobs in the US as of 2022 (Daniel, 2022, n.p.), that 39% of humanities PhDs were employed in careers outside of post-secondary teaching as of 2019 (Goldstone, 2023, n.p.), and that overwhelmingly, PhD students are prepared throughout their programs to go into the tenure-track positions that they likely won't get (Rose, 2020, n.p.). With the ever-dwindling prospects of the academic job market, I sought to focus on what could be done to promote alt-ac professionalization in my own university, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and within the English department at UTK that my PhD program is through. Within the scope of this project, alt-ac refers to non-teaching careers within Academia and any careers outside of Academia. In seeking solutions to the low rate of Humanities PhD Graduates landing tenure-track positions, and the lack of preparedness many PhD Graduates feel for alt-ac careers, I have specifically sought to answer three questions through my research for this project:

1. What have the experiences of recent UTK English PhD students been post-graduation, who've chosen to pursue alt-ac careers?

2. How have these students transferred the skills they've learned in the English PhD program to their alt-ac careers?
3. What do their alt-ac professionalization experiences tell us about UTK's resources, both past and present, for preparing PhD students for alt-ac career opportunities?

In seeking to answer these questions, I have worked closely with ten participants who have generously told me their stories throughout 30 collective hours of interviews. They have shared their insights, motivations, struggles, fears, and triumphs (which I share in their own words in chapter 4). Together, my participants and I have shared, co-theorized, and provided many resources, strategies, and suggestions for graduate students considering alt-ac and the faculty and departments who work with and support those students.

Throughout this, my first chapter, I will seek to reciprocate the openness and honesty my participants have shown in sharing their stories by sharing my own story¹ of how I've come to this research project, and how I've ventured into the uncharted land of alt-ac. I'll then conclude the chapter with a chapter summary guide for the entire dissertation. To graduate students currently finding themselves embarking on the dark and mysterious path toward alt-ac, I hope my story helps you feel a sense of kinship and understanding. You are not alone, and there are a lot of people (at least 11 on this project

¹ While including my own story could technically be seen as opening my project up to as a possible autoethnography, I have chosen not to go this route as this project mainly focuses on the stories, insights, and experiences of my participants. My story here is simply one anecdote that provides the reader with some context into how and why this project began, and I never engage in the kind of systematic self-reflection an autoethnography requires (Poulos, 2021). The stories and self-reflection of my participants provide the expertise that has helped to inform this entire project. Therefore, I have labeled it as a phenomenological qualitative project (see more in chapters 2 and 3).

alone!) cheering you on in your journey. To faculty, mentors, and administrators looking to support your students, I hope my story gives you a helpful perspective as you continue doing the amazing work you do to help your students.

My Own Alt-Ac Story

It's hard to put a beginning on a thing like this; I don't think there was a distinct beginning to my alt-ac journey (and it's far from over), but I just remember slowly realizing that I had come into the English PhD program here at UTK in 2019 with a very different perspective from a lot of my peers, from a lot of what I was hearing my professors say about the academic job/professionalization setup, and from the institutional values at large.

I had a really hard experience in 2017, the year after I'd graduated from my bachelor's that had sent me reeling. I had taken a year off after graduating in 2016 to work and figure out what I wanted to do next-knowing I didn't want to directly use the film degree I'd graduated with. I'd had loads of awful, sexist experiences working on film sets for internships at this point and already knew that writing was--as it had always been--the thing that I truly loved and wanted to pursue further for my career. While film studies had taught me so much about working with more complex themes, analyzing visual texts, taking constructive feedback well, and working to tight deadlines, these were lessons I knew I could take with me into an English Master's program. So, in spite of (and possibly even because of) my hard experience in 2017, I applied for a new start in the form of a two year's master's program in English at SUNY Cortland in Upstate New York (near where I'd grown up). I was the first student to ever propose such a thing as

switching from a Film BA to an English MA at SUNY Cortland, was accepted after several of the English professors were consulted, and proceeded to have two of the best, most carefree, most joyful years of my life.

I met my husband shortly after starting the MA program, made wonderful friends, and just thoroughly enjoyed myself in classes where I truly felt at home. I helped to start up the Writing Center at SUNY Cortland with both an amazing mentor and one of my fellow master's students—one of my best friends to this day. In tutoring lots of different students with their writing, I realized that I loved teaching and supporting students. That I wanted to be a college professor, that helping students every day for a career would be an amazing way to make a living while I worked on my creative writing work (fantasy novels) that I had/have long-term plans to get published.

There was no PhD program at SUNY Cortland, which would've been my first choice. So, I chose to ask some mentors about Comps/Rhet PhD programs, hearing that they had a better job outlook, and eventually learning that UTK was known for being supportive to students, having enough resources to go around, and having a good sense of community. I applied to three programs, and eventually got accepted into UTK's Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics program, moving to Tennessee for my new program two days after marrying my husband in New York.

One thing truly worth mentioning is that, as I unknowingly began my alt-ac journey, I was also unwittingly on a journey towards better mental health. I had graduated from my bachelor's program in three years instead of four to save money, working

myself so hard that I had blackouts from lack of sleep, was underfed (from lack of time to eat), and was experiencing around five-six anxiety attacks per week at my worst.

My Masters was where I began making changes. My hardest semester in the program was my second semester where I took 4 graduate classes while working 40 hours a week at my retail job and dating my husband. One of the best days in my program was at the beginning of my second year, after I had gotten my graduate assistantship working at the Writing Center, and I handed in my two weeks' notice at my retail job. My work/life balance became much healthier, my husband was incredibly supportive of this change and of my work/life balance efforts in general. This was around the time we got engaged, and I had to balance studies with wedding planning. After this change, I swore to myself I'd never go back to the unhealthy work habits I'd had before.

The next step toward good mental health was taking advantage of the counseling center I had free access to once becoming a student at UTK. With the newness of everything, and how busy my studies were, I was once again having anxiety attacks 5-6 times a week and my husband was very supportive in wanting me to get the support I needed so that I could find a healthier way to work through and manage my anxiety. What I thought would be a few quick sessions talking through breathing exercises and taking it easy turned out to be a life-changing experience that involved on and off counseling for the next four years. What can I say other than that it was all tied up in so much more than anxiety? And that this experience allowed me to truly show up for myself in ways I hadn't even realized I wasn't until now. What I wanted mattered. What made me happy mattered. I was allowed to be sad, frustrated, scared, angry. I was

allowed to be vulnerable to the people around me and admit when I didn't like something, or didn't want something, or when something wasn't right for me.

I realized that I wanted a family. That I felt centered and mentally healthy enough to have one now. That I wanted my career to be well-balanced with a family life. That, while I refused to give one of those two things up, I would drop any career that made me feel like I wouldn't be supported in my desire to prioritize family.

This value corresponded with the other values I had taken on throughout my journey. I wanted family to be a priority. I wanted inner peace and mental health to be a priority. And I wanted to feel free to say no to the things in my life that I didn't agree with, or that made me unhappy. This acute awareness of these values; of the importance of my family, and of my mental health, began to happen around the time that Covid-19 hit and sent shockwaves through Academia, unearthing some of the hard truths about Academia as a workplace in its wake. This was in 2019/2020.

By 2021, I felt ready to start expanding our family and asked around about graduate students' family leave policy only to find out that we didn't have one (unless you count a leave of absence with a full unpaid semester off and no health insurance a policy). I was quickly and strongly supported by many of the wonderful faculty in the program and an amazing mentor who logistically made it possible for me to stay in the program, and it'll always bring tears to my eyes as I think about everything she's given me and my family in her support.

This informal support, however, didn't change the way my hair stood up at the lack of formal, structured, institutional support offered to graduate students who, like me,

didn't want to have to choose between a career and their family. What had happened to the importance of supporting women that was so often touted in the feminist works I'd been reading within Academia for half a decade? What happened to supporting and respecting different positionalities? It was clear to me that we didn't practice what we preached. We, especially in the humanities, talked all day about bettering humankind, but what about those of us who worked in the Academy? This cognitive dissonance in values was especially clear during Covid-19 as those of us who'd considered a future in academia saw what our respected mentors and advisors were going through just to survive. Heard the stories, heard about the sacrifices. We see you and we respect you and are more grateful to you than you could probably ever know. But we've also listened to your frustrations, and learned from you, and for some of us, the academic path became a dream we no longer wanted to pursue after Covid-19.

This was most certainly the case for me. I'd re-evaluated (not unlike a lot of folks between ages 23 and 28) what I really wanted from my life. I let go of the pressure I'd always felt to be perfect, to live up to others' expectations, and started worrying more about what would truly make *me* happy. What would truly be a healthy path forward for me? This change mingled with new motherhood in 2022. An experience that hit me and changed me in ways I couldn't ever have imagined. After only two weeks of my husband's support after coming home from the hospital, he had to go back to work for financial reasons. And then I was left alone most of the day with a little two-week-old who became everything to me. Becoming her mom made me grow so much; made me tougher, more confident, more comfortable with having to work through the unknown.

And even more determined to model good and healthy life choices for her. It also made me realize that I could never personally put her in daycare and go work for 40+ hours a week. Daycare is a wonderful, indispensable, and healthy option for a lot of parents; for several of my friends and family, and I say you go! Do what's best for you and your family! I just felt, in my own heart, that what I personally wanted was to work at home with my little one. I knew, pretty early on, that that's what would make me happiest.

And so here I am, after healing from past trauma, after marriage, working toward better mental health and work/life balance, and motherhood. Here I am, working towards becoming a freelance writer who works at home with her daughter, during naps and between playtime and cuddles. Here I am, writing a dissertation where I get to ask others who have come before me how they've made the journey from our English PhD program here at UTK to their numerous alt-ac careers. Because I need to know. And others who come after me will need to know too. It is my participants' stories, the most important stories, that I find a community with, and that I will share throughout this dissertation. And I have shared my story, here, to try to honor and payback their openness and generosity in sharing their stories with me. To all of you, thank you so much for your honesty, your care, and your support. This project could not have happened without you.

Conclusion

I hope that in sharing my story, I have provided at least some insight into how and why I came to this project. Throughout this dissertation I'll be sharing many more resources, information, strategies, and stories that I hope will be helpful to anyone

looking to use, share, or provide alt-ac resources. In chapter 1, as you have seen, I've provided my reasoning for embarking on this project by telling my own story. In chapter 2, I'll provide a literature review contextualizing the necessity for alt-ac resources to be further built upon at large within academic humanities spaces, as well as the Indigenous Studies' theories and frameworks (such as co-theorizing with my participants) that have informed my orientation to this project. In chapter 3, I'll discuss the phenomenological and community-based research methodologies I've used throughout this project, as well as the practical procedures I've employed. In chapter 4, I'll make space for my participants to tell their stories, insights, theories, and advice in their own words, with my own analysis in response, to form our collaborative response to the need for greater alt-ac resources for graduate students. Finally, in chapter 5, I'll provide a condensed infographic to represent my participants and my suggestions from chapter 4, along with a worksheet resource for helping graduate students practice transferring and translating academic skills into alt-ac job contexts, and a rhetorical analysis of UTK's Graduate English website, with suggestions for adding alt-ac resources to the website. Chapter 5 will conclude with a discussion of my project's limitations, possible future work, and my overall reflections of what this project has meant, and what it means for the changes that need to happen at a structural, institutional level to build upon the alt-ac professionalization support for humanities graduate students.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

For a lot of graduate students, the insular nature of Graduate School and Academia at large has often mystified the pathway towards professionalization that happens during one's PhD. Many of us are informed in our master's programs that there are few jobs out there to go around, but that if x, y, or z happens, we might have a chance. Some of us are told, as I was, that there are far more jobs available in Composition and Rhetoric than in other Literature-based branches, so that may be a more viable way forward if we're intent upon completing our PhDs. The effect of this honest warning, which faculty are kind to impart, is often diminished for those of us who choose to move forward with our PhDs by several factors, including the prestige of academia itself, our history as high-achievers, and our general ignorance of the professionalization context and process that occurs in Academia. The reality, when we begin our PhD programs, is that we are then also beginning a demystification process. When we talk to graduate students farther in the process entering the academic job market, when our mentors and advisors discuss their job market observations, when we serve on committees that are responsible for hiring at our own universities—these are all ways in which the veil surrounding the academic job market drops to the ground, the mist clears, and we're left with the disheartening knowledge that, as many of my participants have pointed out, the job market is a complex, often arbitrary, landscape with high supply and low demand. The job market for composition and rhetoric involves a lot of “kitchen sink”

positions as my advisor, Lisa King, so aptly pointed out to me during one of our discussions about my research findings: jobs where the employee is often expected to hold multiple significant positions and responsibilities, such as First-Year Writing Program Coordinator, Writing Center Director, Instructor, and Committee Member. While some PhD graduates will find such opportunities exciting (with some of my close friends among them—and to them, I send all the support and cheerleading in the world), there are those of us who may find this job market context intimidating and wrong for many personal reasons.

Unfortunately, for both groups of graduate students, we often don't understand the thorny, confusing, ever-evolving academic job market until we're facing it ourselves in our PhD programs. Much has been written and explored on the topic of alt-ac as a last-resort career alternative when one's struggling to obtain an academic job, or in the context of the dwindling academic job market, however this study is hoping to fill the gap in proactive alt-ac professionalization resources and formal support structures within PhD programs. To offer support for graduate students who want to (and should be able to) prepare for alt-ac careers during the five years they spend within their PhD programs, and who might view an alt-ac career as the best option for them personally. My goal, throughout this section, is to provide an overview of the following: I'm hoping to: (1) give a clear recent account of the academic job market landscape that current PhD students are operating within, as well as (2) an overview of the ways in which the job market context has affected a lot of the different graduate students hoping to get steady jobs once they've completed 10 years or more of higher education, causing some within

academia to consider alt-ac careers as a highly viable alternative (3). I'm also (4) providing an overview of some of the theoretical work I am using in my approach to my alt-ac-centered research in this dissertation, so that readers can understand my foundational orientation to this project and the collaborative work I engaged in with my participants. In providing a review of these topics, I am laying the contextual groundwork for my research questions for this project ("What have the experiences of recent UTK English PhD students been post-graduation, who've chosen to pursue alt-ac careers?" "How have these students transferred the skills they've learned in the English PhD program to their alt-ac careers?" "What do their alt-ac professionalization experiences tell us about UTK's resources, both past and present, for preparing PhD students for alt-ac career opportunities?") by specifically exploring accounts of the academic job market and career professionalization experiences of graduate students, the exploitation of graduate students whilst in PhD programs hoping to professionalize, and the many different positionalities and needs of graduate students that impact their career choices upon graduating. Upon reading the following review, you will hopefully feel you have a clear picture of both the context and principles within which this project is operating.

The Impact of Neoliberalism on the Current Academic "Job Market"

There has been a growing trend toward neoliberalism in the university since at least the 1980's (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 2). Education has been increasingly commodified, the jobs within being pushed further and further over the cliff of exploitation. Ross and Savage (2021) describe the move toward neoliberalism in the university as a "reorganization of a variety of processes and relationships," such as viewing students as

“customers” and taking an increasingly “corporate” approach to management and decision-making (p. 496) (see also Mutch & Tatebe, 2017). With universities placing more power in the hands of the corporate-minded administrators and less in the hands of the faculty and staff working on the front lines, the work-life expectations of academic workers have been thrown increasingly out of balance. Faculty at the university are having to work harder and harder to please their students, the “customers” consuming their commodified education, and meet the factory-like expectations of their administrators and superiors looking to produce the greatest output. As a result, work that was previously seen as holistic has now been fragmented, the amount of work required has been increased for all, the value of some workers’ labor has been “cheapened,” workers are increasingly subjected to surveillance, and workers who behave as “consenting subjects” to the system are most rewarded (Ross & Savage, 2021, p. 508).

The increasing surveillance of work output and push for workers to become “consenting subjects” to the neoliberal system are perhaps some of the most terrifying results of neoliberalism, and are accomplished through what McCann et al. (2020) refer to as “targets and terror” strategies that make workers fear the consequences of resisting administrative requirements, regardless of how exploitive they may be (p. 431). Such a system promotes, along with the “neo-Stalinism” that McCann et al. (2020) describe, bullying by workers and administrators with higher places in the hierarchy and the bystanderism (and often active participation) of those workers simply trying to survive within the system and fearing retribution if they do not support those in power (Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020, pp. 400-401). Neoliberalism has promoted a system in which we are all

subject to bullying, being the bystander, and even, at times, participating in the bullying. This is allowed to be the case because of the way in which neoliberalism promotes qualities such as speed, output, efficiency, effectiveness, individualism, and disregards qualities such as morality, collectivism, and community, as the work of the university is often seen as being “beyond morality” (Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020, p. 406). And of course, this bullying is often disproportionate and targeted in terms of who it affects most, harming some groups’ welfare and stability within the university more than others.

There are some suggestions for moving beyond the current neoliberal structure of the university, such as incorporating love, support and collaboration as a means of combating the exploitation inherent in the neoliberal way (Al-Mahmood et al., 2020) and standing against neoliberalistic bullying through the promotion of “compassion” instead of “collusion” (Mutch & Tatebe, 2017, pp. 231-233). While these efforts are certainly taking place in some instances of resistance within the neoliberal structure, it is clear that this structure will take some significant time to dismantle, and that it has negatively impacted the job prospects of those wishing to make careers in the university for the foreseeable future by creating an overall atmosphere of overwork and exploitation.

Academia and Other Industries

This tendency to see university work as “beyond morality,” is perhaps the component of academic work culture that most separates it from other industries. Or, perhaps better put, it is the tendency in a lot of academic fields and departments, such as the humanities (as this study is focusing on) to frame their work as higher-minded; the work that needs to be done for the betterment of humanity; work that is solving great

problems, lessening inequality, banishing evil and antiquated ways of thinking, etc. I do not frame humanistic principles in this way to poke fun, or to make light of them; they are worthy efforts that played a large role in drawing me to my chosen field; I and many graduate students like me truly enjoy helping others and standing up for what we feel is right. This is a shared culture most of us not only recognize but seek in the academic workplace that we may not necessarily see in the business world outside of academia. And, in its ideal form, this value system is certainly admirable. There is, however, as my participants have pointed out (and as I will get into further in later sections), a major pitfall of such thinking that often has difficult implications for graduate students hoping to make a career in the academic humanities. Many of my participants discussed that, in their experience in Academia, our work is discussed in terms of passion, not pay: joy, not benefits: and bettering humanity, but not creating better employment situations for ourselves. In discussing our careers as a passion, in wrapping up so much of our identities in the roles of teachers, mentors, tutors, and all the different ways we support students, departments, other graduate students, and the university at large, we are often ourselves left unsupported, with little opportunity to advocate for the very things we need to thrive. Based on my discussions with my participants, there is reason to believe that there may be more opportunities to advocate for oneself within some industries outside of academia.

For example, two of my participants, Donna and Jerry, recalled to me during their second interview sessions that in their experience in alt-ac careers, they were paid based on a benchmark system of education and experience, and they noticed that businesses and employers (at least, the ones they had witnessed) are often very concerned with

maintaining equity and will therefore make major increases to pay based on those benchmarks, even without being prompted (Donna, personal communication, February 24, 2023; Jerry, personal communication, January 16, 2023). These benchmarks have likely arisen from employers' desires to remain competitive with other businesses and employers in the same industry. If a business wants to remain competitive and hire and keep excellent employees, they must offer competitive pay and benefits based on the average pay and benefits offered in their field (again, based on an employee's knowledge and experience). This seems to differ from the way academic pay and benefits are discussed based at least largely upon demand. The academic job market is shrinking as we can see by the dwindling percentage of tenure-track jobs available (Daniel, 2022; Goldstone, 2023), and therefore there is likely a much lower demand in academia for employees than in a lot of other alternative industries that humanities graduates could go into. This means that since the supply of prospective employees is high for academic positions and the demand is low, there is less pressure on academic employers to offer competitive pay and benefits. In other industries, such as technical writing with Donna, and immigration law writing and support with Jerry, the demand for employees seems to be much higher. Ron touched upon the importance of supply and demand as he discussed the ways in which our pay as academic employees is reflective of the resources allotted to us, not our intrinsic worth and value as employees (Ron, personal communication, November 14, 2022). Tom discussed the ways in which he started thinking more about what he truly wanted from his employment when the students he was teaching were set to make far more than he'd ever make as an instructor, by working in industries that he

hadn't even considered (Tom, personal communication, December 9, 2022). The takeaway? The supply of prospective employees and the demand employers have for hiring employees likely factor largely into how much room employees have to advocate for the things they need to thrive in a career. While many of the troubling hallmarks of neoliberalism can still be found in the workplace outside of academia as well as within, one of the most important distinctions is that, due to a higher demand for employees, graduates looking for employment outside of academia may have more opportunities to advocate for higher salaries, better benefits, and a healthier work/life balance. This opportunity to better advocate for oneself in other industries could be one of many reasons why some graduate students feel an alt-ac career could be a better fit for them and their career goals, however more in-depth research should be done to determine just how deeply the issues of supply and demand do factor into job components such as salary and benefits.

The Growing Demand for Alt-Ac Professionalization for PhD Students

For at least the last three decades, there has been anxious conversation surrounding PhD students' increasing career struggles within academia. In 2001, Chris M. Golde discussed the worsening issue of graduate training mismatching the reality of graduate students' eventual careers, often preparing them for increasingly sparse tenure-track positions, and nothing else (5). And this disconnect between the realities of the job market and the professionalization taking place in academic PhD programs has necessarily had negative impacts on the professionalization efforts of the graduate students within them. In 2005, Golde went on to describe 6 reasons graduate students left

their doctoral programs early, including research practices that weren't matched with students' strengths (p. 681), poor fit between students' and department's expectations, and inaccurate expectations about the nature of graduate school (p. 683), some students feeling academically unprepared (p. 686), mismatches between advisors and students (pp. 686-7), student beliefs that research faculty life was incompatible with what they wanted (p. 688), student perceptions that the job market was poor (p. 690), and the structural isolation students went through (p. 692). These factors strongly suggest that rather than students simply failing to meet academic job market standards, they weren't being supported on an institutional and systemic level, and that this lack of support made them feel ill-prepared for success in academia, success in the academic job market, and in their future career goals in general. This is an issue that has lingered since the early 2000's and continues to haunt English PhD programs to this day, with many students having to turn to non-tenure-track positions (both within and outside of the university) out of necessity, without any formal training from the program they've usually spent five (or more) years in, with the aim of professionalization. PhD program's disconnect from the realities of the modern day academic job market has often led to a decent amount of blame placed on individual students and faculty, as demonstrated by Karen Kelsky (2015), who surmised that some of graduate students' career difficulties are due to misconceptions and faculty who don't want to discuss the harshness of the academic job market with them (p. 28). Barbara E. Lovitts had already countered this narrative in 2001, however, when she pointed out the error of an entire problematic system that failed to adequately prepare graduate students for the careers they'd be able to attain after their studies. The major

error here being, of course, the disconnect between what PhD students are prepared for professionally in their programs, and the actual career opportunities they have available, or in the words of Christopher S. Rose (2020):

1. We must all consider “alt-ac” our mostly likely employment option; and
2. Your doctoral program will prepare you for a TT position, which you won’t get.

With such dissonance between preparation and reality, and little opportunity to get an inside look at the workings of academic career preparation until they’re in a highly specified program, it’s no wonder graduate students have often felt lost and frustrated as they try to forge their careers beyond their programs.

In 2011, Gene Russo discussed research with graduate students from all manner of scientific areas of study who reported decreasing satisfaction with their studies the longer they went on, as well as increasing anxiety about their career outlook, especially those studying in the U.S. It’s worth noting, as well, that such graduate student concerns may well have stemmed from (and continue to stem from) watching many of their tenured advisors and mentors leave academia, such as Terran Lane (2012) discussed leaving his computer science associate professorship for issues relating to fear of “no longer making a difference,” “work-life imbalance,” “centralization of authority and decrease of autonomy,” an inhospitable “budget climate,” “hyperspecialization, insularity, and narrowness of vision,” “poor incentives,” “mass production of education,” and poor “salary” opportunities. Lane’s reasons for leaving academia highlight the often-jarring difference most of us find between our dreams and goals for our academic work

versus the reality we find ourselves working within. Often this is only something we realize once we've made some headway into the insular world of professional academia, resulting in us switching paths after we've invested time in our academic futures. In Lane's case, he ended up leaving his tenured position for an alt-ac position at Google, which he felt would provide better opportunities in most of the categories he'd listed as current issues within academia. With some tenured professors choosing to leave their positions for opportunities they believe will better match their values, short and/or long-term career goals, and work/life needs, along with long-standing reports of concerns for graduate students' mental health and well-being (Levecque et al., 2017; Scott & Takangi, 2019) increasingly dwindling tenure-track job prospects after graduation (Schmidt, 2016), and ever-increasing pushes for academic employee unionization in order to make academic jobs livable (Rogers et al., 2013; Tolley, 2018; Kezar et al., 2019), it's clear that discussions about preparing graduate students in all academic disciplines for alt-ac jobs are only going to continue.

While the necessity of providing alt-ac professionalization opportunities for PhD students is clearly felt in most academic disciplines, there has been a wealth of research looking into alternative-academic careers for PhD students within English-related fields and concentrations on some level for the last two to three decades, and increasingly since 2015. As a result of saturation within the Academic English tenure-track job market, but often no decrease in the amount of PhD students who are admitted into English-related PhD programs, graduates are increasingly turning to alternative-academic options for their prospective careers. Cassuto and Weisbuch (2020) state that, "According to recent

statistics, four of the eight [PhD students accepted into a program] (50 percent!) will not complete the Ph.D. — and those are pre-Covid-19 numbers. Of the four who do finish, two will not get academic positions and will seek jobs elsewhere. The remaining pair will get full-time faculty jobs, most likely at teaching-intensive institutions” (p. 1). The amount of work graduate students are putting into their professionalization through their programs, only to either leave the program, or attain one kind of job that they may or may not have been hoping for (teaching institutions are great! But not what every candidate is hoping for), is disheartening to say the least. As a result of this evolution of the PhD, and English-related PhD in particular, there is an increased demand for more alternative-academic professionalization opportunities and support within many English-related PhD programs.

For many universities, such as my own (the University of Tennessee, Knoxville), the concentration of Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics is positioned within the larger umbrella of English, and while our needs are often different, they can sometimes be intertwined as an English-related concentration. While there is evidence that Composition and Rhetoric has spent time thinking through alternative professionalization options for graduates, such as with the subfield of Technical Communication—a commonly-mentioned alt-ac profession likely because it is both widely applicable and has both academic and alt-academic ties—there are still more opportunities for alt-ac professionalization, particularly for Comp/Rhetors who don’t particularly want to go into Technical Communication as an alternative to a tenure-track, such as myself. So, even within the field of Composition and Rhetoric, there is evidence of a need for more alt-ac

professionalization opportunities for PhD graduates looking into a multitude of different careers.

This is a need that has existed for some time and is just as relevant today as it ever was, due to multiple factors, including but not limited to the continued saturation of the full-time faculty job market. As with all of the humanities, the job availability of English-related full-time faculty positions has been increasingly declining. In 2015, Ball et al. discussed “a report prepared by the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Professionalization of PhDs (2003), based on data through the 2001–2 academic year,” which found that “doctoral candidates in language and literature have faced no better than 50/50 odds of finding full-time professional employment upon graduation since the early 1970s” (p. 103). And, according to Ball et al., the situation will only continue to get worse from there in today’s current job market (p. 103). In another 2015 article, Leonard Cassuto discussed a case in which a graduate student was given informal alt-ac professionalization support by her faculty, with the faculty concluding ‘We will serve our grad students a lot better if we help them learn skills that will serve them well in all sorts of careers, both within the professoriate and totally outside it,’ (A25). Such a push for transferable and widely applicable skills would indeed have served graduate students better, as according to Struve, as of 2017, there were still many “fields in which tenure-track positions are declining” (p. 3). As of 2019, Lueck and Boehm discussed the increased relevance of the dwindling full-time faculty job market, and its effect on Composition and Rhetoric in particular, with a specific focus on changing up the way we approach dissertations and committees to provide increased opportunities for alt-ac

professionalization. Additionally, as we have already seen, as recently as 2020 Cassuto and Weisbuch wrote an article discussing that the current PhD is not working to provide any significant alt-ac professionalization in the face of an ever-dwindling full-time faculty job market. The long-standing and ever-present concern with providing support for alt-ac careers, therefore, is still a very important conversation happening for English-related PhD programs.

The Impact of the Current Job Market Landscape on Graduate Students

The limited supply of coveted tenure-track and full-time faculty jobs, while affecting all graduate students negatively, unsurprisingly affects certain graduate students more adversely than others. Some of us have specific positionalities that don't "fit" perfectly into the requirements or logistics or expectations of the few coveted full-time positions available, and for those who occupy more than one of these "unfitting" positionalities, the adverse impact can be compounded. We can name and recognize the challenges caused by these positionalities as racial discrimination (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; hooks, 1994; Isaac, 1998; Cleveland, 2004; Sheared et al., 2010; Mack et al., 2015; Brunnsma, 2017; Taylor, 2017; Cedillo, 2018; Howard-Hamilton, 2019; Kynard, 2020; Anandavalli et al., 2021; Baca, 2021; Chu et al., 2022), discrimination against LGBTQIA+ graduate students (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014; Brewer, 2014; Bloomfield & Fisher, 2016; Deane, 2017; Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Mayo & Blackburn, 2020; le Thuy et al., 2021; Jiménez-Millán & Buenestado-Fernández, 2023), challenges faced in the accommodation of diverse physical or mental abilities (Wood et al., 2014; Dolmage, 2017; Hamraie, 2016; Osorio, 2019; Rice-Evans, 2019; Stella, 2019; Hubrig & Osorio,

2020; Hubrig, 2021; Rice-Evans & Stella, 2021), limited opportunities caused by economic status (Crozier & Claire, 1998; Aries & Seider, 2005; Langhout et al., 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehmann, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Langhout et al., 2009; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Johnson et al., 2011; Ostrove et al., 2011; Jerkins et al., 2013; Curtin et al., 2016; Durante et al., 2017; Burke et al., 2020; Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021; Park et al., 2023), and gender discrimination, with a lack of advocacy for graduate student parents and mothers, in particular (Lynch, 2008; Barthelemy et al., 2016; Ahmed, 2017; Kulp, 2019; Jaimes, 2020; Palermo-Kielb, 2020; Yeigh, 2020; Osorio, 2021; Yoo & Marshall, 2022). It's important to note that in my research with participants, while racial discrimination, sexual/gender discrimination, and challenges faced in accommodating diverse physical or mental abilities might have been experienced by some, they weren't discussed as contributing to participants' choices to journey into alt-ac careers. I have laid out the above range of challenges to both acknowledge the different positionalities of my participants, even if they have not been mentioned as factors in their decision-making process, and to acknowledge the challenges faced by a broader population of graduate students affected by the worsening academic job market.

However, in the following paragraphs, I focus on the common thread that tied my participants' reactions to the academic job market together, across their different positionalities, and that was their need for a work/life balance. The way in which graduate students' (and hopeful graduates') work/life balance has been negatively impacted by the dismal job market is especially important for those with marginalized

positionality, and the positionality that I saw most in my research was that of graduate parents, and mothers in particular. To put this in numerical terms, of my 10 participants, 4 discussed being motivated by their familial and parental roles, and 3 of those participants were mothers. While some of my participants may not have been parents during their time in the English PhD program here at UTK (though some of them were!), it's important to note that parent/motherhood was still a major factor in the ways limited job opportunities affected their career decisions upon graduating. I, myself, must claim major motivation for embarking on my own alt-ac journey, and therefore this project, as coming from my positionality as a graduate student who is also a mother. I have therefore sought to structure the following sections in a way that represents both the difference and commonalities in the ways my participants were affected by, and reacted to, the academic job market, starting with a focus on (1) graduate student work/life balance in general as a motivator. This will include considerations of financial balance and mental and physical health as well. Then I'll move into a discussion of (2) the challenges faced by graduate student parents, and (3) graduate student mothers, in particular. In each of these following sections, I hope to provide some further insight into the kind of challenges that caused my participants, and other graduate students facing the same complicated academic job market, to consider a job outside of academia as a better fit for their particular positionality.

Graduate Student Work/Life Balance

It is no secret that graduate student workers are among the most significantly overworked and underpaid in the university's neoliberal system. With Graduate Teaching Associates (GTAs) making up 41% of the teaching staff at public universities across the United States (Cicchino, 2020) and teaching 46% of the undergraduate courses at four-year colleges (Bettinger et al., 2016, p. 64), it's clear that graduate students cover a lot of ground at the university. And yet, in a national survey of GTAs in English programs, 71.6% felt their stipends didn't cover cost-of-living expenses such as rent, utilities, and groceries (Osorio et al., 2021, pg. 138), with emergency and healthcare expenses forcing graduate student instructors (GSIs) into "crisis mode" (Osorio et al., 2021, pg. 139). In the same survey, 65.4% of GSIs reported working more hours than they were paid to work (Osorio et al., 2021, pg. 140), feeling that there's "a clear disconnect between how many hours GSI employers think it takes to properly and ethically deliver quality instruction and how many hours GSIs feel obligated to do that work properly" (Osorio et al., 2021 p. 140). This often means, as several of my participants told me (Ron, personal communication, November 14, 2022; Anne, personal communication, December 9, 2022), that graduate students can feel as though their time is primarily spent focusing on the tasks for which they get paid, as opposed to the field-specific work that will greatly impact students' future career goals. The disconnect between the labor expectations graduate students commonly face and the pay they receive for doing that labor can also be incredibly daunting and overwhelming for many graduate students, and the impact of their high-stress work environment is clear to see with "Graduate students suffer[ing]

from mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and emotional distress at an alarming rate” (Bekkouche et al., 2022, pg. 547). To put graduate students’ distress in numerical terms, “estimates” show that “between 13% and 47%” (Bekkouche et al., 2022, pg. 547) of graduate students experience these mental health issues (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2018; Hyun et al., 2006; The Graduate Assembly, 2015). These rates of prevalence are “2–6 times higher” (Bekkouche et al., 2022, pg. 547) than what you’ll see in the general population (Evans et al., 2018). What this all comes down to is that most of graduate students’ time is spent simply surviving in a system that doesn’t recognize the negative impact it’s having on students’ mental health, economic status, and non-teaching related work.

Graduate Student Parents

While the negative effects of a work-life imbalance affect all graduate students, they disproportionately affect graduate student parents, who must grapple with work/family-life balance issues, in addition to all the other work/life balance issues mentioned above (Perna, 2001; Reddick et al., 2012; Saltee, 2012; Saltee et al., 2016; Yoo & Marshall, 2022). This further demonstrates that, until (and perhaps even after) academia sorts out its work-life imbalance issues, PhD programs that are designed to help graduate students prepare for their future careers must take the shortcomings of tenure-track academic jobs for some students into account, and provide alternative professionalization opportunities in order to meet the needs of the students they’re designed to guide into the workforce.

Graduate Student Mothers

Rather unsurprisingly, women, particularly early career women and women with families, are disproportionately negatively affected by the neoliberal system of the university. This is at least partly due, according to Caretta et al. (2018), to the neoliberal university's inability to promote networking for women, particularly those with families who have "caring responsibilities" (p. 263), the way that high pressure to produce and limited time negatively affects work-life balance and family planning (pp. 268-9), and the ways in which resources for new mothers can often be hidden and unadvertised, or seen as the responsibility of the new mother to locate and understand, on her own (p. 270). As one of the key tenets of neoliberalism, individualism seems to wreak the most havoc for women, particularly those with families, as the responsibility of making their work and family lives fit together (messily or otherwise) is entirely placed upon women. They are seen as responsible for working around the very real and necessary practicalities of their family lives without being given any formal support for fitting themselves into a system that wasn't designed to promote their success in the first place.

The connection between graduate students' increasing need for alt-ac careers (and therefore professionalization opportunities within their programs) has long been linked to the work-life imbalance required in academic careers. Many scholars have discussed how work-life imbalance is disproportionately hard on female faculty (who have been and still are considered the primary child-carers in their homes and families), and therefore disproportionately harmful to their long-term career goals in academic settings (Williams, 1992; Tancred and Czarnocki, 1998; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Bain & Cummings, 2000;

Bradley, 2000; Drago & Williams, 2000; van Anders, 2004; Hollenshead et al., 2005; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2005; Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006; Umbach, 2006; Stone, 2007a; Stone, 2007b; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006; Cabrera, 2007; Elliot, 2008; Wolfinger et al., 2008; Wolfinger et al., 2009; Bonawitz & Andel, 2009; Lester & Sallee, 2009; Galinsky et al., 2011; Rhoads & Rhoads, 2012; Slaughter, 2012; Sallee, 2013; Williams, 2013; Ginther & Kahn, 2014; Lester, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Lester, 2016; Ahmad, 2016; Webber & Rogers, 2018).

With female graduate students often seeing the disproportionate hardships faced by female faculty, mentors, and advisors, and with plenty of female graduate students experiencing such hardships themselves as they're pulled between their roles as students and parents (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Lynch, 2008; Springer et al., 2009; Mason et al., 2013; Kulp, 2016), there's a large, inarguably gender-motivated need for alt-ac job professionalization opportunities, so that female graduate students may find careers more suited to their work and home-life balance needs. It is little wonder, then, that among the researcher and participants in this study, 5 of us are parents, and 4 of us mothers², with all of us making the decision to go into alt-ac careers, and all of us longing for greater alt-ac professionalization opportunities within our program.

² I have included myself here to further demonstrate how common it can be for graduate students' dual roles as parents and students to play a part in their alt-ac journeys, but also to show/reiterate my own positionality as a parent/graduate student who will naturally identify and relate to other graduate students also navigating their dual roles as parents and students.

Indigenous Ways of Knowing: An Ideal Framework for Ethical, Community-Based Research

My underlying theoretical framework when conducting the research for this project was not necessarily conventional, and my description of it may seem unconventional also. The reason for this is that I was steered most strongly by an orientation to the community-based research I was conducting within my own community of Graduate students from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. It was an orientation that began in Dr. Lisa King's Independent Study focusing on Indigenous Rhetoric and Scholarship in the Spring of 2021, where I was exposed to the theoretical research orientation of Indigenous scholars who, as my friend and fellow student in that independent study Kelly Sauskojus has said, are the experts in the room on community-based research, as they deeply understand what goes into truly ethical community research, and what does not. My exposure to this class, and to this foundational orientation towards community-based research has fundamentally changed me as a scholar and a researcher. There are components of my research process, and the theory and scholarship upon which it is built, that I simply see now as part of what it takes to do this community research the "right" way. I have sought to learn from Indigenous community researchers and apply their theories to my research with a non-Indigenous community because they are founded with values that are inherently decolonial and therefore resist the exploitative nature sometimes seen in other research practices, and are therefore not only fitting lessons I sought to learn from in my own research, but also lessons, values, and theories that I felt I *needed* to listen to in order to do my due

diligence to the community I am both working with, and a part of. I lean heavily into Indigenous Studies here to show that, just as the teachings of Feminist and Gender Studies can help us understand how the current system hurts us all, including men—though not in the same ways that it specifically hurts women or women of color—Indigenous Studies can help us understand how the current academic system hurts us all, even though it doesn't hurt us in the same ways it hurts Indigenous peoples. Indigenous Studies and Indigenous perspectives can help give us an insight into the inherently colonial neoliberal academic system in and under which we have all worked. In listening to Indigenous researchers doing work with their communities, non-Indigenous people can learn how to critically examine the academic systems that hurt marginalized people the most but are inherently harmful to a lot of other people working within those systems too. From our Indigenous scholars and mentors, we can not only learn to examine these systems with a critical lens, but also to engage in the kind of work that can change the systems that harm most of us. In the following sections, I will do my best to lay out the major Indigenous community-based research theories and values I have learned and applied to my research, as well as name the Indigenous scholars and mentors I have learned them from.

This orientation, while providing the foundation for my approach to the research, was mixed with the practicalities of a phenomenological approach, and so I will also do my best to show how these two major frameworks connected to provide the theoretical support for my methodology (which I'll discuss in more depth in the next chapter, chapter 3). This combination, situated in my positionality as a new mother and a graduate

student, have greatly impacted my very understanding of what my research was and what it was meant to do. While, as I mentioned earlier, this approach may be less conventional than some, I feel it truly encapsulates the major theoretical factors at play in my research and helped me see my research first and foremost as a tool to help my community.

Community Research Involves Listening (to Stories)

When engaging in a research methodology of storytelling, as I will apply in my findings section (Chapter 4), it's just as important (if not more) to listen to others' stories as it is to tell your own. This is especially true if you're in the kind of position, through race, class, gender, or sexuality, where stories similar to yours are the ones most often told and listened to, the ones most aligned with the overarching colonial narrative. For other, marginalized voices, it is imperative that the rest of us engage in what Danielle Donelson (2018) refers to as "humbled, rhetorical listening" (p. 16). In her work theorizing "a settlers' approach to decolonial pedagogy," Donelson argues that such listening means knowing not only when to be silent, but when to encourage others to speak and share their stories, and to honor those stories by listening in a way that respects and acknowledges the differences between both your and their embodied contexts (pp. 86-7). While we may hear aspects of other people's stories that we find kinship and understanding with, we must resist the urge to focus too deeply on the similarities between our situation and theirs. Doing so would "re-inscribe colonialist practices...and construct a universal narrative, discounting embodied differences" (Donelson, 2028, p. iii). Instead, we must engage in a practice Donelson calls "making space," where we invite a multiplicity of stories to be told by others and heard by us (p. 80). When playing

the role of researcher, we must enact this kind of humbled, rhetorical listening by being mindful of our own embodied context, as well as how it differs from those who help inform our research with their stories, experiences, and histories.

Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2014) enacts such humble, rhetorical listening in “Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology: Making research matter with multi-generational women from the Little Traverse Bay Band,” where she works with a group of Odawa women from the Little Traverse Bay Band to better understand their theories about intercultural research methodologies (p. 108). Rather than simply viewing the women she works with as “participants,” Riley-Mukavetz sees them “as intellects who understood disciplinary conversations on ethical research methodologies and representations of American Indians in formal education” (p. 115). As such, Riley-Mukavetz listens to and hears the women’s stories and experiences as “rhetorical theories on how to do intercultural research, negotiate institutional (re: dominate) discourses, and make visible the roles and responsibilities of American Indian women in their language and on their terms” (p. 108). Mukavetz goes on to describe her research relationship with these women as collaborative: “When I asked for their input, I listened to it. And I took it because they were right” (p. 115). This act of hearing the women’s stories and experiences as theories came from Riley-Mukavetz’s method of listening with a respect for both her and the women’s different embodied contexts, as well as listening to the women’s perspectives and input on how their own stories should be viewed and interpreted in Riley-Mukavetz’s larger project. Listening to those whose knowledge and experiences help to inform our research, as well as respecting and acknowledging the

difference in their embodied context, allows us to resist colonial narratives and structures by making space for a multitude of different stories, experiences, and positionalities.

Community Research Happens in a Space/Place

One of the most important aspects of Indigenous storytelling is acknowledging the multiple histories of a place; to listen for and make note of the stories that diverge from the colonial narrative, as well as the kind of erasure that can follow in its wake. Research is always historically and geographically located and, therefore, requires careful consideration of the history and place that make it possible. In America, it is impossible to ignore the troubled history of Indigenous peoples' stolen land, as well as the impact of that theft on Indigenous communities, both in the past and present. (While my research doesn't deal with the history, theft, and exploitation of Indigenous land as Indigenous rhetorical scholarship does, the theory of space/place and exploitation has made me think deeply about the kind of exploitation that happens to graduate students in the space of PhD programs within universities--see Chapter 2 section "Graduate Student Work/Life Balance"--and to discuss that exploitation as closely involved with graduate students' needs for greater alt-ac professionalization support). This is our history, and it impacts us all differently, but it impacts us nonetheless, as do the structures that contributed to it and followed after it. When writing "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics," Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Marillee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny, and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson (2014) model the foundational role of place when they discuss the history of the "vacation home...just north of Harbor Springs,

Michigan” where they begin working on their project together (p. 1). Powell describes this history as an important part of the work they do:

Standing on the frozen shores of Lake Michigan, we take pictures and laugh and talk some more, working through ideas for the article, yes, but also...Working out a relationship to the land, to the lake, to the histories of this place. Building a space in which our work exists alongside those histories. Building a practice we can remember when we're not all together, not in this place/space (p. 1).

For Powell and her collaborators, this connection to a location that has so many “places that mark important Odawa-white histories” (p. 1) is an integral part of their work drawing connections across Cultural Rhetorics stories, theories, and praxes, and showing the way they are “navigating” such connections (p. 2). Cultural Rhetorics work always seeks to resist the erasure of history, which requires an investment in the past histories of the locations in which we live, work, and do research.

This historical investment is further supported by Riley-Mukavetz and Powell (2015) in their article “Making Native Space for Graduate Students: A Story of Indigenous Rhetorical Practice,” where they discuss the ways they encouraged students to develop a relationship with the land they worked and learned on, as well as its history. In the course, Riley-Mukavetz and Powell taught students to not only consider the histories of the place in which they were situated while taking the course, which was in “Michigan--aka Three Fires Territory” (p. 145), but also to reflect on the students own geographically-located perspectives they brought into the class with them: “stories from

Texas, Michigan, Chicago, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Virginia, Indiana, Ohio, California, and other places/spaces” (p. 146). What they were trying to teach their students, and what we should all take into account, is that the history of our place, and the overarching structures and hierarchies that have influenced it, all affect our work and research. They therefore deserve our attention, care, and acknowledgement as an inseparable and foundational part of our work.

Community Research Should Involve Reciprocity and Collaboration

A central aspect of Indigenous research is its focus on the importance of community, as well as the researcher’s accountability to the communities they’re researching with. In his landmark text *Research is Ceremony*, Shawn Wilson (2008) discusses two important criteria involving community that researchers working with Indigenous communities should always seek to follow (adapted from research principles listed by Judy Atkinson): “A knowledge and consideration of community and the diversity and unique nature that each individual brings to community” and “ways of relating and acting within community with an understanding of the principles of reciprocity and responsibility” (p. 65). Both of these criteria point to an accountability the researcher has to the Indigenous community(ies) that help inform the research they’re engaging in. Wilson summarizes this concept of accountability by using the term “relational accountability” and defines it as the following: “In essence...the methodology needs to be based in a community context (be relational) and has to demonstrate respect, reciprocity and responsibility (be accountable as it is put into action)” (p. 107). When we, as researchers, are engaging in any community-based research; listening to stories,

experiences, and the theories of others, we need to explicitly acknowledge that those stories, experiences, and theories are being told to us from within communities. In order to resist the exploitative model of research so often encouraged in colonialist output-based structures (such as the academy), we must hold ourselves accountable to the communities we work with and in and ensure that we engage in acts of the reciprocity that Wilson mentions.

When this respect and reciprocity toward communities is not shown in a researcher's methodologies, it can lead to distrust within those communities, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) discusses in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. In it, Smith discusses the ways Indigenous knowledge has historically been “collected, classified, and then represented...” apart from its original context and without any consideration of the goals of the communities from which it came (p. 1). According to Smith, while this has fostered a spirit of distrust of outside researchers in Indigenous communities, there is still a strong motivation to support Indigenous research paradigms which place a great emphasis on relationships with and accountability towards Indigenous communities in the way they, their knowledge, and their stories are represented (p. 5). If we truly want to combat the exploitation of Indigenous communities, and any communities we work with as researchers, we must always ask those communities how our research can also benefit them and help them further/reach their own goals. Additionally, we must always make sure that we are held accountable to the communities we work with in the stories we tell about them in our research. As Andrea Riley-Mukavetz has argued above, stories are theories, and

therefore, we must be careful in the ways we discuss and represent the theories we learn from working with communities in our research. Riley- Mukavetz also discusses the theory of “hereness” in “Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology,” developed with the group of women she builds relationships with in the Little Traverse Bay Band. Not only does Riley-Mukavetz discuss spending a lot of time with the words, perspectives, and knowledge of these women (over 8 years, at least), but she also discusses the importance of taking that time, of collaborating with the women she’d worked with and listened to, making sure that they weren’t simply “research participants,” but co-researchers, working with Riley-Mukavetz to communicate what she refers to as their theory of “hereness;” of sort of embodied way of honoring relationships that they’d learned to engage in from their community.

Finding New Meaning in the Past: The Cathartic Comfort of a Phenomenological Framework

In his *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, Irving Seidman (2006) advocates for what he refers to as a phenomenological framework, in which interview participants are encouraged to view their experiences as “phenomena,” or to “reconstruct their experience within the topic under study,” (p. 14). According to Seidman, the interview participants’ experiences become “phenomena” (p. 17) through the “reconstruction” (p. 18) the interviewer helps to provide-thus we as researchers use “textual evidence” and “language” (p. 18) to get at “the true is” (p. 17) of participants’ experiences. This requires “context” (p. 18) to make sense of participants’ experiences and, perhaps more importantly, to help them make meaning out of their experiences themselves (p. 19). This

meant that my approach to interviewing, my major goals in researching, were to help my participants think about their experiences journeying from their English PhD program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to their alternative-academic roles they now found themselves in, as phenomena, as part of something bigger, and something that they could and should make meaning out of.

Application

I will not discuss much about my application of these theories here, as I believe that discussion is better saved for my methods section in Chapter 3, but I will say this: applying these theories, seeing this research project as community-based from the beginning, and approaching the project with the major priority being to better serve my community and also care for myself and my own future goals in the process, has fundamentally shaped every aspect of my research process, my priorities, and my goals for the future application of this research. I have felt centered in my goal of creating more alt-ac professionalization support for current English PhD students. I have felt justified in spending most of my time focused on the practicalities of creating such resources; on caring about the lived and real experiences of the people I work with, and hear from, and might not meet, but can hopefully still support in my own small way. The fact is, this research is close to my heart; it matters to me because it's important to my community, and I have felt very supported and cared for throughout this process in the mentorship and guidance I have found in the theoretical framework I've laid out above. Now, I simply hope to pass that support and care onto others in my community, through listening

to my amazing participants, and sharing the wisdom I was fortunate enough to have them share with me.

Conclusion

As you've begun to see through the ideological frameworks I've discussed throughout this chapter, my participants' wisdom, knowledge, insight, adaptability, and experience are helping to light the way to more alt-ac professionalization resources for those of us in English PhD programs who are unable to pursue academic tenure-track or teaching positions for a variety of reasons. Chapter 4 will show us the many different reasons that may be through my participants' stories of how they've journeyed into alt-ac so far, and their numerous perspectives on those journeys. Throughout this chapter, I've hopefully shown you both the larger context that makes their stories invaluable for moving toward greater alt-ac professionalization resources, and the theoretical framework that demonstrates why their stories are such a valuable medium for showing why our graduate students need the alt-ac resources my participants and I are advocating for. In the following chapter, Chapter 3, I'm going to delve into my methods to show how the framework I've mentioned here manifested itself into practice, and how that practice led to results that were different than results I could have gotten to any other way, and also invaluable to this project, and life-changing for me personally. As I close this chapter, I can only reiterate my gratefulness in the community I've found in creating this project, in my mentors, advisors, and committee members, in fellow current graduate students who have shown interest and support for my research, in the participants who have made this all possible, and in the scholars to whom I owe my entire approach and orientation to the

work I've done here. Without them, this project would never have manifested itself the way it has. And to them, I just want to say, thank you.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

My methodology for this research project was necessarily community-based and I saw it that way from the beginning; as a community of UTK English PhD students: 10 past (my participants) and 1 current (myself). Through this project, I had the great privilege of being able to call myself a peer of sorts to my amazing participants; to share a kinship with their experiences and sense of community with them that I will always value greatly. I was also simultaneously occupying the space of “researcher” and was therefore also very lucky to hear the wisdom, insights, and expertise of my peer-participants. Occupying this liminal space afforded me so many important and helpful opportunities to work with my participants to identify problems, discuss solutions, co-theorize, and simply share and hear different experiences. As you have read in Chapter 2, this liminal positionality I held as a peer-researcher made it necessary for me to take a community-based approach based on the theoretical underpinnings of Indigenous community-based research methods, and both the theoretical and practical support of Irving Seidman’s phenomenological approach. In Chapter 2, I explained the theoretical frameworks of both of these approaches. Now, in Chapter 3, I seek to show you how the theoretical foundation for this project manifested itself in practice. Throughout the following chapter, I will discuss (1) the participants in my community who were kind enough to participate in this research study, (2) the practical procedures used in data collection for this study, (3) the Meaning-Making Methods that were used to interpret the

data collected, and (4) the hopes my participants and I have for the use of the information, insights, perspectives, and stories that make up the “data” collected in this study. In organizing my methods this way, I understand I am perhaps veering from a more conventional methodological setup, and I have done this mindfully to best accommodate the highly collaborative, community-based methodologies used in this study.

The English Department and PhD Program at UTK

Before I delve into my participants, procedure, and the application of my theoretical framework to my research in the field, I’d like to take some time to discuss the context of UTK’s English Department at large, as well as the PhD program setup within it. I would, before I begin, just like to add the caveat that my journey through the UTK English PhD program started in the Fall of 2019 and will have ended in May of 2024, so I’ve been part of the department through many unprecedented circumstances, including Covid-19, the birth of my daughter, and then largely working from home for the 4th and 5th years of my program (so I could be at home with my daughter). I will provide this context on the department, from my own experience, and from the way the department is described in its own online presence through the UTK English website.

The UTK English department itself, from a graduate student’s perspective³, is setup under an administrative trio in our department: (1) the Department Head, (2) the

³ There are, of course, other less visible structures of power and procedure than what the department website or my experience as a graduate student could tell me. There are faculty committees that make important decisions for the department, there are less visible leadership roles amongst faculty. There are even graduate groups, such as the Graduate Students of English (GSE, an elected group to help orient and

Director of Graduate Studies, and (3) the Director of First-Year Composition (FYC). The Department Head oversees the English department at large, particularly managing the faculty. The Director of Graduate Studies oversees and manages the graduate students; first-year reviews, graduate student concerns, conference and research funding, etc. The Director of FYC oversees the First-Year Composition program here at UTK, which almost all graduate students teach for as part of their contractual agreement with the university, and as part of the fulfillment of their program responsibilities. Each of these three Directors are, of course, hugely supported by their offices and the administrative clerical workers who manage the day-to-day workings of the English department and are therefore invaluable in keeping the department running. The Director of FYC specifically has a lecturer-held Associate Director of FYC and graduate student-held Assistant Director of FYC in addition to the amazing clerical workers in their office. Each of the three Director roles are rotating and I have seen all 3 of them rotate in the time I've been a part of the English Department at UTK.

There are, of course, more specifics when it comes to graduate students' experiences within the PhD program. Graduate students' PhD pathways within the English department begin with being accepted into one of three tracks: (1) Literature, Criticism, and Textual Studies (2) Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics, and (3) English with Creative Dissertation (*Graduate Studies*, n.d.). Specific sub-tracks, such as Medieval Studies, Victorian Studies, and 19th Century American Literature are under the "Literature, Criticism, and Textual Studies" umbrella. Creative sub-tracks, such as Poetry

support graduate students, as well as advocating on their behalf and acting as liaison between graduate students and administrators) that wield a sizable amount of collective power in the department.

and Fiction are likewise under the “English with Creative Dissertation,” umbrella. Sometimes students switch between programs if they feel one would be a better fit than their current track, and overall, there is a very strong sense of solidarity between graduate students, who band together frequently to share resources and materials, advocate for changes or address issues that need to be solved. There’s been a sense, certainly throughout my time in the program—though Covid-19, the current economic inflation and housing crisis (circa de 2023-24)—that we’re all in this together. That we graduate students understand the unique set of circumstances we all find ourselves in, and that we want to help each other where we can. This is the sort of environment from which my participants earned their PhDs (with a reminder of the caveat that my participants did not go to UTK throughout the same time period that I did, and therefore may have experienced some differences in terms of how outside events shaped their time in the program) and will hopefully provide you with a helpful context to better understand at least the logistics of the journey my participants had to go on to earn their PhDs from UTK.

Community Participants

The participants for this study were UTK English PhD graduate students, who graduated from UTK between 2013 and 2023. Participants were currently working within alt-ac careers (note: alt-ac for the purpose of this study means non-teaching careers within academia and any careers outside of academia). These participants were selected from two methods: (1) word of mouth through my committee and other PhD students

within the English department and (2) a list from the department administration detailing students they knew had gone alt-ac and students whose current careers were unknown⁴.

Meet My Participants

My participants have each gone on their own unique alt-ac journeys, and it's worth highlighting that there are many different ways to journey or transition from academia into alt-ac. I therefore think it's important to both briefly introduce you to each of my participants, and to also show the multiplicity of my participants' experiences in why they went into alt-ac careers, and what made alt-ac personally beneficial for them. Below, I have included short descriptions to introduce you to the participants you'll be hearing from more extensively in chapter 4. Their journeys, and their generosity in sharing them, have both allowed me to make this project possible, and also make it clear just how many perspectives and positionalities there can be when pursuing alt-ac careers:

- Ron has a long history of teaching at the high school level. He received an academic job in the Midwest after graduating from UTK, but felt underpaid and wanted more job opportunities for his husband. He now works at a Western university but in an alt-ac job in instructional design support for instructors.
- Donna has a long history of teaching at the college level. She graduated during peak Covid-19 and received a WPA (Writing Program Administrator) position

⁴ It's important to note here that keeping an extensive record of graduate students who have gone alt-ac is currently unprecedented within my department and I therefore used the information that does exist and was available to me (and which they were kind to share!). It's also worth noting that my department shows great enthusiasm for such a list to exist and that, though I couldn't reveal any information about participants within my study due to IRB restrictions and privacy/consent concerns, there is talk about obtaining such information through an optional survey that may be sent out to all the department's alumni in the future.

after graduating from UTK. This job didn't align with her husband's job needs, as he needed to move away for his job. They were willing to work that out together so she could continue in her job, however the pay was too low and the university she worked at was unable to offer higher pay. She's now a technical writer, making significantly more than her WPA position, but she misses academia and hopes to find a way back that could work for her.

- Leslie graduated during peak Covid-19 as well. There were simply no jobs that were available or what she wanted to do. She also felt frustration with the way Academia was treating people during Covid-19 at large. She's now working as a freelance writer, focusing on issues of accessibility and community-building for a well-known Podcast.
- Jerry received a visiting professorship upon graduating from UTK, but wasn't able to find any tenure-track jobs in spite of doing all the right things to professionalize and prepare for an academic career. He ended up moving out West to support his wife's career goals and is now working in immigration law/support. He is happy with his job and feels he has a much better work/life balance.
- Tom received a postdoc in the Southeast after graduating from UTK. He realized that the students he was teaching in his postdoc were going to be making far more than he'd see in a long time with teaching at the university and felt inspired by their ambitions. He also wanted a good work/life balance and to feel like he was

- being paid what he was worth. He now works in an administrative role that he's happy in, with the goal to continue moving forward in his administrative career.
- April received a WPA position in the Midwest upon graduating from UTK. She worked in the role for 2 years before leaving for several reasons, including upper administration working to eliminate her role at the university, burnout, and the worry that her son would only remember her working. She now works as an instructional designer for an educational company and prefers many things about this work and the work/life balance it allows. She is still searching for a position within a company where she's truly content.
 - Anne worked in a teaching-heavy role in the Southeast upon graduating from UTK. She decided to leave that role upon having her second child and began freelance writing during Covid-19. She enjoys her job, where she writes content for clients, particularly in the Medical field, among others, and feels she has a much better work/life balance with her freelancing career.
 - Joan: In her 5th year at UTK, Joan realized she didn't want to move wherever the academic jobs were and leave her support network behind. Joan began working at a STEM-focused high school in the Southeast. She enjoys the collaborative atmosphere of her workplace, as well as the opportunity to support and nurture her students.
 - Shauna received a postdoc upon graduating from UTK and, after working in one or two science/tech writing positions, is now working at a technical writer for a

research company in the Southeast. She very appreciated for the work she does at her company, and feels she has a much better work/life balance.

- Lucy began working as a copywriter for an academic publishing company upon graduating from UTK. She has an aunt who works in the publishing field and was able to help her prepare her job materials (for which she feels very fortunate). She enjoys her new job, has goals of moving forward in her field, and enjoys the work/life balance her job allows her to have.

As we can see from the varying experiences, career journeys, and motivations of participants, there are many reasons that alt-ac careers may be the best fit for English PhD graduates. For work/life balance, better pay, supporting spouses and children and families. Ensuring graduates themselves retain their support network. Some of these reasons repeat across some participants' stories, and others may not. While it's therefore clear there are many different reasons graduates may choose alt-ac careers, it's also important to remember that my participants all worked towards their professionalization goals in the same place for half a decade (though not the same half-decade). And there are ways, no doubt, that participants' time at UTK had impacts on their alt-ac journeys and where they've since ended up.

The Impact of Space/Place

Space and place play an incredibly important role in my research in the sense that my participants and I were all brought together by our experiences with a place, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and a space, the English PhD program operating within UTK. Without that connection, we wouldn't have felt the strong sense of

community that we have felt. Without that shared sense of place and space, we would likely not have felt a sense of kinship that has woven its way throughout every one of my interviews, and chapters, and the way I talk and think about my research, our research, and what it all means.

Over and over within my interviews, I found myself framing this mutual understanding with participants, this mutual sense of community, as a “kinship” when I talked about it to them. I would be unable to prevent myself from nodding, smiling, or laughing in understanding at some of the memories and experiences they related to me. I would sometimes speak up and validate the negative feelings associated with certain alt-ac journey experiences participants would relate. I would thank participants for sharing their stories and make sure they felt safe and knew that they weren’t alone in their experiences—that I could relate to some of the things they were saying, and that I knew a lot of other people who could relate to them too. At first, I often questioned whether acknowledging this kinship, this sense of belonging, was okay. Did it take away from my positionality as the objective-ish researcher? Could it potentially skew results from participants? Was it wrong to insert myself as a non-objective participant in the issue I was interviewing them about? But ultimately, I was heavily comforted and inspired by Andrea Riley-Mukavetz’s (2014) work in “Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology” as an Indigenous woman working with other Indigenous women from a different tribe. Riley-Mukavetz embraced the shared sense of community she found with the women from the Odawa tribe, valuing their insight and even taking their advice (p. 115). Even though I am a non-Indigenous person working with other non-Indigenous people in my

community, Riley-Mukavetz's work has helped me to see that true community work involves closeness and kinship and two-way communication, as well as the prioritization of your participants' needs above all else. This too, is the important reciprocity that Shawn Wilson (2008) talks about in *Research is Ceremony*, where he encourages researchers to refer to their participants as "co-researchers" (p. 8) and discusses the importance of giving and receiving feedback from co-researchers (p. 137). I therefore felt that reciprocity and kinship were aspects of my community-based research that should be embraced. I found that supporting my participants in their journeys, listening to their stories, insights, and theories, and fostering a safe space where they could be heard, and their feelings could be acknowledged were the true aspects of my research to be prioritized. And so kinship and reciprocity were two major guiding principles I've applied throughout my methodology and interactions with participants.

Practical Procedures

I received IRB approval in the early Summer of 2022 and began collecting data for this project during the Fall of 2022. My preparation took place during the Summer of 2022 and the bulk of my data collection was completed by the end of the Spring 2023 semester. Once I reached out to participants based on the departmental list, or through word of mouth resources (such as my advisor posting an announcement on Facebook, myself posting an announcement in the Graduate Students of English page on Facebook, and communicating with potential participants through Facebook messenger), I sent out official emails informing participants of the goals of the survey and providing them with my contact information should they have any questions. Once my participants gave the

affirmative that they would participate in the survey, I sent them the survey link via email.

I collected their information in a google sheets document in my official UTK drive, to record which participants were sent the survey, and which, after completing the survey, indicated they wanted to participate in interviews (they did this through a small set of questions provided at the end of the survey). Another important piece of data to mention here (that I also use in my infographic in chapter 5) is that of the 23 survey participants, 15 responded that the university needed more alt-ac professionalization opportunities for graduate students. This is perhaps the most important piece of statistical evidence to come from the survey and demonstrated that a significant number of UTK alumni supported a push for an increased development of alt-ac professionalization resources and opportunities.

Once I received survey-takers' consent for participation in the interviews, I sent them an additional email with a link through scheduling software (Calendly, associated with and connected to my UTK Zoom account) so they could conveniently schedule their first hour-long interview at one of the available times I had on the schedule.

I then conducted 3 interviews with each of my participants via my UTK Zoom account, using Zoom to record them and Zoom AI auto transcription to transcribe them, correcting the transcripts where necessary. I read aloud the informed consent form for interviewing at the beginning of our first Zoom interview and got verbal confirmation from my participants. For an in-depth look at how I went about conducting my interviews, see the "Interview Protocol" section.

Data Sources

I have incorporated both a survey and three separate rounds of follow-up interviews for two primary reasons. My initial goal with the surveys was to determine from a list of potential participants, (1) which of them actually fit the criteria of working in alt-ac careers (in case they switched, things had changed since they'd last spoken to my contact, etc., and (2) which of them were willing to answer further questions/be interviewed. The surveys were relatively short, with the major function of determining the above two qualifications of participants, but were also designed to yield important information that could help provide a broader context for the interview data, such as overall perceptions of current alt-ac professionalization opportunities offered in UTK's English PhD department (determined through questions on a Likert scale) and overall perceptions of room for greater alt-ac professionalization opportunities to be implemented. The interviews and their follow-ups were then conducted with willing participants to further flesh out the survey responses and listen to different PhD alumni stories about alt-ac professionalization. I planned on conducting interviews with at least ten participants, with three rounds of interviews for any willing participants, which resulted in a total of 30 1-hour long interviews overall.

Surveys

My aim was to send the survey out to at least 30 participants. I was able to send the survey to 27 alumni and received responses from 23 participants total. This ensured that any statistics drawn from the survey were as close to statistically significant as I could

get, and also gave me a comfortable amount to narrow down into those 10 interviewees.

The survey was created on Qualtrics and included the following:

1. Description of Study
2. Consent (with potential risks discussed)
3. Alt-Ac Career
4. Relevant Background Information
5. Perceptions of UTK English Department PhD program's Alt-Ac Professionalization Opportunities
6. Perceptions of need for additional Alt-Ac Professionalization Opportunities in UTK English Department PhD program
7. Contact Information
8. Information for Interviews

My survey was organized in four basic areas: (1) survey info, (2) participant background/career info, (3) participant perceptions of UTK English PhD Program's current and potential alt-ac professionalization opportunities, and (4) follow-up interview information. My goal was to keep the survey brief, taking no more than about 5-10 minutes for participants. This was to simply ascertain the basic/contextual information I need to then begin my interviewing process (see Appendix A for more details).

Interviews

Participants were asked their willingness to participate in three follow-up interviews at the end of the survey. These interviews all took place via Zoom and allowed participants to expand on their survey responses. I secured funding to offer participants

for their time: \$25 Amazon gift cards for their participation in the interviewing process, with a minimum of participation in one interview round. I used Zoom AI for transcription services, which not only protected participants' identifiable information, but also streamlined the process for me, as it was built into the Zoom system I used to record interviews.

Interview Protocol

My plan for the interviews was to ask participants questions designed to evaluate the ways in which UTK's English PhD program already promotes space for alt-ac professionalization, as well as the ways in which that already existing structure could be built upon to do so further. The questions were designed to gauge each participant's story; their own path towards an alt-ac career, during and/or after their graduate program, their professionalization needs, and the extent to which those needs were or could have been fulfilled by the resources provided through UTK's English PhD program. The rounds were based off of Seidman's (2006) three-part interview and were broken up as follows:

- Round 1: I asked the participants to tell me the story of how they'd gotten into their current career (Appendix C.1).
- Round 2: I asked participants the details about how they'd gained the skills for their current career (Appendix C.2).
- Round 3: I asked participants what their current career means to them (Appendix C.3).

I set out to ask each participant three rounds of interviews, and have been able to do so, but worked with what participants were comfortable with, and found that the multiplicity of perspectives and positionalities on participants' alt-ac journeys that I was gifted through the 3-part interview structure truly helped enrich my research and led to many new discoveries I often wasn't expecting.

In terms of how the actual interviews were conducted and structured, there were several important decisions I made that I think are worth mentioning, and all of which reflect the life circumstances I was working with/around at the time I was conducting research. One is that I used certain time and energy-saving strategies, such as having email templates for every step of the interview email process (in appendices), using Calendly scheduling software (as I mentioned above) so that participants could quickly and seamlessly schedule interviews without any back-and-forth, and sticking to strict 1-hour interview slots. I always did my best to make sure that interviews were over by the end of the 1-hour time slot. If participants wanted to chat a bit after the interview was over, that was fine, but I made sure my part of the bargain was kept and kept consistently. This is a recommendation that comes from Seidman (2006) in order to gain and keep participants' trust (p. 86). I also scheduled interviews for evenings, 2 days a week. A lot of these decisions were based off of what would work for me as a new mother working at home with my daughter. The 90-minute interview Seidman recommends (p. 25) wouldn't have worked well for me with my other time commitments, so I chose an hour in length and that happened to work better for my life and work needs, as well as the needs of my busy participants.

I also found myself growing more comfortably into Seidman's suggested "I-thou" relationship (that avoids the high informality of a conversation but involves reciprocity and trust) (pp. 101-103) with participants fairly quickly after beginning my interviews. While I aimed to avoid declaring my own conclusions about their experiences, asking leading questions, or acting in any way as though I was trying to lead them down a particular path with their answers, I leaned somewhat heavily into my relatedness, or the kinship I mentioned earlier, with them during their interviews. Part of what gave me access and trust with my participants was the fact that I am currently where they have been-a UTK English PhD student contemplating the daunting world of alternate-academic jobs. To ignore this connection would have been dishonest, limiting in my interview process, would have made me less human, and frankly, would have made me less likely to hear the stories and experiences that my participants gifted me with. I felt, and still feel, quite strongly that it was my job to care for my participants-to treat them well and to create a safe space of shared understanding as they were telling me their stories. Some of us talked about parenthood and significant others and the great impact they had for us on our career decisions. Some of us talked about the "prestige" of academic spaces and how that was a strong deterrent for avoiding certain kinds of academic jobs. One participant discussed struggling with the idea of leaving academia and losing prestige in their current work, feeling that their act of leaving lessened the worth of their career somehow. Here, I could not remain the unbiased researcher and say nothing. I had to tell them that they should be proud of themselves for making the decision that was best for them. That they hadn't lost any prestige and had made a great

decision by putting themselves and their needs first. Did this break away from the stereotypical role of unbiased, objective researcher? Absolutely. But I felt my participants deserved to have a safe space in which to speak and that that was far more important than the small chance my validation might change the direction of the interview. My participants trusted and (I hope) continue to trust me because I am one of them, and I felt that prioritizing that trust was more important than aiming for the most objective interview style I could attain.

To balance this connection and relatedness, I did strive to follow Seidman's advice to keep the direction of the interview flowing back onto my participants (p. 95) so that our shared experiences were used in the service of clarifying or focusing back onto what they were trying to say in their interviews. Overall, I felt that I was able to strike a reasonable balance in the interviewer-participant relationship that involved trust, compassion, reciprocity, and also kept the focus on participants' experiences and how they wanted/chose to find meaning in them.

Meaning-Making Methods

Andrea Riley-Mukavetz describes "meaning-making" as "situated within a specific cultural community, whether it is a tribal community, digital community, an archive, or a group of craftswomen" (2014, pg. 110). In applying an Indigenous, ethical, community-based, inherently decolonial framework to my research, I feel, as I have mentioned in my Interview Protocols, that I have been able to approach my research in ways that have been kinder to my participants, and kinder to myself, than some alternate research methods might have allowed me to do. This kind and compassionate research

approach allowed me to apply the specific values/theories I mentioned in Chapter 2, and will go into more depth about in the following section, but in a general sense, it simply allowed me to conduct the research in a way that felt doable for myself and my participants, in spite of major life changes, busy schedules, complicated feelings about our time spent in the PhD program, and sometimes even complicated feelings about where we're all at right now, amidst our various alt-ac journeys. As a new mother at the start of my interviews (I returned back to work after an 8 week maternity leave on October 10th of 2022 and had my first interview session November 11th), I found that both having and enacting a kind, compassionate, and ethical research methodology allowed me to continue my work, and continue it in a way that I was able to sustain even in the midst of a major life change. It was therefore a process that felt refreshing in its doability, often even fun and enjoyable, and has been a project that will always remain very close to my heart. This, to me, is what community research is all about, and I feel very fortunate to have been a part of it.

Applying a Phenomenological Framework: Catharsis in Action

In his *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, Irving Seidman (2006) discusses the importance of a phenomenological approach, in which participants are made to see their unique experiences within a context that allows them to gain greater meaning and understanding. Throughout this research project, the delineation between context and experience for me was relatively clear: I was generally able to provide the broader context for my participants, while they were able to help me see that context through sharing their stories and experiences. As the peer-researcher, I was able to hear all of my

participants' stories. I was able to see the common themes, hear the common feelings, experiences, frustrations; I was able to see when my participants came across a previously unturned stone in their path, to help them lift it up and examine it and find new meaning, while they were collectively the reason I even knew there was a stone there in the first place. Or that the stone should be examined. One example of this was when, acting on both an instinctive feeling that one of my participants, Jerry, felt hesitant about discussing salary as a motivator for changing careers, and the knowledge that some of my participants had admitted to feeling this way, I asked him why he seemed to feel this hesitation. I've included the following excerpt from Jerry's first interview session⁵ to demonstrate how I applied Seidman's phenomenological method in action, which to me was strongly intertwined with the co-theorizing modeled after Andrea Riley-Mukavetz that I mention below in "Collaborative Theorizing:"

Amber: "Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah, this is so interesting. One question I have, and I'm aware we're getting close to time. You mentioned sort of when you were talking about salary, and like again, you can feel free to say as much as you're comfortable with. I'm not asking for any numbers or anything--I want to preface that. But you said a phrase like it's bad to talk about this. But do you want to sort of tell me why you feel it's a bad thing to talk about salary?"

⁵ Interview transcript excerpts have been lightly edited for clarity.

Jerry: I felt that the reason I said it earlier, I think, was within the context of conversation--like I don't want to seem like I'm loaded, or anything like that, you know, because I don't mean to come across that way at all, and I mentioned other salaries of people with my former institution, and I feel kind of bad for mentioning that, you know, because, like I mean know I'm not trying to say that any of them are like not well off, or like I'm better off than any of those people, you know...I mean I don't want to make it seem like I'm doing like super well off, or anything like that. But you're able to--you have more flexibility, I think, right? I mean that's just the reality of it, right? Like more money allows you to do more things and it just provides a certain level of security and a certain level of comfortability.

Amber: Absolutely. Yeah, no, I am just totally with you. I honestly, I'm just wondering. Do you sometimes feel like talking about salary is taboo, especially in academic spaces, as a motivator?

Jerry: What do you mean?

Amber Kent-Johnson: Yeah, it's interesting because I guess to my middle class--that's how I grew up is the salary [is important] right? If the salary wasn't going to cut it, that's part of why we're doing the job in the first place. Right? So I just find it really interesting when people are sort of almost hesitant to talk about salary. Totally respect it, but I just find it very fascinating as to why there's this hesitation around it.

Jerry: You know, I mean like I--it's not like I feel like really bad and critical talking about it. But I think that, to your point, there is this kind of un-comfortability. I think it's like teaching always is kind of discussed as a joke, right? Like, you know you just go into teaching, knowing you're not going to make much money, and then you're like 'Oh, you could go get a job outside. You could certainly make a lot more money, ha ha ha ha' [both laugh]. It's always discussed in that way. It's like this kind of like, not quite dismissive, but kind of like, you know, like a laugh line, in a way.

Amber: Right.

Jerry: And so I think that is yeah, I never really thought about it. But you're right; there is that weird kind of culture about it, and it makes you wonder if that should be part of more of the alt-ac conversation, or play a bigger role in the alt-ac conversation. Maybe that's not where you're trying to go with it [both laugh], you know I think you're right. I never thought of that. But I wonder how much injecting that into, or putting that as a part of the conversation would be better, and not just treat it so cavalierly. But to actually say no like these are some numbers. When I first was looking for jobs out West, like I remember the first firm I applied for. They asked what kind of salary I was looking for, and I was like, I don't know, like forty-thousand, which to me seemed like shitload of money.

Amber: Right, right'' (Jerry, personal communication, December 2, 2022).

In moments like these, my participants helped me to recognize and better understand patterns, and I helped them to realize that their experiences and feelings were part of a larger context; that they were phenomena, as opposed to individual and isolated events, thoughts, and feelings. In this particular case with Jerry, several of my other participants had recognized the taboo or difficulty of talking about money in academic spaces. So when I heard Jerry's hesitation to discuss salary, or downplaying of salary as a motivator for his alt-ac journey, I asked him if he thought discussing money was considered taboo in academic spaces. I was wondering, after speaking to my other participants and hearing Jerry's hesitation to discuss salary, if we as graduate students had essentially been trained not to talk about money in academia (and in our case, specifically within the humanities). Once I discussed this with Jerry, it led him to start thinking reflectively about the way money is discussed in and outside of academia in a different way than he had previously. In this way, we collectively thought through some of the stigma surrounding people's motivations for choosing to go alt-ac, such as being driven by financial reasons, as well as one way work/life balance plays an important role in graduates' decisions to go into alt-ac careers⁶. Financial comfort, and the ways in which that comfort allows participants to have a healthier work/life balance, is something a lot of my participants ended up discussing as huge motivators for their choice to journey into an alt-ac career.

In another example of the collaborative work my participants and I did together when I applied Seidman's phenomenological framework, I was talking to my participant

⁶ Both "Stigma" and "Work/Life Balance" are codes I discuss in my findings under the major theme "Why Leave Academia?" in Chapter 4, and you can also see them in the codebook I've included at the end of this chapter.

April in her first interview and was struck by her use of the word “abuse” when discussing the ways graduate students are treated in academic settings. She and I then both discussed the ways in which different forms of abuse and trauma can influence graduate students both before and during their PhD programs:

Amber: So I’m hearing just sort of really valuing family, wanting to be in a work situation that supports your family--is the primary thing that's valued in your life. And then this concept of being present, which is absolutely one that is close to my heart, too.

I'm just curious because you talked about how--and this is something that really struck me when you were talking about it--You talk about how academia is sort of this abusive relationship in a way, and you don't have to disclose anything that you're not comfortable with. But I’ve been in an abusive situation, and I’m just curious if we sort of-if it's because it's what we know. If that's one of the reasons we're [subconsciously] attracted to it.

April: Well, hell, my first ex-husband that was-that was the love I knew. I married him, almost died, you know, at his hands, and then left, and then-went to...what saved me from that was getting back into to teaching right? In that situation, [I was a] master’s student. ‘Oh, you're a really good student. You should teach.’ Okay. My first semester ever teaching, I got threatened, like a student wrote in a journal that they had dreams of killing me.

Amber: Oh my gosh.

April: And I was told that if you can survive this you'll be great at teaching. You'll be great at academia. And it was true, you know?

Amber: Yeah, in a heart dropping sense.

April: I mean like I am a true trauma Kid. I can work at this kind of level and speed cause it does require you to organize quickly, to be successful in the career. Right? Organize quickly, understand exactly who needs what and I can see that right? And then I fall for it, too, because, like I don't have a very healthy attachment style to my parents [laughs], and I get some professors really highlighting how well I'm doing something. And I eat that praise up. I feel seen, and then I buy in more and more and more, and to the point where, there's nothing left for me to give.

And I am, you know I am neuro divergent, and this is something I didn't really realize until recently--the extent to which, like, I have to mask and really push through on a lot of things, because I've had to do that for survival.

Amber: Right.

April: But also [my neurodivergence] has helped me be a really good researcher. It helped me be, you know, mindful, a quick learner, when it came to writing, and how to improve my style--like my responses, all of that. I could just. 'Oh, okay, You're giving me an issue, I can dig in and teach myself how to do this, and I can be successful at doing that, because I know I'm a good learner.

Amber: Yeah. So it sounds like the qualities you're talking about allowed you to do well in the academic setting, but it's just like we're talking about how it's like, even if you're doing all the right things and doing well. It's just not a sustainable path because-

April: Not it's not.

Amber: Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing with me. I really appreciate it. I know this is our lives, and it can be a difficult thing to talk about. But I just really appreciate your story and your perspective, and I see it very much as a gift. So.

April: Oh, you're welcome, I'm happy-like, I've been through it all [both laugh], and I am I guess--my husband says I've just made it my mission to help others. And this [the treatment of graduate students], because Academia doesn't have to be this way.

Amber: No, no.

April: They choose to be that way.

Amber: Yes, I know, and it's often really harming the people that it's supposed to be helping, that it claims to be [helping].

April: Look at how many grad students UT takes in every year, knowing that when I went on the market in the late 2010's, there are only 64 jobs. I applied to 64 jobs and I think it's gone down since then. And the person before me, before I applied, had like a 150, so maybe it went down like 100 jobs. But they keep accepting at least 20 people every year. And then you do that math per graduate program across the US. What? It's a Ponzi scheme.

Amber Kent-Johnson: Yeah.

April: They know! They know, and it's your fault because you didn't publish enough.

Amber Kent-Johnson: Yeah. I think that's part of the abuse right? Is setting you up for a situation that is impossible. And putting the blame. Yeah. Just going to write that down.

April: Yeah, no worries. I don't think they will enjoy reading this, but it's true [both laugh].

Amber: Yeah, I mean it's-

April: Even if it's for you. It's true.

Amber: Yeah, it's not unlike other responses I've received, You know that's one thing.

April: That's interesting.

Amber: Yeah, I mean, it's just a lot of people whom I've spoken with. And I'm talking to participants who graduated with in the past 10 years, and it's just a lot of people are somewhat jaded from the experience [of graduate school/academia] for multiple reasons, but all sort of ones that I think a lot of us feel kinship with" (April, personal communication, December 16, 2022).

In April's and my discourse above, we collaboratively discuss our thoughts and ideas about this concept of abuse faced by graduate students. We question whether some graduate students' pasts might affect their relationship with academia in negative ways, as well as the ways in which the harsh academic job market and the stigma of failure surrounding it may function in toxic, and perhaps even abusive, ways. This was perhaps an unexpected discovery the two of us had together, with April providing invaluable insight into the connection between academia and mental/emotional abuse and with myself providing some context that we were not alone in our thinking of academia as

involving real, damaging toxicity. This is a collaborative finding that meant and continues to mean a lot to me, and is one that I have thought back on regularly as I've continued working on this project. Both examples of my collaboration with participants work to demonstrate the ways in which my phenomenological approach of co-theorizing has functioned throughout interviews, and has led to far better, more meaningful discoveries than I could have ever possibly found on my own.

Community Research Involves Listening (to Stories)

One important aspect of Indigenous storytelling methodologies is that viewing story as methodology allows us to learn knowledge we'd otherwise miss (Riley-Mukavetz, 2014; Donelson, 2018; cf. Literature Review, Chapter 2). Surveys and even just straight answers to questions can't get us the kind of knowledge, wisdom, and insight that we can learn from taking the time to listen to someone's story. The importance of story as a research method in itself has fundamentally affected the way this research project has been set up. The very first chapter of this dissertation focused on representing my own alt-ac journey thus far, while my findings chapter (Chapter 4) will focus on relaying this study's findings through the stories my participants tell about their experiences. Chapter 4 will be presented mostly in the form of story because I felt that my participants' stories should take precedence. That their existence as people with experiences, insight, and different perspectives should be given prominence over everything else, especially findings that can often feel neatly compacted and edited down to patterns that don't always reveal the whole picture. Therefore, story is being used in this research project through the telling of multiple stories, most of them short stories and

examples of what participants' alt-ac journeys have been like, that help to demonstrate the multifaceted, complex, nuanced nature alt-ac journeys can have. In order to get at something closer to the whole truth that I was after, I had to engage in Danielle Donelson's (2018) "humbled, rhetorical listening" and listen for not only the similarities between my participants and each other, and myself, but also the differences. To give up some of my space and make sure my participants were getting the space to talk that they needed and deserved. The truth is that some of my participants are happy and content with their alt-ac jobs and overall journeys. Most are ambivalent about at least some aspects of their alt-ac journeys and some still feel an array of complicated, sometimes jagged feelings about their experiences. Some never want to go back to academia, and some miss academia and hope they can go back. Most felt grief upon leaving teaching, but some did not. These different stories--these various perspectives--cannot, and should not, be summarized into fairly clean patterns of findings where the rough and rugged bits would be sanded off in favor of making a kind of sense out of them, as one holistic narrative. Much can be gained from a findings section where you look for patterns (and patterns have been named amidst my participants' stories for that very reason!), but much can be gained from slowing down, and listening, and embracing multiplicity.

In order to hear my participants' stories, I first had to *ask* to hear them, which can most clearly be seen in my interview questions 1 and 3 (Appendices C.1 and C.3, respectively), where I asked them to tell me the story of their alt-ac journey (for question 1) and to tell me what their journey had meant to them (for question 3). Structuring 2 of the 3 interview questions in this way not only set up the research to be focused on story,

but also led to the kind of co-theorizing through story that Andrea Riley-Mukavetz discusses in her work (Riley-Mukavetz, 2014, pg. 108). I'll go into more depth about what my participants' and my collaborative theorizing looked like in "Community Research Should Involve Reciprocity and Collaboration" below, but I will take the time here to say that, for me, my findings were definitely a collaborative effort between my participants and myself. I made a conscious effort throughout my research to avoid mystifying my research process and instead was honest with participants, telling them exactly what the research was for, what my future goals were, both personally and professionally, and why I was asking the questions I was (and in the specific way that I was asking them). My participants were incredibly supportive, offering networking opportunities, advice, their own theories and ideas about the issues we were discussing, and their invaluable experience. It is because of them, and their collaborative involvement in this project, that I have a findings chapter at all.

Community Research Should Involve Reciprocity and Collaboration

In order for community-based research to be ethical, it has to involve reciprocity and a recognition of one's responsibility to a community as a researcher (Wilson, 2008, pg. 65). I began this process by asking myself and participants how this process could feel reciprocal to them. Perhaps one of the most meaningful and surprising ways reciprocity manifested throughout the research process was when the phenomenological approach I took mingled with the co-theorizing and resulted in a cathartic, sometimes therapeutic experience for participants. I had several participants tell me that the process of being interviewed about their alt-ac journeys had helped them to see their experiences

differently. To know that they weren't alone in their feelings, that what happened to them was part of a larger context, gave some of them peace, helped certain wounds heal, and helped them find new meaning in an experience that was often considered painful or that they felt ambivalent towards. This, to me, was what I had been hoping for; so that my participants could feel they weren't simply helping and supporting me with my research (though they have, immensely), but were receiving help and support too that felt—if not mutually beneficial—then at least somewhat beneficial for them. All of my participants also responded very positively to the idea that their experiences could be used to help others. Not only were there other graduate students facing similar challenges, but my participants could use their shared sense of community with these students to help them see a path forward through an often scary, isolating, and painful transition. This was the main reason participants mentioned as their motivation for participating, and seeing the ways their experiences could be helpful was often cited as one of their major motivations for participating in my research. This goal, of helping future English PhD students at UTK, was one in which we were all strongly united, felt passionately about, and collaborated together to provide these future graduates with helpful resources. This has meant a lot to us all and was truly something we worked out together.

Collaborative Theorizing

Working through my research with my participants was a process modeled after Andrea Riley- Mukavetz's (2014) approach to theory in "Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology: Making research matter with multi-generational women from the Little Traverse Bay Band." For Riley-Mukavetz, her participants' stories were "rhetorical

theories,” (2014, pg. 108), and for me, my participants’ stories included findings, patterns, and codes that we all discovered together. My process of “coding,” then, such as it was, was largely collaborative, and involved a combination of inductive and deductive coding. For my part, after receiving participants’ interview responses, and transcribing them, I applied deductive coding to the data to organize it into themes according to my original research and interview questions. Johnny Saldana (2021) refers to this kind of coding as “structural,” which “applies a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question used to frame the interview,” (p. 66). This type of coding is meant to work as an initial pass over or organization of the data, followed by more in-depth analysis within the chosen themes and organization (p. 66). The themes I selected to organize my data in my initial coding process therefore came from my research and interview questions.

Research question 1, “What have the experiences of recent UTK English PhD students been post-graduation, who’ve chosen to pursue alt-ac careers?” and interview question 1 (see appendix C.1), “Can you tell me the story of how you got into your current career?” were turned into Theme 1 (as seen below, in Table 1), “Why Leave Academia?” This is not an exact replication of the aforementioned research question, nor the question asked in the first interview round, but it certainly relates to both, as participants’ motivation for leaving academia has related directly to their experiences pursuing alt-ac careers post-graduation. Why participants have chosen to leave academia is also very strongly tied to the story of how they’ve gotten into their alt-ac careers. In order to understand the participants’ journeys, I had to start at the beginning, of why they

left in the first place. Participants also seemed to emphasize their leaving academia as a very important part of their alt-ac experiences and journeys, as you'll see in chapter 4.

My second theme, "Skills Transfer from UTK's English PhD to Various Alt-Ac Careers," relates to my second research question, "How have these students transferred the skills they've learned in the English PhD program to their alt-ac careers?" and my first second-round interview question, "Was/is there support for you to develop alternative academic skills in your PhD program? What forms did that support take?" with the follow up question, "How did those skills transfer into your current career?" (see appendix C.2). These questions directly related to the subject of skills transfer and were therefore directly tied to the creation of theme 2.

Theme 4, "How and Where to Offer Additional Alt-Ac Support," also came from my second research question ("How have these students transferred the skills they've learned in the English PhD program to their alt-ac careers?") as well as my third and final research question, "What do their [participants] alt-ac professionalization experiences tell us about UTK's resources, both past and present, for preparing PhD students for alt-ac career opportunities?" and the second, third, and fourth interview questions in my second round of interviews (see appendix C.2): "Are there additional forms of support you would find/would have found helpful in your PhD program, for developing your alt-ac professional skills? Please explain." "If you answered yes to question 2, how do you think these resources could be implemented in a PhD program?" "What are the most helpful resources you found, outside of your PhD program, for helping to develop your

alt-ac career-related skills?” These questions were all designed to ask participants about additional alt-ac resources and support the English PhD program at UTK could offer to help graduate students transition into alt-ac careers after graduation. Therefore, they directly informed theme 4, which was organized to show how and where additional alt-ac support could be offered.

Theme 3, “What these Alt-Ac Journeys Mean,” relates strongly to my first research question (“What have the experiences of recent UTK English PhD students been post-graduation, who’ve chosen to pursue alt-ac careers?”) and my first three questions of my third interview round (see appendix C.3): “What does working in an alternative academic career mean to you? How do you feel about your current career?” “Is there anything you would change about your educational process/experience, if you could?” “If you could give another PhD student advice about going into your alt-ac career, what would it be?” Each of these questions is directly tied to how participants have reflected and are reflecting upon their alt-ac career journeys as they both look back at those memories and think about the future they’d like for future graduates on their own alt-ac journeys. Each of these themes were chosen for their relevance to research questions and interview questions, as sorting the patterns emerging from the data seemed to make the most sense under an explicit structure strongly tied to those questions. Participants gave many of their answers in a way that was contained within or tied to the corresponding interview question, and in presenting the patterns in my data to readers, following the initial structure I’d come into this research with seemed the easiest and clearest way to convey my participants’ and my results.

Once this foundational structure of themes was laid down, I coded participants' responses further for emergent patterns using grounded theory, which I determined would best allow me to keep participants' stories intact and identify "a theory 'grounded' or rooted in the original data" (Saldana, 2021, p. 41), that arose from the data itself, and not any preconceived themes or questions. It's important to note that, while I was aware of similarities and patterns within the data, I was also cognizant of making space for differences (Donelson, 2017), but-perhaps the most vital aspect of my process overall-many of these "codes" were all founded on emerging patterns my participants and I had already discovered together (I provide an in-depth explanation and example of this in the above section "Applying a Phenomenological Framework: Catharsis in Action").

Therefore, when I talk about my participants' perceptions of the abusive nature of academia, the code "abuse/breaking down" is one that April, for example, came up with, and that I listened to and prompted her to say more about. When I discuss my participants' perceptions of leaving academia as involving a sense of "grief" and "loss" it's because several of them, without speaking to or discussing it with each other, all described it in that way. These are just a couple of examples taken from the codes and findings I'll be discussing in the following chapter (chapter 4), and that I have included in the "Master Codebook" below, but they illustrate the point that I'm trying to make about my process for arriving at my research findings. I have had the great privilege of working with a group of highly intelligent, reflective, creative, research-oriented, perceptive, and knowledgeable people. How could anyone be better placed to theorize their experiences than they are? This was my thinking throughout my process, and I therefore see my

“coding” process less as one of scraping and sculpting to find patterns and meaning and more as one of simply enacting “humbled, rhetorical listening” (Donelson, 2018, pg. 16) to my participants as they told me their theories about their alt-ac journeys and the meaning they have found along the way so far. To better acquaint you with the specific codes we’ve found together, I’ve included my “Master Codebook” below, with brief descriptions of each of the codes my participants and I discovered together, as well as the larger themes these codes have helped to inform. The following table has been laid out in the same format as the themes and codes in chapter 4 and provides a foundation for the codes we’ll be exploring more deeply within chapter 4.

Table 1. Master Codebook

Theme	Code	Description
Theme 1: Why Leave Academia?	Abuse/Breaking Down	Academia fosters abusive relationships, whether it's the exploitive relationship with work/passion that Grad students/workers have, or a substance abuse like high from teaching, advising, etc., the isolating, mental-breakdown-inducing trials of the PhD program itself, etc.
	Disillusionment	The ways in which participants' hopes and expectations for an academic job were proven wrong or let down. The ways in which they had to learn painful truths about alt-ac perceptions of the PhD, or how the PhD translated into alt-ac jobs.
	Covid-19's Impact	The ways in which the Academic job market and PhD program were negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in ways that made already difficult employment and success rates even harder/more elusive.
	Alt-Ac Benefits	The overall benefits from working in an alt-ac career that are different from, or in addition to, benefits found in an academic setting. These could include higher pay, work-life balance, benefits, etc.
Theme 2: Skills Transfer from UTK's English PhD to Various Alt-Ac Careers	Adaptability	This is specifically referring to participants' ability to "think on one's feet," or adapt a plan to a new, and sometimes unexpected, context or event. This is often

Table 1. Continued

		learned and developed through teaching.
	Communication	Participants' ability to develop rapport quickly and effectively with coworkers, supervisors, and clients, through various forms of communication, such as in-person discussion or via email.
	Research	Participants' ability to find relevant and credible information on a topic, sometimes to back up a point, and sometimes to inform others.
	Rhetorical Knowledge	The rhetorical knowledge participants have gained from teaching first year composition courses at UTK (which focus on rhetorical knowledge and skills) and/or by specializing in the Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics track at UTK. Such skills and knowledge include an understanding of the rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, context, constraints), genre analysis, the rhetorical appeals, etc.
	Writing	Participants' ability to not only write well in an academic context, but to apply their writing knowledge to different genres and contexts.
Theme 3: What these Alt-Ac Journeys Mean	Grief/Loss	There's a grieving process that comes from leaving academia and going into Alt-Ac, which involves the pain of missing teaching, losing a lot of your social network, and losing your identity as an educator.

Table 1. Continued

	Stigma	The ways in which participants were or felt shamed by those within academia for their interest or progress into alt-ac careers.
	Work-Life Balance	Participants' ability to balance a job with family, hobbies, and time off.
	Supporting Other Graduate Students	The desire all participants showed to help current graduate students (including myself!) navigate their own alt-ac journeys and to provide support to other grad students.
Theme 4: How and Where to Offer Additional Alt-Ac Support	Task Analysis	Participants' encouragement that graduate students do an activity where they start to think of the actual skills they have and use all the time in their program. This provides a strategy for naming and identifying those skills so that they may be lined up with the skills mentioned in job advertisements.
	Job Ad Searches	A method encouraging graduate students to familiarize themselves with alt-ac job descriptions so that they can begin to identify which kinds of alt-ac jobs they may be interested in.
	Coursework Collaborations	Participants' suggestion that graduate students should get departmental credit towards their degrees for taking alt-ac related classes outside of the department.
	Translating CVs to Resumes	Participants suggested the importance of directly translating (and often times cutting out) aspects of a CV so that alt-ac employers can directly see how a graduate students' skills and experiences fit the requirements of an alt-ac job.
	Alt-Ac Alumni Network	A network of alumni in alt-ac careers who current graduate students considering alt-ac could

Table 1. Continued

		reach out to for support, insight, advice, and recommendations.
	Alt-Ac Internships	Participants suggested that the UTK English department partners with local businesses to offer interested graduate students hands-on alt-ac experience via internships.

Conclusion

In giving an account of both the practical considerations that went into my methodologies, and the theoretical framework and values that have supported them, I hope I have made it clear just how much of a role collaboration has played throughout my research. We have discussed the ways in my participants have collaboratively aided me in gleaning the theories, meaning, and findings from this research project (as detailed in this chapter, Chapter 3), and now we are about to see exactly how those findings have manifested themselves through story in the next chapter (Chapter 4), where I have simply played the role of organizer in presenting the themes, patterns, and codes my participants and I have come up with together, as a community, all working toward the same goal of providing helpful resources for graduate students who will someday be on their own alt-ac journeys, just as we have been, and still are.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

As previously discussed in Chapter 3, working through my research with my participants was a process modeled after Andrea Riley- Mukavetz's (2014) approach wherein she viewed her participants' stories as "rhetorical theories," (2014, pg. 108). I applied Riley-Mukavetz' collaborative theorizing to my work with my participants and accordingly saw findings, patterns, and codes that we discovered together throughout their storytelling processes. My method of "coding," then, such as it was, was largely collaborative. While I used structural deductive coding to utilize themes from my research and interview questions for my findings' themes (Saldana, 2021, p. 66), and discovered similarities and patterns within those themes with the co-theorization of my participants based on the themes that arose from the data (Saldana, 2021, p. 41), space was also intentionally made for differences (Donelson, 2017). Once my participants' stories were thoroughly discussed, transcribed, and analyzed, four major themes arose from the research: (1) Participants' reasons for leaving/feeling frustrated with Academia, (2) the skills that transferred from their PhD program at UTK to their alternative academic careers, (3) their perspectives on their alt-ac journeys overall, and (4) the various forms of support they believe could help current and future UTK English Graduate students. I have done my best to layout each of these themes in the following sections, with each thematic section beginning with a short introduction into that corresponding theme, moving into my participants stories, thoughts, and insight in their

own words⁷, and ending with my own analysis of the patterns and takeaways that I'm seeing for each section as a whole. I have been mindful in providing space (Donelson, 2017) in this chapter for my participants' immense expertise and feel so grateful to have the opportunity to share their stories, which they themselves tell far better than I ever could.

Theme 1: Why Leave Academia?

In this section, participants discuss their different perspectives on, and reasons for, leaving academia. These are important stories for us to hear because, just as it's completely valid for people to stay and work within academia, it's also completely valid for people to have numerous reasons for leaving it. It's important to listen to these stories about leaving academia because they will help us understand how to best support students choosing to go alt-ac; it will help us better understand what they're feeling and going through and see that not all alt-ac journeys look the same. In sharing these stories, my participants and myself are not focusing on a condemnation of academia, but rather, are trying to create a space of recognition for the difficulties of the academic professionalization journey, and the experiences of those who chose to leave academia for reasons that were both important to, and made sense for, them. They identify these reasons throughout the four codes below, starting with "Abuse/Breaking Down," where participants discuss the ways in which their time in academia felt toxic and caused harm to their mental health and the mental health of their peers. The second code "Disillusionment" describes the ways in which participants conceptualization of

⁷ Interview transcript excerpts have been lightly edited for clarity.

academia became personally more negative as they spent more time in it, spurring them onward in their decisions to leave academia for alt-ac careers. The third code “Covid-19” demonstrates the ways in which participants’ academic careers were made increasingly challenging by the impact Covid-19 had on the academic job market. Finally, the fourth code “Alt-Ac Benefits” describes the ways in which their alt-ac careers have provided specific benefits (such as pay, actual job benefits, and work/life balance) that they felt they couldn’t achieve through academic careers. These four codes have been identified as patterns of motivation for participants choosing to leave academia and, in understanding this motivation, graduate students going alt-ac and the faculty wishing to support them can learn a lot about the factors that greatly impact graduates’ career needs, and therefore, career goals.

Abuse/Breaking Down

April, interview 1: “Really look at how many people end up having breakdowns...Just breakdowns, and I mean one of my good friends, she was struggling, and she ended up having a break down, and barely got through the program. Simultaneously, another person had a breakdown. One person was committed. This is like. While I was there, another person was completely triggered, and went off into the deep end, and people left [the program] left and right. It really does take everything from your identity, and it takes the bad, the nasty parts, and it highlights them. Because look at how often we deal with rejection in the field” (April, personal communication, November 12, 2022).

Shauna interview 1: “And oh, I also got angry about the stipend when I started. You know they entice you. They're like, oh, here's this extra, like whatever we're gonna add to the base of your stipend, and you'll have that for a couple--I think it's one or two years, or whatever--and then it goes down. You know you already start out at poverty level, and then they take more away the longer you're in the program.

I felt so jaded by that--this idea that, you know, we're gonna entice you and get you in here [the program]. And then we're just gonna try to kick you out the door as fast as we possibly can, not showing any kind of care for what we're worth as people and employees, because you're not really an employee. You're in this weird, you know, liminal state where I just feel like everything is so slippery. You can't get a foothold anywhere, and the way that it's just expected that you're gonna be able to manage all of these things, and if you don't, you know, then there's the door.

There was really no kind of acknowledgment of how that affects a person's mental health and I struggle with depression and anxiety. I have my entire life. My very first semester in my PhD, I went from feeling confidence in my writing and my ability; my capability as an intellectual human being, to feeling the imposter syndrome, like they're gonna find out that I'm a complete fake. You know I can't do anything. I'm stupid, and they're gonna kick me out, you know.

And it like completely just permeated my entire being. And so I lost a lot of the confidence that I had in my writing and in my ability to just to be a scholar” (Shauna, personal communication, February 27, 2023).

Joan, Interview 1: “I was like, this is a really frustratingly small amount of money for the amount of work that I've put in. It doesn't show that they value us that much, or value what we do that much, and I always found that frustrating. Because you know at UT, when you're teaching English, every single student at that school matriculates through English. It's one of the few--if maybe not the only department--where they're [students] required to take English 101 or 102. You don't get out of that, whether you take it before you get there, or whether you take it there, you have to have it.

So we're servicing thirty thousand students, and we're some of the least paid people on campus. I mean I was really frustrated with how small our salary was. I mean it was small when we were grad students, but I was like, well, you know we're grad students. Everybody's salary was small” (Joan, personal communication, November 19, 2022).

Disillusionment

April, Interview 1: So here I was. I was doing it [working as a WPA] and moved my whole family to the Midwest, you know, and I think, starting my second week, I got pulled into meetings with the provost, who said, First Year Writing isn't important and wanted to use Accuplacer, which is for L2 learners, and you know, known for its inaccuracies to not use it anyways. [The provost] wanted to use Accuplacer to test students out and push them forward. Mind you, when I had done diagnostics on the curriculum and the students, they were at a very low level and a basic level of writing--like they're grasp of genre couldn't even be there because I had to go back and just talk

about paragraph structure, or even how to put sentences together. That's where they really were.

And the curriculum itself, too, is still dated in the seventies. So they were still writing about their feelings like Peter Elbow himself had created the curriculum. And so I knew, coming into this position, that I would be responsible for creating new First Year Writing curricula, as well as kicking off a five-year assessment, both of which I had planned to do, and I had started while I was there in my two years. But the Provost started pulling me into these meetings. He basically said my job was pointless. Well, I was like, why did you just hire me?

He had worked hard to defund the English department, and it just, it was just a battle, it was just a very bloody battle. And then I started going to the WPA boards right, where other people are connecting and asking for ideas, and I even saw one WPA from one of the institutions that had offered me a position. They were under the gun from the Dean trying to figure out funding for adjunct instructors, and I'm like, what is happening? Like the Junior WPA's, we're just being put into impossible situations, increasing burnout. So everything I was doing--and I mean I was doing research, I was putting together presentations and pamphlets and everything, and I was just completely burned [out]. I remember my chair looking at me and was like 'I'm surprised you're still here after the first year' when I started my second year. So I was like, 'Well, gee, thanks. You know that wasn't helpful'" (April, personal communication, November 12, 2022).

Tom, Interview 1: So I finally got a job offer from a Southern Tech School—a Fellowship [that] is up to three years long. Fellowship post doc teaching, and I said yes, in large part, because it was the only job offer that I had. But I was lucky enough because it was a really fantastic program and I, you know, moved to a new city after getting into the role. And you know that's really where teaching and that fellowship program is what really made me step back and think about what I wanted to do. Career wise. I was just increasingly dissatisfied with what Academia had been telling me were the goals, and was really dissatisfied with the sort of financial compensation for all the work that I had to put into reaching those goals, and I know that in my cohort there were 15 of us in the Fellowship that that year that I started it, and I was the only one who wasn't instantly back on the tenure-track job hunt right when we got the jobs. I think they were announced, probably--I don't know April May, something like that, onboarded in August--and instantly everybody else was sending out applications and getting reference letters in Interfolio and blah blah blah, and I did not. I was like 'No. Are you kidding me? I just did that.' But what changed? Just looking at the people around me, and how they were just instantly scrambling for jobs that were not compensating them very well.

You know the Fellowship, when I started, paid 42 k and I guess, for many people that I was very lucky, because I'd been working at the University of Tennessee as a grad student, making like \$18,000 a year. So 42,000--I was rich, you know? And I certainly felt that. But I started to talk with my students. We're talking 18-year-old students, some of them 17, because it's a Tech school right? And you know, it's this engineering school, one of the premier tech programs in the country. Brilliant students like, not in my

smartest day ever. I wasn't smart enough to get into a place like that it's just--they're on another level. And I was incredibly humbled by how smart my students were, and I was talking to them about 'what do you want to do? What are you coming to the university for?' And they had answers that just floored me. You know they were like, 'I want to be a millionaire.' I'm like, that's a job? Like wait, what? I don't understand. 'I want to design an app. I want to start a company--my dad owns multiple buildings, and I'm going to get the business.'

And it was just. I come from a very, very blue-collar family in the rural Midwest and I, you know, very quickly made more money than either of my parents had ever made. Not when I was a Fellow. It took a little bit longer, but it was just. It was clear, talking to these students, looking around me at that university that I just had a very narrow idea of what my education and what my skills could do for me career-wise. I had gotten you know, sort of locked into this Ivory Tower identity, and this is a problem I think that is not unique to the humanities folks, but that's where I'm coming from. So that's what I can speak to: where our personal identity is really caught up in our degrees. You know the books that we have on our shelves say so much about us as people" (Tom, personal communication, December 9, 2022).

Jerry, Interview 1: "I planned to, I wanted to become a professor probably, and I felt like I did everything right in grad school like I had a Tennessee Humanity Center fellowship my final year, you know, so like I thought that was kind of a big deal. I presented at major conferences, like MLA, etc., But--not my first year on the market, but by my

second year, I had two publications, and after grad school, I got a visiting assistant professor job at a university, and so I thought I was doing it everything right, you know.

But it's just--I mean, I don't know anybody from my cohort that has a tenure-track position now. Like I had the visiting position, and they were great, but it's just there wasn't something I wanted to do long term. I had a conversation with another person there, who I was friends with in the department, and I think he was like. I think he was maybe late forties, or like, maybe early fifties, and he told me like that he had just repaid back his student loans, and so I was like man, I have student loans. I don't know what his situation was. I know mine are comparatively probably a lot less than most people's are. They're less than the national average, you know. But I still was just, that was on me, and I was trying to be actively on the market again. I was presenting again, I presented at MLA again. I did other conferences.

Yeah, just throwing out applications all the time and just not getting any bites whatsoever, you know. And then there were a few positions and one that I thought I had a super good chance with and didn't even get an interview for. And so it was just kinda at this point where it's like, what am I gonna do here? Am I going to keep going on this route, and am I going to try, and give it another shot next year? But then I'm one year further down this path, you know, and it's like the longer you get down the Academia path, it feels like the more you're stuck in it, you know. And then you already even doing a PhD is really a big commitment to that path.

And about this time, my wife and I were talking about doing a career change and making a move, and a pretty drastic one. We wanted to go West, and so she started just applying for some jobs out there and ended up getting one, and then I just kind of made a break. I stayed at that university for two years, and then I just left Academia completely, moved out there [out West], not really knowing what I would do, but just throwing out applications all over the place to anything and everything” (Jerry, personal communication, December 2, 2022).

Covid-19’s Impact:

Leslie, Interview 1: “I graduated the summer after Covid had hit so a lot of universities at places that I would have been applying to had put all of their hiring on hold. And so I had applied for positions, both tenure-track and post-doctoral in the Fall of 2019, when we had no idea that all of those things were going to go on hold, and by the time Covid hit I had heard back from a couple of places that I had gotten rejections from. But then, after Covid hit, there was a wave of rejections framed [by universities] as ‘we’re putting this hiring process on hold for the time being,’ so I was kind of just trying to stay afloat at that point. I wasn’t being very active in my search for a position for 2020. By Fall of 2020 things were still kind of strange, but I had received the post doc appointment [at UTK], and I was like, okay well, I’ll have a year to figure out what I’m doing from there.

It was probably at the end of that year, Spring of 2021, that it was very clear to me that academia wasn’t the right place for me to be, not just because of the really underdeveloped job market, but seeing how Academia handled the pandemic, I think for

a lot of people in a lot of ways. The pandemic was a catalyst to reevaluate and reprioritize what you're doing in your life, and it certainly was for me. And while on, like an individual-to-individual basis, I felt like there was support, and there was camaraderie to get through the struggle that was happening, when I was looking at larger patterns of behavior across Academia, it left a really bad taste in my mouth. And while I loved the department that I was in, I was very displeased with the University that I was at, and frankly, I didn't want to--I was in a position where I could on principle say, 'I don't want to be a part of this anymore'" (Leslie, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

Donna, Interview 1: "I have never had intentions of going into alt-ac. My intention was to stay from the get-go in Academia in some way. In fact, before I was in the PhD at UT, I actually had applied to do a combo master's in public policy...one that's really focused on education. So when you're done, you're basically helping write policy for education. And I had applied for that, and I got an interview, but I didn't get the actual position, which probably worked out because I would have had to stay in an expensive city. There's no way I could have done it remotely.

But I had always had intentions of one way or another, staying with Higher Ed, or just Secondary Ed--just education of some sort. I had never had any intention to do anything other than that. Once I started down that path, when I got out of UT--well, I graduated UT literally in the middle of the pandemic...

So I defended online, just the whole bit, and at the same time my husband's job was moving us to the Mideast, and so I was on the market, and finishing my PhD all during the pandemic, and that was the worst experience ever in my life. I don't know that there's a lot that the Department could have done to support me, because there was nothing to base an idea of support in that situation on. Nobody knew what they were doing at the time, and higher ed jobs and higher academia were the same as all the jobs around the US. It was a mess, an absolute mess, and academia was even worse, because I think by the time I was done, I applied to higher ed jobs like traditional tenure-track. I did everything anywhere all over the US. Because my family knew that if I was gonna have a career, I was gonna have to do this. So we were all resigned with me not even living with them in the beginning...

I applied everywhere, applied in high schools. I applied everywhere, I applied.... This is not the norm. I do not think this is the norm, but this is the timing that I was in. I applied to over two hundred positions, and I had thirteen interviews and three offers” (Donna, personal communication, November 20, 2022).

Alt-Ac Benefits:

Donna, Interview 1: “I got a really good job. My position was assistant professor in residence, which is another way of saying teaching Professor, basically for a University in a city near NYC, and the campus is forty-five minutes away from New York City. And I was also considered what you would call the coordinator. But I think the actual title was ‘liaison for first year writing’ for that campus. So it was like, you know--like UT has a lot

of different campuses, but they're pretty autonomous. That NYC-adjacent University's are fairly autonomous. It's set for certain programs. The first-year writing program is very centralized, in its design, and its hiring to some degree. But once you get to your campuses, you don't tweak the curriculum necessarily, but you can tweak how you present it, and some other things about it based off of your population. And the NYC-adjacent University has their campuses. They have very rural campuses, and then they have very urban campuses. So it's a big school system with a lot of different campuses that serve a lot of different types of populations.

So I loved it. It was great. I enjoyed it. I loved being the administrative part. I really like that. It is a lot of work. It's not for everybody. I think if you're a researcher you probably hate administrative stuff, but you know, for me in my background, I liked it. I enjoyed it. So it was great. They wanted me to renew. Everything was fantastic. And then my husband--probably six months into that job--was told that he was needing to relocate to either Utah or back to West Texas and I had not planned on necessarily relocating with them [my family]. My intention was to stay with the job, but I felt like I was not being paid for the amount of work that I was expected to do. So I inquired about a pay equalization because I did research about what people were making who were tenure-track. And even though as an assistant professor in residence you are a teaching professor, you're basically on the same kind of promotional track as a tenure-track person. It's a parallel line.

The amount of money they were offering was nowhere near the same for people who had less experience, but they happen to get a tenure-track job. It was like a twenty thousand to thirty thousand dollars difference. Yeah. And then they don't take into account, here's a thing, too, that people have to be aware of. They do not take into account the cost of living of where you are. It is a decision that's made--especially in a large university system--it's a decision that's made very centralized. If you are part of the Union--there's things about being part of a union that are fantastic, and that I totally wholeheartedly love. And there's things that are very restricting. One of the reasons why they could not offer me more money was because of the Union contract--because they had contractually agreed to a certain line of salary based off of your title.

So tenure-track's going to get more money because that's what they negotiated for, and there wasn't anything I could really do about that, and I cannot tell you how many times they told me--and this is I mean, people need to be aware of it, and it's an unwritten rule that if you want more money and you want a chance to make more money, then you need to get a job offer from somebody else, and then you tell your university, and you tell them 'I've had a job offer,' and then all of a sudden, they're willing to renegotiate everything. So it's an ugly rule, but it's an unwritten rule.

And so I had no problem working with who I was working for. I loved it, had no intentions of leaving academia, even though the money wasn't as great, but situations being what they were, I had applied to other positions that weren't in academia just to see what would happen. I had no indication that I was necessarily going to get a job, but I just

told them, ‘Okay well, I can't justify living near NYC, which is the equivalent of living in New York City itself, on this salary. I can't make it happen, not with...One of my kids is about to go into college, like I can't do that, and they were like, ‘Well, we're really sorry, but we can't do more money,’ and I was like ‘Well, then, I'm gonna have to step away. Like I'd still teach adjunct for you if you want me to.’ And they did, so I still teach adjunct for them” (Donna, personal communication, November 20, 2022).

Ron, Interview 1: “So when I graduated, I got a job immediately. Like three days later, after graduating, I didn't live in Tennessee anymore. I moved to Iowa to work at a small university in the Midwest, and eventually, you know, there were three big factors that played into me leaving that town, and eventually that job. The first was they wanted to pay me a salary that started with a three. There was almost no opportunity for my husband in that town. Because it's nine thousand people in rural Iowa and you're either... No, that's funny, I'll tell you that part later. And uh, you know, and the third one is that it wasn't a university that really does tenure...

The closest civilization is Iowa City. I think maybe they have a couple of hundred thousand people there...So it was like an hour and a half drive to get there. And he [my husband] has a certification as a pharmacy technician. And it's a rough town to be doing that in because there's a pretty significant substance abuse problem in the community. Both prescription opioids and methamphetamines.

Okay, and that's really, you know other than that, there's an appliance factory. And something about doing research for investments. And those are definitely not his cup of tea” (Ron, personal communication, November 14, 2022).

Analysis

So now we’ve heard about participants’ motivations for leaving academia, and the many different reasons they felt leaving was the best decision for each of them, personally. One of the most important things to keep in mind is that graduate students do have many different reasons for leaving academia and seeking jobs outside of it. They have many different perspectives and feelings about their alt-ac journeys and why they were necessary. However, a pattern can be seen in how often participants cited their identities as motivation for being displeased with or leaving an academic setting. As we’ve seen in the chapter 2 section “Graduate Student Work-Life Balance,” Graduate Students experience mental health issues at a rate “2–6 times higher” (Bekkouche et al., 2022, pg. 547) than what you’ll see in the general population (Evans et al., 2018) due to high pressure, overwork, and low pay. As seen in April, Shauna’s, and Joan’s interview excerpts, the question of breaking down is very much wrapped up in their identities as graduate students facing these concerns. For April, academia “takes everything from your identity” and “highlights” the “bad.” For Shauna, the “imposter syndrome” she felt “permeated” her “entire being.” For Joan, the lack of livable income for graduate students meant “they don’t value us that much.” Similarly, in the “disillusionment” subsection, we see Tom question his identity when exposed to his students’ different perspectives on career, saying he had “gotten locked into this ivory tower identity” before realizing there

were other ways to think about your career goals. We also see Jerry discuss the way his identity and role as a husband made him more motivated to make “a break” with academia so that his wife’s career goals could be supported.

In the “Covid-19’s Impact” subsection, Leslie discusses how her conflict of values motivated her to leave academia when she saw “how academia handled the pandemic,” and that “looking at larger patterns of behavior across academia...left a really bad taste” in her “mouth.” For Donna, in the “alt-ac benefits” subsection, she justifiably saw herself as “on the same kind of promotional track as a tenure-track person,” and wanted to be paid fairly according to her identity as a capable, worthy academic who had many years of experience in her field. For Ron, in the same subsection, his role and identity as a husband wanting to promote his husband’s career growth, as well as his own, motivated him to leave academia, with both his knowledge that he deserved better than “a salary that started with a three,” and that the geographically available employment options for his husband were “not his cup of tea.” Both Ron and Jerry (above), in citing their important roles as members of their families, must consider their decisions with work and family-life balance in mind, in addition to striking a general work-life balance with their careers (Perna, 2001; Reddick et al., 2012; Sallee, 2012; Sallee et al., 2016; Yoo & Marshall, 2022), adding to the ways their layered identities motivate them in their career decisions. While many participants are motivated by their own unique circumstances and career needs, it’s clear in this first thematic section, and will become clearer as we hear more stories and discussion from participants, that the decision of whether to stay or leave academia is closely linked to participants’ identities;

who they want to be, what kind of work they want to do, what kind of other identities they want in the people they work with, the kind of identity expectations they face at their workplace, and what kind of other identities they see themselves holding besides simply being academics (such as spouse and parent). In the following thematic sections, we will continue to see how participants have further discussed this question of identity and the ways in which it's motivated them in their alt-ac journeys.

Theme 2: Skills Transfer from UTK's English PhD to Various Alt-Ac Careers

One of the major questions I asked participants was about skills transfer, specifically asking them, "Was/is there support for you to develop alternative academic skills in your PhD program? What forms did that support take?" (Appendix C.2). My participants had a range of answers to this question, which have manifested in the following five codes: (1) adaptability, or one's ability to engage in real time problem-solving when new or unexpected situations arise, (2) communication, or the ability to develop connections quickly, mindfully, and effectively, (3) research, or the ability to engage in high-caliber research to effectively learn new information, (4) rhetorical knowledge, or rhetorical skills that can be used to analyze and think critically about different writing contexts, and (5) writing, or the ability to engage in a high standard of writing that can be adapted to multiple contexts and genres. While all of these skills were identified as transferable (and invaluable once transferred), one major aspect of that transfer process many participants touched upon was the difficulty of transferring the skills PhD graduates *do* have into non-academic contexts.

Participants' thoughtful responses about the different contexts in which they had to transfer their skills from the PhD demonstrated that participants were being mindful and reflective of those contexts. As Neil Baird and Bradley Dilger (2017) discuss in "Metaphors for Writing Transfer in the Writing Lives and Teaching Practices of Faculty in the Disciplines," the adaptive transfer metaphor "recontextualization" can be useful for describing this kind of awareness of context when transferring skills from one setting to another (pp. 105-106). To engage in adaptive transfer means that one is required to do more than simply cut and paste prior knowledge into a new context; they must "actively repurpose or transform writing-related knowledge, skills, and experiences," (p. 103). To engage in recontextualization means "significantly adapting prior knowledge and painstakingly considering writing contexts," (p. 110). In their following responses, participants have engaged in this careful consideration of the writing contexts they've encountered both in their PhD programs and academia, and since they've begun their alt-ac journeys. Their advice is often largely grounded in encouraging other graduate students (myself included) to think deeply about the context they're going to be working and writing in and how skills can be adapted from the academic setting they've known to those new contexts. They've often identified this process of having to think about skills differently as one of the biggest hurdles to overcome when pursuing alt-ac careers. It's therefore very useful to have this metaphor of recontextualization in mind when reading through participants' advice on transferring their skills and the processes they engaged in in order to do so. Hopefully in sharing their stories, reflections, and advice, future

graduate students can have a head start in understanding the kind of adaptation of skills that proves invaluable when embarking on an alt-ac career.

Adaptability

Ron, Interview 2: “A lot of what's engendered as a really useful skill is the ability to think on your feet. Because when you're trying to have a discussion and get the ideas flowing to practice good, constructive, best learning and nobody has anything to say. Well, what do you do? You can't just sit there and wait for it to happen because it never will. So you have to have some fallback plans.

You know I was fortunate that early in when I was taking my bachelor's program in education, one of my teaching mentors required that for every lesson plan we did for her, we included a troubleshooting text section where we just think about what might go wrong and what we would do about it if it does. And you know, having just a list of extra questions in your back pocket, and things like that go a long way. And just preparing for what might go wrong. Which you know some of those things inevitably will” (Ron, personal communication, November 21, 2022).

Communication

Tom, interview 2: “Being able to talk to people and get people to respond to you is the most important skill, definitely. I think, for many of my roles it's been my ability to build rapport quickly. And I think that teaching helped me really hone that skill set down in a way that very few other industries or lines of work will, at least not authentically, right? Like a salesperson can fake rapport, but you know, like that's the dance. A good teacher, I

think, genuinely wants to build rapport with their students because they understand that that's another way of building a bridge, and the stronger that bridge, the better educational transfer knowledge exchange you can have.

So whenever I'm in a meeting, and I'm making small talk as we wait for so and so to join, I get good responses from people who are very much my senior, administratively. People who you wouldn't think would want to talk about, well, we were talking about pets this morning-just little things like that don't seem like a big deal, but in my experience they're a very big deal.

...Yeah, so it's just communication, you know. Emails, being able to send good emails is also massively important. Because so much of our communication is done via email now, and it's so easy to get it wrong in text, especially when it's to mixed audiences. But I pride myself on my email writing. I have gotten compliments on my email writing. I have people pay me to do email writing for them occasionally. It's just hugely important to master one of the primary means of business communication, you know, and so many people are bad at it, and I don't understand how they get away with it, or how they don't understand that being good at this thing is good for you professionally” (Tom, personal communication, January 2, 2023).

Research

Anne, Interview 2: “I think inherently in a PhD, you know you're forced--like not forced-but you have to research. And so developing those skills further have helped me in my career.

...I don't know. I mean I feel like there are a lot of skills that transfer. I feel like the problem for me was not knowing how to transfer them, or what that really meant. So I didn't learn things and transfer them. I just feel like the jump was really big to get from these are the skills to use for academia to these skills can also be used in other fields or other areas. So I feel that for me, that leap was difficult.

But yeah, no, I mean definitely research, definitely honing my procrastination skills,” [laughs] (Anne, personal communication, February 6, 2023).

Leslie, Interview 1: “There's a podcast that I had been listening to, and it was the passion project of an actor whose work I had followed. So had it not been for my interest in film and media literacy, and all of that that I also had within academia, I probably wouldn't have found this guy's work. Probably wouldn't have ended up listening to the podcast, but I liked it a lot, and I respected what they were trying to do. And I knew they were a small team of people, putting the podcast together, but one of the things they did this Summer was start up a Patreon subscription offer right? So I had subscribed to it, and I was watching because they were doing, not just an audio podcast, but they were recording them to watch his videos too. And so I was watching the videos, and I noticed some of the people they interviewed had really thick accents, so like they were interviewing people in Shreveport. They were interviewing people from East Baltimore, and they had difficult-to-decipher accents. But I was aware, as somebody who does disability advocacy, that they really needed subtitles just coming at it from the perspective of knowing that people that are hard hearing from auditory processing issues could use

subtitles. But I also knew that as kind of a famous movie star, the guy that's hosting it has a large global audience. A lot of his fan base are not native English speakers.

So I emailed the Patreon. I didn't know who was running it. It just said, you know, 'Email us if you have any questions.' And I told them that I did disability advocacy, you know, that they should seriously consider putting subtitles on their videos just for accessibility purposes. And then someone emailed me back, and was like, 'I think that's great. I would really like to pursue that. I don't have any knowledge of accessibility stuff. I would love your input if you're willing to give it.' So we set up a call just to talk about that. But then we ended up hitting it off, and it turned out that he was the executive producer of the podcast. So I explained to him why I was interested in their project, and the kind of work that I do, because one element of the podcast is giving people a platform to talk about the things that they're passionate about. People who might not otherwise have a large audience.

So the fact that I was involved in activism worked really well, and when he found out that I did content writing he was like, 'Would you be willing to look at our content management setup, and tell me what you think? And if you think there are better ways that we could be doing some of this stuff.' And that just sort of bloomed into being very involved in helping them come up with ideas for community building" (Leslie, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

Rhetorical Knowledge

Joan, Interview 2: “When I got into rhetoric and writing and decided that was the route I was going to go for my dissertation and my PhD...There's a lot more emphasis on collaboration, working collaboratively, even when you're just doing projects or writing papers, or anything like that. And I thought that I really liked that a lot better. I like the kind of collaborative spirit of writing in some of the theories that inform the kind of collaborative process.

And I think in writing and rhetoric, too. There's--so much of what you do is learning how people learn. You just have to know that, to know how to teach writing. And so a lot of the theories that inform learning emphasize collaboration. You never learn in a vacuum, right? So I think those are some things that made their way over to my career now. It has been helpful, that spirit of collaboration and the skills that you have, when you do collaborative work...

With my students, I now emphasize collaboration a lot, even if it's just partner work. We're technically a STEM school, and you will not encounter a single STEM career where you're not working with someone in some capacity. And you have to know how to collaborate with people in a meaningful, conscientious way, or else you will be a miserable STEM student” (Joan, personal communication, November 21, 2022).

Shauna, Interview 2: “I think that I had a huge advantage based off our rhetorical training, because I knew what to do. You know, it wasn't something that was completely

foreign to me, and so I could use those skills that I had been learning for the past 5 years, to help me get something that I really wanted.

...like the rhetorical situation--huge. Audience, message, author, context, like all of that stuff just comes into play. And the fact that I knew about how documents get created; I know about visual rhetoric. You know, things like when you're creating a document, how text plays a role, and just all of these things that people who don't have the education that we have normally wouldn't think about. I was able to think about those things. And I do think that gave me a leg up in a lot of the applications that I submitted," (Shauna, personal communication, March 15, 2023).

Lucy, Interview 2: "So, for example, if I have to write copy for this poetic memoir, or something I've never done before. So I look up a bunch of other memoirs that are the same sort of genre, same sort of audience, from similar presses that are going for a same sort of market. And I pull up copy from like three or four books, and then I'll think, okay, so what is the per paragraph breakdown of this. So I was like, okay for these memoirs they often tend to start off paragraph one with a hook, and some very concrete details about the book. So one of them was like...oh, it was a girl growing up in Chinatown or something and her family ran Chinese restaurants, and it [the memoir] talked about getting shrimp, baking shrimp in the back, or something, like concrete things that really give you a flavor and a sense of being there in the scene.

And then a brief sentence, kind of like, 'This is the person and the story they're telling.' And then in the second paragraph they move into okay, these are like the big ideas, and

it's this new memoir from this exciting new person on the literary scene who asks questions about identity and what it means to be Chinese American, or whatever, and then readers will walk away feeling x or something, right? So I looked at that for a few books, and I was able to split it up like that. So the next time that I did copy for a memoir, I was [going off of] that [first] memoir. Then when I was reading the book and I was taking notes, and some really specific, concrete images--like his son was in an inpatient program. And he was practicing the tuba. And you could hear it throughout the whole hospital, basically the ward. I was just like, 'Oh, okay, I'll include that in the super detailed section and [then in the] second paragraph I'll be like, okay he's exploring grief and faith.

So yeah, I pretty much know that my rhetorical purpose, no matter what, is to sell the book. But I try to think about: how is this typically structured, and how are they gaining the reader's attention, and how can I do the same thing?" (Lucy, personal communication, November 28, 2023).

Writing

Jerry, Interview 2: "As far as skills, definitely writing. I became a better writer for sure. You know, absolutely no question about it--I became a better writer. More effectively able to form complex thoughts and sentences and complex arguments--there's no question about that.

But the thing is, I know other people with PhDs who--I mean, I've seen that in my current work or my previous job, [people with] PhDs--And they're not able to do that kind of

[complex writing]. And not to say that I'm a better writer than them, but just you know, writing has always come easily to me, and... You may be better at it [with a PhD], but I see people in my current job who do writing really well, and they don't have a PhD. Or a master's, but they've had lots of training doing the writing.

I often think, would I be--if I had gotten the PhD versus just lots and lots of practice and experience doing [writing]--would there be different skill levels at this current point? And I don't know. It comes a lot easier to me now than it did before... But I wonder; I don't know if that would have happened just through experience," (Jerry, personal communication, January 16, 2023).

Analysis

As participants have spoken about the transference of the skills they've learned or further developed in their PhD's, it's clear that they had to be resourceful with the skills they have, and recontextualize, (Baird and Dilger, 2017, p. 110) or look at them in new ways, in order to apply them to alt-ac contexts. One of the main patterns in their mental shifts around their skills (as we'll see more extensively under Theme 4) has been to simply view the tools, strategies, and personal qualities they've employed in academia as skills and experience that can be transferred out of that highly specific academic context. For instance, under the "adaptability" subsection, Ron discusses the importance of "think[ing] on your feet" and having "fallback plans" as teachers always strive to have in the classroom. This form of adaptability, or on the ground problem-solving, is not the sort of thing that's mentioned in one's CV, but is a valid, useful skill that has served Ron, and

no doubt other participants, well in his alt-ac journey. Similarly, under “Communication,” Tom discusses the vast and often underrated importance of “build[ing] rapport quickly” with one’s coworkers and supervisors, and being able to “send good emails,” which are “one of the primary means of business communication.” Once again, these skills are vital for one’s progress in a career path, are further developed in a communication-heavy field of education like English and are not often recognized as the important skills that they are.

The process of recontextualizing any skills from an academic setting into non-academic contexts is difficult, however, as shown by Anne in the subsection “Research.” Anne discusses the “difficult” “leap” from using skills, even ones as recognizably transferrable as researching, in academia to understanding that “these skills can also be used in other fields or other areas.” This difficulty Anne experienced demonstrates that, in being trained within and for a highly specialized academic career context, it takes time and an adjustment in mindset for graduate students to transfer their skills into alt-ac contexts.

This pattern of difficulty in transferring skills from an academic context to non-academic contexts can be seen throughout Theme 2, but interestingly, there is another pattern of more recontextualization transfer that seemed to be perhaps easier to recontextualize to non-academic settings under the subsection “Rhetorical knowledge.” For Joan, the highly “collaborative process” often embraced in the field of Composition and Rhetoric was not only enticing to her during her PhD but has also transferred into her work with STEM high schoolers, where she encourages collaboration, as they’ll have to

“know how to collaborate with people in a meaningful, conscientious way” in their future careers. Shauna saw her “rhetorical training” as a “huge advantage” that “gave [her] a leg up in a lot of the applications [she] submitted.” Lucy used concepts such as “genre,” “audience,” and “rhetorical purpose” to help her in her copywriting work. What is perhaps most interesting about the transfer of rhetorical skills (learned either through alumni’s experience teaching first-year composition as part of their Graduate Teaching Associateships at UTK, or through their field knowledge, depending on which English track they choose) is that participants have framed it as an advantage rather than a difficulty; there is no mention in any of these excerpts about the difficulty of transferring rhetorical skills/knowledge. This could be due to the ways in which rhetorical knowledge is already deeply tied to the recognition of context—the very use of rhetorical skills involves a deep consideration of context—and therefore, rhetorical skills are already uniquely qualified to be engaged in a recontextualizing form of adaptive transfer.⁸ Further research should be done to explore the potential relationship between rhetorical skills and recontextualizing adaptive transfer, but for now, it’s interesting to note that rhetorical skills transfer seemed to be significantly smoother than transferring some of the other skills participants mention.

⁸ Even though the ease of transference of rhetorical skills is worth noting, it is also worth noting that there are a few limitations to this finding (that will be explored further in my conclusion section). For one, while participants did discuss the usefulness of their rhetorical knowledge, some of them had mixed feelings about having to teach rhetorical knowledge as a part of their program, rather than focusing on the field they were trying to go into for their careers. Secondly, it’s important to note that 5 of the 10 participants were on the Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics (RWL) track within the English PhD, and I myself, the interviewer, am also on the RWL track, which may possibly have led to some bias about the usefulness of these skills, as I explore in more depth in my “Conclusion” section.

Lastly, I think it's important to acknowledge that some of the participants questioned the direct usefulness of their PhD overall, as opposed to other means of gaining knowledge and experience, as Jerry did under the subsection "Writing," where he questioned whether his writing would've just improved "through experience," rather than through his PhD program. Altogether, it seems that the general patterns of transfer for participants' PhD skills can lead us to several conclusions: (1) It was difficult for participants to recognize their transferable skills, (2) It was also difficult to figure out how to transfer those skills to non-academic contexts once they were identified, (3) rhetorical skills and knowledge seemed to transfer more readily to non-academic contexts than many other skills gained in the PhD program, and (4) not all participants saw their PhD program as necessary for the skills they currently use in their alt-ac work. These are valuable lessons for those of us who are preparing to begin our own alt-ac journeys, and for mentors and faculty hoping to help support graduate students in their journeys. We all can take heart that, while there may be a leap involved in transferring the skills we've gained through our PhD program, that process of transference, of the recontextualization of our academic skills, has and can be done.

Theme 3: What These Alt-Ac Journeys Mean

Another aspect of using story as a methodology for this project (see Chapters 2 and 3, for reference) was asking participants to share with me their own thoughts about what their alt-ac journeys so far have meant to them, and what their feelings are about their current alt-ac careers. They, and I, are committed to providing honest accounts of their multiple, and varied, perspectives. With that in mind, I think it's very important to

note that none of my participants were trying to claim that their alt-ac jobs were perfect, never-frustrating, never exhausting, or the most ideal setup. What they have explored here are honest accounts of why most of them feel content and happier in their alt-ac jobs, and why some, though happier, are still searching for a better job, and even why some may someday want to return to academia. The multiplicity of their responses are shown through the four identified codes below, starting with “Grief/Loss,” or the sense of loss participants went through in leaving academia, including loss of identity, loss of friends and support network, loss of teaching, and loss of professional network, among others. The second code “Stigma” describes the ways in which participants have felt looked down upon by members of academia for their decision to leave and pursue their alt-ac careers. The third code “Work-Life Balance” was a widely-identified code that manifested in different ways for participants, but pointed towards factors such as more free time, or time to pursue hobbies, more time for family, greater financial stability, and the placing of boundaries around passions and career that a lot of participants discussed as healthy. Finally, the fourth code “Supporting Other Graduate Students” depicts participants’ enthusiasm to share their knowledge, stories, and experience in the service of helping other graduate students embarking on similar alt-ac journeys to the ones participants have embarked/are embarking on. These codes all highlight the challenging, complex, messy, multifaceted nature of transitioning from academia into alt-ac careers. Participants had nuanced, complex feelings about their journeys and these feelings are detailed below to show that, while alt-ac is a highly valid career choice for English and humanities PhD students, it’s still a complicated career path involving a lot of emotional

labor and unforeseen hurdles. In hearing participants' feelings and reflections on their alt-ac journeys, prospective alt-ac graduates will be all the better prepared for the messiness, realities, and complexity they may well face themselves in their own alt-ac career pathways.

Grief/Loss

Donna, Interview 1: "Some of the things that I miss--and I'm at the place now with my husband's position, that if I had the opportunity to leave for a tenure-track job I could, where before I couldn't. I needed to take these steps before, and I think I would [accept a tenure-track position] if I really liked it. You know, I've applied. We'll see if anything comes back. I'm not desperate. I have a very good job, but I miss my research. I miss interacting with fellow academics. I miss the classroom a lot, and it's just...it's a big part of who I've been for twenty years. I don't see myself not being an educator. So it's really hard, I think mentally, emotionally. It's hard to make that transition, if that's how you've seen yourself for a really long time. I've seen a lot of people who are much younger than me, who didn't have the same amount of career time in academia as I did, and they make it very Pollyanna, because they say, 'my time is respected, and I'm making a lot more, and my benefits are great.' Yes, but if you're an academic at heart, I think that honeymoon period--once that honeymoon period's gone, there's a lot that you miss," (Donna, personal communication, November 20, 2022).

Donna, Interview 3: "...It [leaving academia] has also meant to me a little bit of a loss of freedom, and a little bit of a loss of that intellectual challenge and camaraderie. Because I

guess, unless you're a scientist or maybe you're a researcher somewhere, you just don't get that same amount of intellectual discussion and working together and collaborating that you do in academia...I like when I get to do proposal work or work on white papers, because I do get to tap into that part of academia that I love, where I get to do research, and I get to collaborate with people on writing, and I get to ask them to explain to me what they're doing, and it's interesting because I'm learning about new things--that part of it's really great, but it's a very small portion of what I get to do. So, in a lot of ways--and I've been thinking about it often--because what I do can be done remotely, I'm looking more towards--maybe in the future--going contract rather than full time. Because I feel like I would have more freedom, and I would be able to choose what I work on a little bit more," (Donna, personal communication, March 31, 2023).

April, Interview 3: "Another big part of it is the grieving. I always tell people for me, grief came in cycles, and don't be surprised if you are enjoying your career and getting paid well for it or whatever. And then grief hits you. A really good friend of mine, who is also a junior WPA, she left to do user research design. And I check in on her all the time. And she's like, 'I remember you telling me about the grieving part, but how much I miss it, and how angry I am...' Because she was really good. I mean we were published in the same collection, and our circles are pretty tied together. And so processing that [grief] has been a big thing, and will be a big part of your journey, leaving.

And it's hard, but find the people you can lean on, because the people who you thought you could lean on may not necessarily be there. Because you're choosing an alternative

path that may mean goodbyes in some ways” (April, personal communication, February 3, 2023).

Stigma

Shauna, Interview 1: “But then also the negative view of a lot of traditional faculty about alt-ac. You know, that it’s somehow a coward’s way out, or you’re a traitor for wanting to do something that is outside of academia. It’s like it’s not the intellectual work that’s so superior, and if you’re going to go out and be a copy editor, then you’re just such a waste. You know, ‘we don’t want anything to do with you.’ But then it’s also like, what they are building up, and what they are saying is the pinnacle of the degree and the career is also just horrible. And it’s also really convenient for somebody who is tenured to think like that, because they have the privilege. So yeah, I just started [seeing] all of these little things and just started noticing these things in different professors; little mannerisms and things that they would say, and that just would show that kind of elitist up there in the theory [mindset]. And, you know, all of the peons down at the bottom like, ‘oh, they have no idea what’s going on.’ All that kind of thinking really started just making me mad, and I was just like you, I wanna help people” (Shauna, personal communication, January 27, 2023).

Joan, Interview 1: “Sometimes I wrestle with this idea that I gave up prestige in academia, and I think there is a little tendency in academia to look down on public education, or people that make the move from academia to public education. I don’t know if it’s something we talk about, or if it’s just implicit. But there is this sort of notion that

they're not as smart or not as driven or not...whatever, you know? And I wrestled with that a lot, and I still do sometimes.

But I think ultimately what I ended up doing was just putting my needs as a human first, and it paid off. I made that decision that I wasn't willing to be a miserable person just to have a tenure-track job” (Joan, personal communication, November 19, 2022).

Work-Life Balance

Lucy, Interview 1: “I have stable employment, I have benefits. I have dental insurance. It's the first time I've ever had dental insurance. There's things I miss about the academic [workplace] like flexibility, but for the most part I just go to work at eight-thirty, nine, and then I leave at five, and then I'm done, and I can do whatever I want with my evening. And I can do whatever I want with my weekend, whereas in graduate school it's like constant guilt, like I'm not working hard enough, like I'm not, you know, putting enough time [in]; like I can never turn off like the work. Whereas when you're working an office job, I have very separate work-life balance...Yeah, overall I just like the [current] schedule a lot better,” (Lucy, personal communication, November 14, 2022).

Tom, Interview 3: “I have time to work on my hobbies that I do for me that I don't do for other people. And so I'm very, very much against people saying, you know, ‘do the thing that you love, and you'll never work a day in your life’-absolutely false for the majority of people. I think maybe for some people they can do it right? Maybe they can. I couldn't, I guess, and I don't think that a lot of people can. I think it's very, very few, and those few who can are at the tippy top spouting this nonsense. It doesn't work for 95% of the other

people there. It's very, very dangerous. To use that language is unethical at a certain [point]-that's where the cult analogy really clicks into place, I think. So, that's one of the things in terms of freedom that I really noticed, like I play video games. Oh, man. It was great! I cooked. I took blacksmithing classes. I also read. I read stuff that I didn't then have to think critically about. Everything I read, I wasn't thinking, 'Hmm. How can I make this fit into a potential publication? How can I make this into a conference presentation? How can I make this fit into a class?' I didn't have to run through those filters to give myself permission to read something that I wanted to read. 'Do I like this? I like the cover. Let's go.' You know, that's as critical as I have to be with my pleasure reading and I've been so much happier to be able to go back to that, reading. I think that's another huge thing, reading only for fun, [for] pure pleasure," (Tom, personal communication, March 8, 2023).

Anne, Interview 1: "So I actually always thought I'd be in academia, ever since I started. When I applied for my MFA I thought, yeah, this is what I want to do. I mean, I love the atmosphere. I love the competitiveness. I love the study[ing]. I love to learn, and so I just love that continual push to learn, and it [that push to learn] was always put on a pedestal, even in my MFA. And in the PhD, it was like, this is the goal; your goal is to become this. and we did have some alt-ac people come in, and I remember some of them saying-- when I was in my MFA--they were like, 'don't do a PhD. It will kill your creative side. Don't do it, like just don't do it.' I had several people come in my MFA program and say that, and I was like, oh, it's not me [that they're referring to].

So in the journey [after my PhD], you know, I was lecturing in the Southeast for 2 years, so I was doing a 4-4 load, and it was mostly comp, but I also had the advanced students as well. I did mostly comp, and it was fine, but it was very workhorse. It took a lot of time outside of the classroom. I was working all the time, which wasn't much different from my PhD, I guess.

And then actually the reason why I ended up not going back was not because we moved. I actually stopped beforehand because I had a second child, and I couldn't find appropriate child care and because of some of our ideology, or you know, religious ideology, there were some things that weren't acceptable to [us with] some of these childcare places that were available and open for me to use them. And so I am having to not work [in academia] because of that. So it was circumstances that propelled me out of academia.

But once I have been out, once I had actually started working as a freelancer--because I had to find something to do and during the pandemic it was really hard, obviously, to find jobs in person, anyway. But once I was starting to make money and doing something I was like, 'Wow! I can get satisfaction.' The same satisfaction, the same curiosity, can be attained by research and writing as [it] could be in Academia and I'm not being underpaid, and I'm not working 80 hours a week. I always-the goal was like, 'well, if I get a tenure-track [position], it'll be fine.' But then I was looking around [at] the people in in that Southeastern university with me... There were people who have been in a lecturer's [position] for 10 plus years. And so I was like, they're probably not getting--I

mean, I knew how much people were getting paid. Not like that's the only thing [that matters]. But I was like, 'well, these people are getting paid not much more than I am. And they've been doing it for 10 years, and I know they're working their butts off, and they're not getting anywhere.' And it's not the dream. The dream is to, you know, work less than 40 hours a week and get paid for it; the dream is not to work 80 hours, and not feel the satisfaction, and to burn out and to hate your job, like that's not your dream," (Anne, personal communication, December 9, 2022).

Supporting Other Graduate Students

Leslie, Interview 1: "I think your project is important, and I'm glad that someone is doing it. I'm glad that you're doing it, because I think you'll do a lovely job with it, and I do think that it will be genuinely of practical benefit to folks going forward. So yeah, I'm happy to help more with it," (Leslie, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

Tom, Interview 1: "I'm happy to help. I think this is, you know, an important topic that is not talked about enough..." (Tom, personal communication, December 9, 2022).

April, Interview 3: "Feel free to hit me up anytime. If you want help, review, or anything. I am happy to help you. You know it really is often like, who do you know, making those connections and getting those references, those internal referrals," (April, personal communication, February 3, 2023).

Ron, Interview 3: “I’m so grateful to you and the work you're doing, and I’m so glad to hear that you have a little bit of a plan on your way out of the cult⁹” (Ron, personal communication, February 20, 2023).

Shauna, Interview 3: “In a way, it's been cathartic for me. And I just--if anything that I've experienced can help anybody else, it would make me happy, you know,” (Shauna, personal communication, February 16, 2024).

Analysis

Here, in theme 3, participants can once again be seen taking up the question of identity as they reflect on what their alt-ac journeys have meant to them, particularly with regards to negotiating their academic identities and the identities they want to have in their alt-ac careers. Participants also talk about the kind of identities their alt-ac careers do or don’t allow them to have, and how they’ve had to negotiate this after leaving academia. One perhaps unexpected aspect of leaving academia that participants have linked to their identities is the grief and loss they can experience upon leaving. In the subsection “Grief/Loss,” Donna says there are things she misses, such as her “research,” “interacting with fellow academics,” and “the classroom,” and that “it’s a big part of who I’ve been for twenty years. I don’t see myself not being an educator.” April also discusses

⁹ One thing that’s worth mentioning is that the theme of the humanities being “cult-like” came up amongst several of my participants. I didn’t include this as a major theme, as I felt that the other themes, such as “disillusionment” and “grief/loss” covered what participants were saying about academia when they referred to it, and the humanities, as “cult-like;” namely, being highly insular, requiring passion from its employees as part of the job, wrapping up people’s identities as part of their jobs, and being highly isolating both when people are in it, and once people leave it. However, I found this running theme, usually said between us as a sort of insightful inside joke, highly fascinating, and thought it was worth mentioning here.

the grieving process that can take place after leaving academia, advising those of us who are planning to leave to “find the people you can lean on, because the people who you thought you could lean on may not necessarily be there. Because you’re choosing an alternative path, that may mean goodbyes in some ways.” In Donna’s case, her internalized identity as an educator has been difficult to reconcile with her current identity as someone working outside of academia, and she has negotiated this by leaving her options for returning to academia someday open. For April, leaving academia has meant the loss of her identity as a member of a community, full of people she was once able to “lean on.” This pattern of loss and identity is continued in the subsection “Stigma,” where Shauna feels graduate students choosing to go alt-ac are often seen as “cowards” or “traitors” by “traditional faculty.” This perspective too is tied strongly to identity, with Shauna’s perspective that negative aspersions are cast on the identities of graduate students choosing to go alt-ac by faculty who are in positions of “privilege.” When such stigma is attached to alt-ac professionalization and worsened by the lack of formal attention and support given to alt-ac professionalization (Lovitts, 2001; Kelsky, 2015; Rose, 2020), it can often be internalized by the graduate students choosing alt-ac as a career path, as demonstrated by Joan, who says she “wrestle[s] with this idea that I gave up prestige in academia.” As well as the “notion” that public education workers are “not as smart or not as driven” as academics, which is something Joan still “wrestle[s] with” sometimes. While we can see the ways in which our participants may have struggled with this internal shift in identity, and often loss of one identity, we can also see the ways in

which their alt-ac journeys sometimes allow them to regain or find other parts of their identities.

This reclaiming or finding positive aspects of identity is perhaps most strongly articulated in the “Work-Life Balance” subsection. For example, Lucy discusses the ways in which her alt-ac job has led to a new sense of freedom: “...I leave at five, and then I’m done, and I can do whatever I want with my evening, and I can do whatever I want with my weekend.” Tom, too, discusses a renewed sense of freedom in terms of the joy he can now get from his hobbies: “I play video games...I cooked. I took blacksmithing classes...I also read. I read stuff that I didn’t then have to think critically about...I’ve been so much happier to be able to go back to that...reading only for fun.” Anne discusses her realization that she could do freelance writing from home with her children and still get “the same satisfaction, the same curiosity...and I’m not being underpaid, and I’m not working 80 hours a week.” For many participants, going on their alt-ac journeys has meant the separation of their identities from their jobs in a way that they see as healthy, as fighting against their previous experiences with exploitation (Osorio et al., 2021) and poor mental health (Bekkouche et al., 2022), and promoting freedom and often joy, and as putting them in a position to help other graduate students who will need the same kind of support they’ve needed on their journeys. Many of them have discussed their involvement in this project, as well as the phenomenological process we’ve engaged in together to “reconstruct” (Seidman, 2006, p. 14) participants’ experiences within the broader context of alt-ac struggles, as providing a sort of catharsis. While participants may have all chosen to venture into their alt-ac careers for many different reasons, it’s

clear that doing so was the right choice for many of them, and helping other students through to the other side of their tumultuous transitions into alt-ac careers is something close to each of my participants' hearts.

Theme 4: How and Where to Offer Additional Alt-Ac Support

This is the last section of the chapter and is full of helpful information and practical advice from a group of people who are uniquely qualified to guide UTK English PhD graduates wanting to journey into alt-ac careers. They, my participants, have all made their own alt-ac journeys, and have been generous, open, and honest in providing the insight and experience they've gained on their journeys so far. I have done my best to relay the majority of their advice and have, based upon their advice and insight, organized their suggestions on a scale of easiest to implement (based on cost/time) to more difficult to implement (based on cost/time). These included the following codes: (1) "Task Analysis," or the suggestion that graduate students should track and analyze the different tasks they conduct as part of the different jobs they do as part of their PhD programs, (2) "Job Ad Searches," or the suggestion that students begin researching alt-ac jobs through job ads as soon as they can to understand keywords and required skills, (3) "Translating CVs to Resumes" to demonstrate the different process and mindset needed to craft a resume as opposed to a CV, (4) "Coursework Collaborations" to suggest the English department at UTK collaborate with other departments to offer students alt-ac relevant courses, (5) "Alt-Ac Alumni Network" to recommend students network with those who have ventured into the careers they want to pursue, and (6) "Alt-Ac Internships" to recommend the English department at UTK partner with businesses to

offer graduate students alt-ac related internship opportunities. Each of these suggestions was given with a lot of thought and care as to how our department could work to make them happen, and also how much they would benefit graduate students. Alongside the goal of creating more alt-ac professionalization opportunities for graduate students, my participants also voiced the hope that instituting such forms of support would work to normalize the alt-ac path and avoid the stigma that can so often be attached to alt-ac journeys from within academia.

Task Analysis

Ron, Interview 2: “It comes down to task analysis. We tell people we're teachers. And the problem that comes up with that is, we assume that ‘oh, everyone's been a student at some point in their life. They know what that means.’ But there's so many different ways to go about it [teaching]. And it looks so much different than it did a few decades ago, when the people who might be hiring are thinking of their experiences as a teacher. Being able to break down the complex task of teaching into all its smaller components is incredibly valuable for finding everything you need to make your case that you're a good candidate for a job.

So, if I were giving advice to current PhD students, I would say, ‘keep a dedicated notepad with you. Carry it through your whole semester, and every time you're doing a unique task that you haven't done yet that semester, add it to that list of all the little parts that go into the practice of teaching. Then, when you're done with a whole course and making that list, see how many of those you can break down into smaller tasks too.’ And

suddenly all of those fancy sounding job words that are in employment ads, they're right there in front of you,” (Ron, personal communication, November 21, 2022).

Job Ad Searches

Jerry, Interview 3: “The main piece of advice that I give to PhD students now, and every time I do one of these kinds of talks with them, I tell them you need to start an alt-ac profile/job search profile right now. Even if you don't apply for anything. There might be one thing one day that comes across your plate that you think, ‘Huh! That's interesting. I could see myself doing that.’ Set up some kind of indeed or zip recruiter or glass door, or any of those other things...

Set up those job alerts to come in like once a week. And just set them up for some different things you might be interested in. The worst that happens is you get spam email. But take a look at the emails when you can. There might be a job that interests you. I feel like so much of the academics, and even [in] the PhD program, you just don't know what's out there. You don't know what opportunities are out there” (Jerry, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

Translating CVs to Resumes

Jerry, Interview 1: “That's the main thing about alt-ac jobs. The main problem you have is people. You're going into an entry level position because you don't have any experience in this field, but people see your background, and they see your education level, and they think this person cannot possibly go into an entry level position. But then they want to put you in a higher-up position. But you don't have any experience to make

you qualify for that higher-up position. And so this is catch twenty-two,” (Jerry, personal communication, December 2, 2022).

Jerry, Interview 2: “I’ve done some of those alt-ac talks with grad students before and the thing I always tell them; the number one thing you can do on your CV to improve your [chances for] alt-ac positions is get rid of everything that says ‘teaching,’ and just change it to ‘training.’ You know, instead of saying ‘teaching classes’ to say ‘training students how to write,’ or ‘training students how to present.’

You’re not going to do teaching if you’re not in a teaching position, so your employers are gonna look at that and they’re gonna say ‘teaching? We don’t do any teaching here.’ And so they’re not going to think of that. But if you say ‘training,’ they do training there, you know, that’s going to be something that is relevant more in their language. And just learning that language took me a lot of time. It was very much something I had to do on my own, or with the help of some friends who were in the corporate world already. Who were not in academia at all... The biggest thing that happened to me is I went to a job and--I don’t know if I told you about this last time, I might have told the story--but I went to the interview with this job for a proof reader, or something like that. And yeah, it would have been a terrible job for me. The biggest reason why, it’s because it would have been like a 3 or 4 hour commute every day and so [at] the moment I was, you know, I was desperate, and I also didn’t know it would be quite that long. The woman who was interviewing me, she took a look at that and she said, ‘You’re gonna be miserable here.’ And then she saw my resume. She’s like, ‘And you have a PhD.’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah,

you know. So I just need [a job]' and whatever. And she's like, 'You're not going to get this job. But I'm just going to spend the rest of this talk with you, just going through what's wrong on your resume,' and she just tore it apart.

And it was the best thing that ever happened to me, because she did exactly what I was just talking about. She was like, 'Here, you wrote this long, complex argument and book link, manuscript and everything. You're never going to do anything like that in this job. Some people are going to look at, not only that, [but] your entire resume, and they're just going to think we don't know what to do with you. So you need to make it clear that you do have experiences that they can use, and they can do something with.'

So it all, that kind of, you know--teaching, presenting at conferences--all that kind of stuff, you just need to get rid of. And you just need to focus on what are the skills or the things that are actually going to be used in this job and that you're actually going to do. It takes so long to figure that out. And I see so many students, you know, make that mistake. I did it because I was like, 'I have all this experience, I need to present it...I have all these accomplishments. I need to present them.' But just like none of them really matter outside of academia, and it sucks to hear that. But it is the truth, like these things that seem so important in academia are not [important] outside of academia.

And the sooner you learn that, or as soon as you learn how to [leave that irrelevant experience out] ...You know, even if you try to twist it to present it like, 'oh, no, it is important. This is relevant.' That's a lot of what I was trying to do. 'Oh, no, this is relevant. Somebody gave me this experience, which is relatable, blah, blah, blah.' That's

too many hoops to jump through. You just need to get to the bare bones; these experiences, these skills. You use these at the job. I have these, you know,” (Jerry, personal communication, January 16, 2023).

Tom, Interview 2: “We often don’t talk about our skills as opposed to our accomplishments, because those accomplishments are how we prove our credentials and skills [in academia]. Right? ‘I have been published this many times in this many journals, I presented at this many conferences, and this many countries. I have served on this many committees for this many organizations.’ It’s very weird, you know, when I think about it in those terms, the academics would be thinking about the numbers in that way, especially literary-minded academics, numbers. What do we know about those things? [Laughs].

Whereas in alt-ac jobs, I’ve mentioned numbers, you know. I’ve quantified as much as I could, but they don’t want CVs. They don’t have time to read all [your CV information]. ‘Translate for me. List the ones that are most important, and then tell me why you are able. What skills do you possess that allowed you to get accepted to all those conferences? What skills do you possess that allowed you to get published in those journals, what skills do you possess that allowed you to teach those classes? Because if you tell me about those skills, right, I can better understand why you’re applying to this job. You give me your CV with your academic accomplishments that don’t apply to this project management role for a finance company, you’re making me do the work. By you

explaining your skills, I'm making you do the work.' I think that's part of it from that side of things," (Tom, personal communication, January 6, 2023).

Coursework Collaborations

Donna, Interview 2: "I definitely think it would have been worthwhile to have an elective class offering, or to encourage us students to take a course outside of the department--if it existed--that dealt with writing outside of academia. We have a tech writing branch at UT right? Of study. But you're not really encouraged or required to take any of that [tech writing coursework]. Whereas, like [in] my first semester...you were—sometimes the only option was like a literature class or something like that, and I didn't need literature. But I took one because I needed the [credits].

If you had situations where, rather than that being encouraged, it was encouraged to take a tech writing class, or to take a business writing class in an upper level, or to take a communications class in an upper level-if they have it...If you were taking a science writing class or an engineering writing class, even if it's not offered within the department--if it was outside of the department. But you got departmental credit for it, that would give you a chance to explore.

And I know we have certificates that you can get, but those often are far more labor intensive than what I'm talking about. You may not need 15 hours' worth of classes to really feel like you've got some kind of knowledge about alt-academia. It may just be one or two. You know, I don't need a whole certificate for it. If I want one, that's great, but I think it should be...They've offered certificates, they've offered training in the writing

center or training in the language center. They should offer you the chance to take, or they should encourage you to take, courses outside of the department if they fulfill the need of alt-academic writing,” (Donna, personal communication, February 24, 2023).

Alt-Ac Alumni Network

Tom, Interview 1: “I just encourage anybody who is thinking about any other job outside of what they're doing, just go talk to people. I think that's incredibly important. It gives you a foundation for understanding the other kinds of ways that people do work in the world...

We're taught to focus on certain aspects of what we do when we're graduate students, and then afterwards teaching and researching, and all of those things that we do are important. But they're talked about in very different ways in other lines of work and it takes a lot of practice and study to be able to translate the teaching skills and the research skills, the communication skills, the project management skills, to translate those into business [terms]...for certain industries, or even within higher ED admin speak. I studied so many job postings, I've studied every single sort of cover letter and resume I could get my hands on, and that's what I mean when I say it's important to network with people--not just to form the connection--but to learn the language that they're using to talk about their work, right? That's incredibly important because you can talk about your dissertation till you're blue in the face. Nobody cares and I don't say that to be disheartening...” (Tom, personal communication, December 9, 2022).

Alt-Ac Internships

Donna, Interview 2: “I think, offering internships? And I think that's a lot less work than people make it out to be-to set up. You could, especially the technical writing group already has it right? They have it through Oak Ridge and the different companies that work for there. With, you know, UT medical right there with Oak Ridge, with a lot of places that use technical writing, or alt-academic writing, it would not be very difficult to get a collection of companies that would encourage free work [laughs]. Cause that's what it is, it's free work. And the only issue that you may have is if you're doing something with Oak Ridge that requires secret clearance, a lot of times. So you'd be very limited to what you could work on, but not everybody who works in tech writing in those fields is cleared. So there's options.

But especially like healthcare is right there, and they're constantly needing tech writers and you could easily call up, ‘Do you want to establish an internship program with our PhDs here?’ You know you don't need that many. You could probably just set aside, maybe one or two internships, because there's not that many PhDs and even grad students. There's not that many grad students, so I don't think it would be difficult. And you know, you're just basically logging hours and producing a portfolio at the end. That's it--there's nothing that the instructor has to really do.

Especially if that's what your focus is [alt-ac]; if you know that's probably going to be your focus towards the end, you're probably already doing dissertation work towards that end.

If you're not, but still are interested in learning about it, and in that last year you usually have the funding to not teach, anyway. So if they're worried about losing people for teaching positions, usually in that last year, [with] PhD funding and MA funding, you're not teaching anyway, because they want you to finish your thesis or you're doing very limited amounts of it [teaching], so it wouldn't be difficult, I think, to do an internship instead.

Even to say, I think you'd have a bigger fight because of funding, and because of the fact that grad students are cheap labor-to fill those spots, but if you could somehow be like, okay, you get a year of teaching, but then you have to give at least a semester or a year of internship option. You can't have teaching for both, like not to tell that to the students, but to tell that to the department in the school. It's not right; every other department has that as a requirement--that you fulfill an internship. My daughter is an undergrad in construction science, and they have a requirement to fulfill at least two summer internships to graduate.

I mean, you already require us to teach non-stop. You could probably offer us at least a semester of an internship, especially if you could get paid internships, if that's an option, because most of them are free. There's a lot of free ones, but honestly, most of them pay something and we don't get paid that much as GTAs. I don't know anybody who doesn't live without subsidizing a GTA somehow, like it's just not enough to live on.

So even if it was, you're already not getting funding in the summer...If you're trying to make money because you don't have GTA assignments in the summer, then you can offer to take on classes in the summer. Well, why couldn't you just offer to take on an internship that counts towards your graduate degree?" (Donna, personal communication, February 24, 2023).

Analysis

Theme 4 is perhaps most closely related to theme 2, where participants focused on the process of transferring skills from their PhD program to their alt-ac careers, as well as the challenges they had to overcome during that process. With their knowledge and insight from having to transfer skills from an academic setting to their alt-ac careers, participants have given advice aimed at helping current and future graduate students avoid or lessen the challenges that participants themselves have faced in transitioning into alt-ac careers. For example, in the subsection "Task Analysis," Ron gives advice for recognizing the transferrable skills that PhD students have through conducting an analysis of each task they complete as part of their teaching duties: "every time you're doing a unique task that you haven't done yet that semester, add it to that list...see how many of those [tasks] you can break down into smaller tasks...and suddenly all of those fancy sounding job words that are in employment ads, they're right there in front of you." Jerry gives similar advice in the subsection "Job Ad Searches," where he encourages students to "start an alt-ac profile/job search profile right now, even if you don't apply for anything...Set up those job alerts just to come in like once a week...take a look at them...I feel like so much of the academics and even [those in] the PhD program, you

just don't know what's out there." These acts of both recognizing your skills as the same skills that are required in alt-ac jobs, and familiarizing yourself with the kind of alt-ac opportunities that are out there beyond academia, are two solutions to some of participants' most discussed challenges when transferring to alt-ac careers. These involve struggling to contextualize academic skills in an alt-ac setting and understanding what kinds of occupation are available to you, now that you're no longer staying in the academic job market you've been prepared for.

In addition to these challenges is the oft-cited challenge of how to present your academic accomplishments as alt-ac skills in your resume and in alt-ac job interviews, an issue Jerry and Tom discuss in "Translating CVs to Resumes." Jerry discusses the "catch twenty-two" mismatch of education and experience/skill level that graduates have to be aware of when applying for alt-ac jobs. Upon seeing PhD graduates' "background" and "education level," "they think this person cannot possibly go into an entry level position," and instead want PhD graduates to be in "higher-up" positions that they "don't have any experience to make [them] qualify for that higher-up position." Jerry also discusses the importance of removing everything that isn't directly relevant to an alt-ac job from your resume and instead put "the bare bones, like these experiences, these skills." Otherwise, your somewhat, could-be-relevant experience will seem like "too many hoops to jump through" for prospective employers. Tom also advises on the importance of putting your "skills" rather than "accomplishments" and clearly "translate[ing]" your academic skills into an alt-ac context for future employers. For all of this advice, participants are

encouraging students to really take some time to acquaint themselves with what alt-ac employers are looking for, and which skills are usually coveted in alt-ac positions.

In the vein of encouraging prospective alt-ac grad students to gain more direct experience and understanding of alt-ac jobs, Donna suggests in “Coursework Collaborations” the role the English department at UTK (or at any university or within any humanities department really) could play in providing graduate students with alt-ac professionalization opportunities and experience. Donna discusses the usefulness of having “an elective class offering” or a “course outside of the department...that dealt with writing outside of academia” “that would give you a chance to explore.” Another way to gain such experience, according to Tom in “Alt-Ac Alumni Network,” is to “just go talk to people” working in the alt-ac jobs you’re interested in so that you can “learn the language they’re using to talk about their work.” This kind of hands-on experience talking with, and learning from, those in alt-ac careers would prove invaluable in understanding the layout of specific alt-ac jobs. Donna provides another suggestion for gaining hands-on experience in alt-ac skills and careers in the subsection “Alt-Ac Internships,” where she argues that the department “offering internships” would be helpful for graduate students, especially with a setup where they could “take on an internship that counts toward [their] graduate degree.” This would not only help promote good relationships between the English department and local businesses but would also increase alt-ac opportunities for graduate students both during and after their PhD programs. Throughout this theme, participants have really thought about their own challenges and difficulties when transitioning into alt-ac careers after graduating, and

have used those experiences to offer helpful, insightful advice to any other graduate students also considering an alt-ac pathway. In following their advice, we will have more resources and experience in preparing for future alt-ac careers, and the support they have given us in this thematic section is both generous and invaluable in supporting us through our alt-ac journeys.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to provide a space for my participants to tell their stories, advice, insights, and experiences in their own words. They can tell their stories far better than I ever could. They can provide the kind of insight and guidance that those of us going from academia into alt-ac dream of finding, and I feel so fortunate and grateful to have had their guidance and support on a personal level, but also to have been able to collaborate with them to use this dissertation as a space where their stories can have a home and can be shared with anyone who wants to hear them. And in our collaboration, we have answered the research questions I set out to answer from the Spring of 2022:

1. What have the experiences of recent UTK English PhD students been post-graduation, who've chosen to pursue alt-ac careers?
2. How have these students transferred the skills they've learned in the English PhD program to their alt-ac careers?
3. What do their alt-ac professionalization experiences tell us about UTK's resources, both past and present, for preparing PhD students for alt-ac career opportunities?

Through sharing participants' various short stories about many different aspects of their alt-ac journeys, we have had an answer to the first question. "Theme 1: Why Leave Academia?" and "Theme 3: What These Alt-Ac Journeys Mean" specifically go into depth about participants' experiences, but we can see insights about their experiences all throughout the research findings as they've shared their experiences directly through stories about what their alt-ac journeys have been like. From listening/reading their stories, it's clear that graduates' alt-ac experiences have been multi-faceted, unique, full of twists and turns, and also full of invaluable insight and wisdom for those of us pursuing alt-ac after them, or hoping to support others pursuing alt-ac careers. Question 2 has almost exclusively been answered in "Theme 2: Skills Transfer from UTK's English PhD to Various Alt-Ac Careers," where participants have discussed a plethora of skills they've identified as transferring from their academic work to their alt-ac careers. Question 3 has been answered most deeply in "Theme 4: How and Where to Offer Additional Alt-Ac Support," where participants have provided a range of ideas and suggestions for building upon the current resources for alt-ac professionalization at UTK. Participants have also peppered their discussions of UTK's past forms of alt-ac professionalization support/resources throughout other themes, such as Theme 1 and Theme 2, where they discuss in some capacity the alt-ac resources they did or didn't have access to during their time at UTK, with the hopes that their involvement in this project could eventually generate additional alt-ac resources for students.

Indeed, all of my participants discussed their hopefulness to continue helping future students going alt-ac through this work, and in our next and final chapter (Chapter

5), my participants' advice will be translated onto short, multi-audience friendly documents so that their ideas and suggestions can be shared on a (hopefully) wider scale than simply the audience of this dissertation. Their suggestions deserve to be heard, and I hope that supplying them in both the storied form of this chapter, and in short, usable documents, will allow that to happen.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

So here we are, at the (almost) end. We've seen the results of two years' worth of interviews, transcripts, coding, storytelling. But what does it all mean? What should we do with all this information? This final chapter is all about how we can hopefully put these dissertation findings to good use. Faculty, administrators, student organization leaders, mentors, and advisors: I'm speaking to you. I've thought about you all a lot as I've worked on this dissertation, about how to support you in supporting students.

What you'll find in the following chapter are all the alt-ac resources I could think of, recommended to me by my amazing participants, in a condensed and easily accessible format, in addition to some suggestions for a location to compile the resources I'm about to share. Although these resources are all working toward the same goals, they manifested themselves into three different formats. Firstly, I'll share an infographic with statistics demonstrating the urgency of developing further alt-ac support, specific suggestions for providing that support from my research and collaboration with my participants, and additional alt-ac resources that UTK already has. Secondly, I'll share a specific resource to help graduate students considering alt-ac do several things: (a) understand what kinds of alt-ac jobs exist, (b) understand which skills are needed in such alt-ac jobs, (c) take stock of the skills they have, and (d) start to make connections between their skills and the skills needed in alt-ac careers. These skills are often transferable but need to be translated in order for alt-ac employers to read them as the

necessary skills for the job. This resource, a worksheet titled “Alt-Ac Skills Analysis” is aimed at helping students start to understand how to do this translation work. Thirdly, I’ll discuss a rhetorical analysis of the current UTK English Graduate website with suggestions for compiling the existing alt-ac resources I’ve found into one central, easily accessible place.

In sharing these resources, I want to thank the people who have worked hard to develop them; people such as Dr. Nancy Henry in helping to create the *Graduate Student Job Placement Handbook* and additional career resources for graduate students and Dr. Erin Elizabeth Smith in helping to create English-specific career resources. And, of course, my participants, without whom none of this would have even been possible. In making my suggestions, I am hoping to give their hard work, ideas, and support the spotlight it deserves, and build upon the good, heartfelt work that has been done here. I’m also hoping to support faculty and administration by compiling readily accessible resources so that they don’t have to research, compile, or dig for them themselves. I hope you find them helpful; I hope you feel the support and care with which they were made. I hope they make you feel just a little more supported in the amazing work you’re doing to support your students. And lastly, I hope these resources make that graduate student contemplating alt-ac feel just a little bit better about the confusion, panic, loss of identity, and frustration they may be feeling. It is for them that my participants and I have thought so deeply, shared, and pushed. We offer them, and you, this support, and thank you for your willingness to listen, and learn, and share it with others.

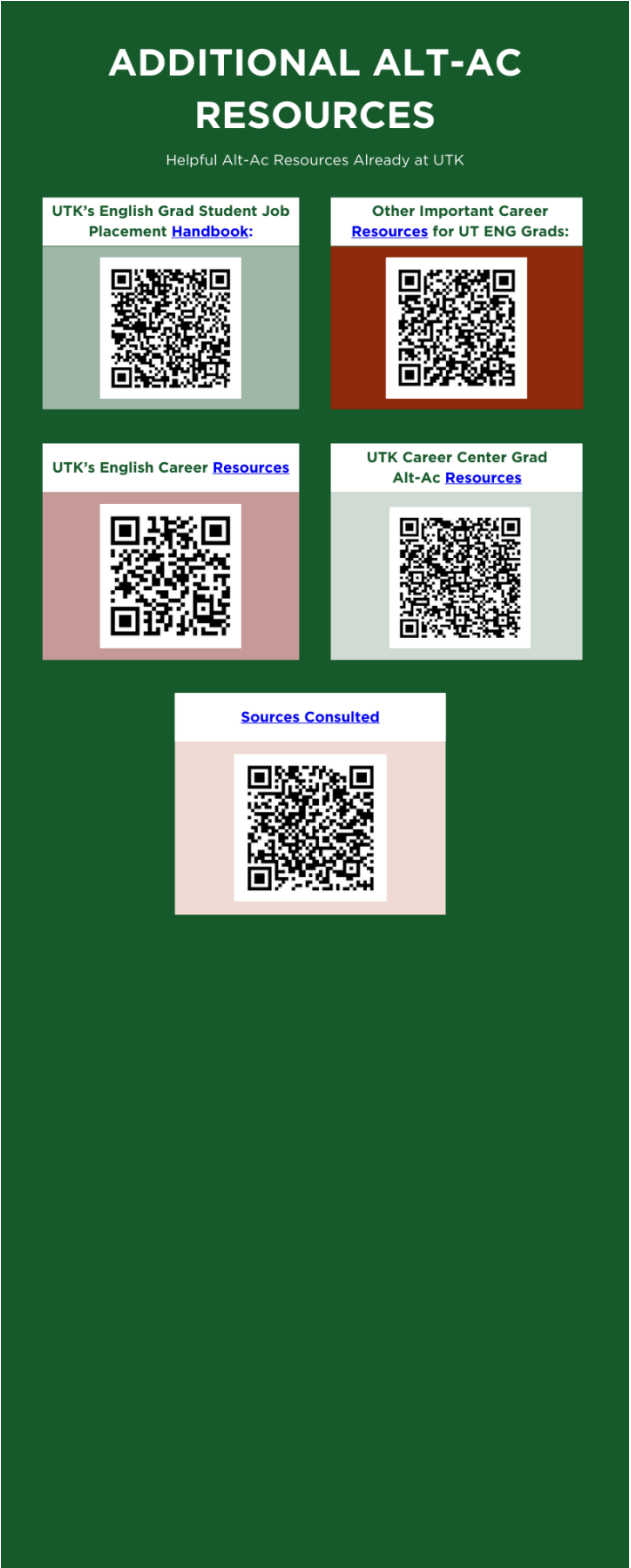
Making Space for Alt-Ac Support: An Infographic

The below infographic (Figures A.1 and A.2) has three different components: (1) some facts and statistics demonstrating the true need for alt-ac professionalization resources in our English PhD program (and other Humanities programs like ours), (2) potential alt-ac resources we can offer based upon my discussions with participants, and (3) additional alt-ac resources UTK already has. It is worth noting that, at the suggestion of my participants, I've included a range of suggestions for providing additional alt-ac support. These options range in both the cost and amount of effort and time it would take to implement them, so that faculty and administrators, and departments at large, can find options for alt-ac support that feel doable for them, both in the short and long-term.

In terms of the infographic's usability, there are several features worth mentioning. This infographic was designed to be as widely accessible and shareable as possible. Therefore, it has been designed to be shareable in both printed and digital formats. There are QR codes that one can scan to access a digital version of the document (in the top left corner), and also digital versions of every resource included in the infographic. There are also hyperlinks to every resource included in the infographic, for those accessing it on a digital platform. The color contrast, font, and design have been created according to visual accessibility guidelines (Institute for Disability Research, Policy, and Practice. (n.d.); Office of Communications and Marketing. (n.d.)). The color branding was selected to be the same for both this infographic and the Skills Analysis Worksheet (Figures B.1, B.2, and B.3) so as to be easily identifiable when someone is searching for them, and to be immediately associable with each other.



(Figure A.1: Making Space for Alt-Ac Support Infographic, page 1 of 2)



(Figure A.2: Making Space for Alt-Ac Support Infographic, page 2 of 2)



ALT-AC SKILLS ANALYSIS

1. Please list all the jobs you are doing/have done in the program (i.e. teaching, tutoring, dissertation, committee member, mentor):

2. List all the tasks you do for your various job(s) (i.e. research, writing, managing students' projects, instructional design):

(Figure B.1: *Alt-Ac Skills Analysis* Worksheet, page 1 of 3)



3. Use Google, LinkedIn, Indeed, or even non-teaching jobs on your university's job site, etc. to look for alt-ac job ads to see which required skills match up with the tasks/skills from section 2.

Examples of jobs to search for are: instructional design, copywriting, student success coaching, technical writing, freelance writing, administrative university work, grant-writing, legal writing (such as immigration law), editing, high school education, etc.)

Write down some skills from your job ads that could relate to the ones you wrote down from section 2 of this worksheet. Note that alt-ac jobs may use different terms to discuss the same skills you've been using in an academic setting. This is a way to match them up and help you realize that you DO have these skills! Here's an [example](#) of how to match academic skills to job skills.

4. Take screenshots of those job ads/record the job title, keywords, description, and requirements somewhere you can look back on, like a Google Drive folder.

Keep adding to the folder, keep looking reflectively at your skills, and you'll start to see some patterns!

(Figure B.2: Alt-Ac Skills Analysis Worksheet, page 2 of 3)

Further Useful Tips and Resources:

Tip: Reach out to others working in a job you're interested in. Ask them if you can meet/zoom and discuss how they did it. You might even find someone who went from academia into that job.
Networking and asking Q's will help!

Alt-Ac Support Infographic

A [summary](#) of findings and suggestions from a qualitative study done here at UTK. Includes additional alt-ac resources.



UTK's English Grad Student Job Placement [Handbook](#):



Other Important Career [Resources](#) for UT ENG Grads:



UTK's English Career [Resources](#)



UTK Career Center Grad Alt- Ac [Resources](#)



(Figure B.3: Alt-Ac Skills Analysis Worksheet, page 3 of 3)

Alt-Ac Skills Analysis: A Worksheet

The following worksheet was developed based on the advice of several of my participants, and in preparation for a workshop for a biyearly interdisciplinary conference held here at UTK, called Nexus. My friend and colleague, Kelly Sauskojus, and I have been accepted into the conference and will be using this worksheet as part of our workshop. I also hope the worksheet can be used as a resource for graduate students to use of their own accord, for faculty to give to students, and as a resource that can be compiled with other alt-ac resources in one centralized location.

The main aim of the worksheet is to help graduate students start to engage in a task analysis of their skills, and then begin to line those skills up with potential alt-ac jobs/careers. Often as graduate students, we do several different jobs simultaneously, and we've been taught to view the success of those jobs in accomplishments; awards, publications, grants obtained, funding received, etc. However, in the world of alt-ac, we can't simply list off our academically defined accomplishments and expect prospective employers to understand how they translate into the specific job we're applying for. We must learn to do that translation work ourselves, and many of my participants listed this as one of the most challenging barriers they had to overcome in successfully applying to alt-ac jobs (Jerry, personal communication, December 2, 2022; Jerry, personal communication, January 16, 2023; Tom, personal communication, December 9, 2022; Tom, personal communication, January 6, 2023). But it's a challenge that they all did overcome, and this worksheet represents a condensed method for how they did that. First, as we can see in question 1 (Figure B.1), we have to break down and name which jobs

we've been doing. As a graduate student, it's usually quite a few at once. For me, in this present moment, my jobs include instructor, tutor, writing center researcher/materials and web designer, writer, and researcher. Question 2 (Figure B.1) pushes us to break our jobs down into tasks. What are all the tasks we have to do in order to make our various jobs happen? For instance, with teaching, we could list several, such as: public speaking, instructional design, student task and project management, and providing feedback, among other tasks.

Question 3 (Figure B.2) provides students with some suggested alt-ac careers to begin searching for. My discussions with participants and also current graduate students wanting to go alt-ac showed that most graduate students making the change to alt-ac don't often know where to begin, or what jobs could even be possible for them (Leslie, personal communication, November 11, 2022; April, personal communication, November 12, 2022; Jerry, personal communication, December 2, 2022; Jerry, personal communication, January 16, 2023; Tom, personal communication, December 9, 2022; Tom, personal communication, January 6, 2023; Anne, personal communication, January 27, 2023). Students are then encouraged to begin matching up skills they've picked out from their various jobs from Question 2 to the required skills they're finding in alt-ac job ads for Question 3. Question 4 (Figure B.2) of the worksheet then encourages students to record their findings somewhere centralized and repeat the overall process, looking for patterns. The worksheet finishes with "Further Useful Tips and Resources" (Figure B.3) where students are encouraged to reach out to any alumni or possible connections who have gone into careers that they've found interesting and ask those connections how

they've successfully made their way into such careers. This section (Figure B.3) also includes a compilation of already-existing resources that students will hopefully find helpful in their alt-ac journeys. The overall method described in this worksheet is, of course, a condensed version of what students will need to do on their own alt-ac journeys, but is hopefully instructional and helpful for developing a method of translating job skills from academia into alt-ac.

It's worth pointing out that this worksheet also includes both hyperlinks and QR codes, with a QR code at the top left corner that gives scanners direct access to a digital version of the worksheet itself, and QR codes and hyperlinks for any of the resources included within the worksheet. This was to maximize the ease of use and shareability of any of the resources included, and I hope the worksheet and included resources may be shared as many times, and with as many students, faculty, and administrators as possible. However, QR codes and hyperlinks, while much more accessible than a distant folder in someone's google drive, are not by themselves long-term answers to the question of where UTK's English Alt-Ac Resources should be housed, as I will suggest in the next section.

The UTK English Graduate Website: A Rhetorical Analysis

Throughout the below rhetorical analysis, I will take a close look at UTK's English graduate website and will both provide a breakdown of the website, and my suggestions for its further potential to provide a space for alt-ac resources. I will make any suggestions in the spirit of potential and in recognition of the great work others at the university are already doing to support graduate students looking to make their alt-ac

journeys. My truest wish is to provide the alt-ac work already being done with the recognition it deserves, and to make sure it's given the support it needs to function as its authors and creators have intended: to best serve the students it was created for. I will start my analysis by breaking down the site's main pages and then will provide my suggestions for further potential.

Analysis

I'm going to start out by looking at the "Graduate Studies Welcome" page that acts as the website's home page (Figure C.1). This page appears to be prioritizing recruitment, with a description of the program (and a "Jump to Application" button towards the very top of the page), followed by a description of financial support opportunities, the types of programs offered in each of the graduate degrees, followed by admissions information, ending with required applications materials, frequently asked questions, and specific contact information for applying to UTK's English graduate program (*Graduate Studies*, n.d.). To the right of the screen, starting at the top of the page, there's a list of deadlines for applying to the program, followed by the pictures and contact information of the Director of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Administrative Assistant.

From a scroll menu to the left, you can click on the following additional pages: (1) "How to Apply," then the program's three different concentrations: (2) "Creative Writing," (3) "Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics," (4) "Literature, Criticism & Textual Studies," followed by (5) "Funding Opportunities," (6) "Graduate Student Handbook," and (7) "Graduate Students of English Organization (GSE)" (*Graduate Studies*, n.d.).



Each of the PhD-specific pages under a further scroll menu for each of the three concentrations (Creative Writing, Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics, and Literature, Criticism & Textual Studies) have the same setup with the deadline for applying to the PhD program at the top of the page, followed by a brief description of the program itself, with a slightly more detailed look at deadlines on the top right, followed by links to concentration-specific resources and then by contact information for program and concentration-specific faculty.

The “Funding Opportunities” page (Figure C.2) begins with a brief overview of “Departmental Financial Support” at the top, followed by several categories of financial support available to graduate students (both MA and PhD): (1) “Teaching Assistantships and Associateships,” (2) “Research and Editorial Assistantships,” (3) “Fellowships and Awards for Scholarship and Teaching,” (4) “Dissertation Fellowships,” and (5) “Post-Doctoral Instructorships,” (*Funding Opportunities*, n.d.). Most of these categories involve support for strictly academic-related professionalization, such as “Teaching Assistantships and Associateships,” “Fellowships and Awards for Scholarship and Teaching,” “Dissertation Fellowships,” and “Post-Doctoral Instructorships.” A glimmer of potential for alt-ac professionalization could be found under the “Research and Editorial Assistantships” category, particularly the first option listed, for an editorial assistantship, where a student could have their teaching load reduced to work on a departmental publication, such as *A.S.A.P.*, *Grist: A Journal of the Literary Arts*, *International Journal of Nuclear Security*, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, and *Victorian Institute Journal*. Indeed, one of my participants, Anne, was able to gain what she felt



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Department of English

College of Arts and Sciences

Funding Opportunities

Departmental Financial Support

Graduate students in the department have access to several kinds of financial aid, some from sources at the university level, other from within the department.

The Department has a number of ways of supporting graduate students while also contributing to their professional development. Our teaching, research, and editorial assistantships and associateships are all designed to provide financial assistance and valuable professional experience. The University and College of Arts and Sciences also provide a limited number of fellowships to outstanding students.

Teaching Assistantships and Associateships

Research and Editorial Assistantships

The department has instituted a number of awards for graduate students that draw on special departmental endowments, especially the Better English Fund, established by John C. Hodges, and the John B. Emperer Fund. The following awards are currently available to our graduate students:

- Richard Beale Davis Editorial Assistantship** — Founded in honor of a former member of the department and distinguished scholar in American literature who was one of the original editors of *Tennessee Studies in Literature*. Each assistantship reduces the teaching load of the student selected and obligates the recipient to assist in editing the department's publications: *A.S.A.P.*, *Crit: A Journal of the Literary Arts*, *International Journal of Nuclear Security*, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, and *Victorian Institute Journal*. The assistantships are awarded competitively. Ordinarily, Davis Fellowships are not awarded to first- or second-year students.
- Percy Adams, John Hurt Fisher, Alwin Thaler, and Nathalia Wright Research Assistantships** — Founded in honor of distinguished scholars and former department members. These assistantships are awarded competitively and reduce a student's teaching load to either a 1:1 or 2:1 and assign him or her to a professor for a research experience commensurate to the released time. Students typically assist the professor in his or her research for ten hours per week during one or two academic semesters, depending on the award. The professor and graduate student should be clear from the outset about mutual responsibilities.
- Research Assistant for John C. Hodges Chair of Excellence** — Normally, for this three year research position, the recipient will receive one class release time each term of the first and third year and two classes release time during the second year. Chosen from among applications by the hold of the Chair of Excellence in consultation with the Director of Graduate Studies.

Fellowships and Awards for Scholarship and Teaching

Dissertation Fellowships

Post-Doctoral Instructorships





EVENT CALENDAR

12 12/05 THE ETHOS OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN AMERICA: ONLY WHITE WOMEN GET PREGNANT RWL Speaker Series: Dr. Kim... Join the University of Tennessee's Rhetoric Writing and Linguistics Division (R...	12 12/05 THE ETHOS OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN AMERICA: ONLY WHITE WOMEN GET PREGNANT RWL Speaker Series: Dr. Kim... The Ethos of Black Motherhood in America: Only White Women Get Pregnant: Harper's book...	14 12/05 ABOUT DOUGLASS DAY 2024: THIS VALENTINE'S DAY, WE INVITE YOU TO JOIN US TO HONOR THE TITLE... UTK's Blackboard Lecture S... About the Talk: Fulbright Scholar in Residence Mari Hildebrand (Emory University)...	19 12/05 UTK's Blackboard Lecture S... About the Talk: Fulbright Scholar in Residence Mari Hildebrand (Emory University)...	19 12/05 CREATIVE WRITING SERIES: FICTIO... Works by Verita Blackburn have appeared in the New Yorker, Harper's, McSweeney's...
01 01/06 SELECT WRITERS FROM THE PHOENIX... The Phoenix is UTK's arts and literary magazine. We received so many lovely submissions...	16 01/06 UTK's Blackboard Lecture S... About the Talk: Visiting scholar Erin McGlothlin (Washington University in St. Louis) will give...	06 01/06 UTK's Blackboard Lecture S... About the Talk: Visiting scholar Lauren Klein (Emory University) will give a public lecture "A...	08 01/06 CREATIVE WRITING SERIES: FICTIO... Kevin Wilson is the author of two collections, <i>Tumbling to the Center of the Earth</i>...	18 01/06 ENGLISH LITERATURE SPEAKER SER... A Blueprint for Colonialism: Richard Hooker and the Liberte of English Polity...

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(Figure C.2: UTK's English graduate web page titled, *Funding Opportunities*)

was very helpful alt-ac experience working with *Grist* (Anne, personal communication, February 6, 2023). Beyond this editorial assistantship opportunity, everything else mentioned is strictly academic-facing with no direct mention of any alt-ac professionalization opportunities.

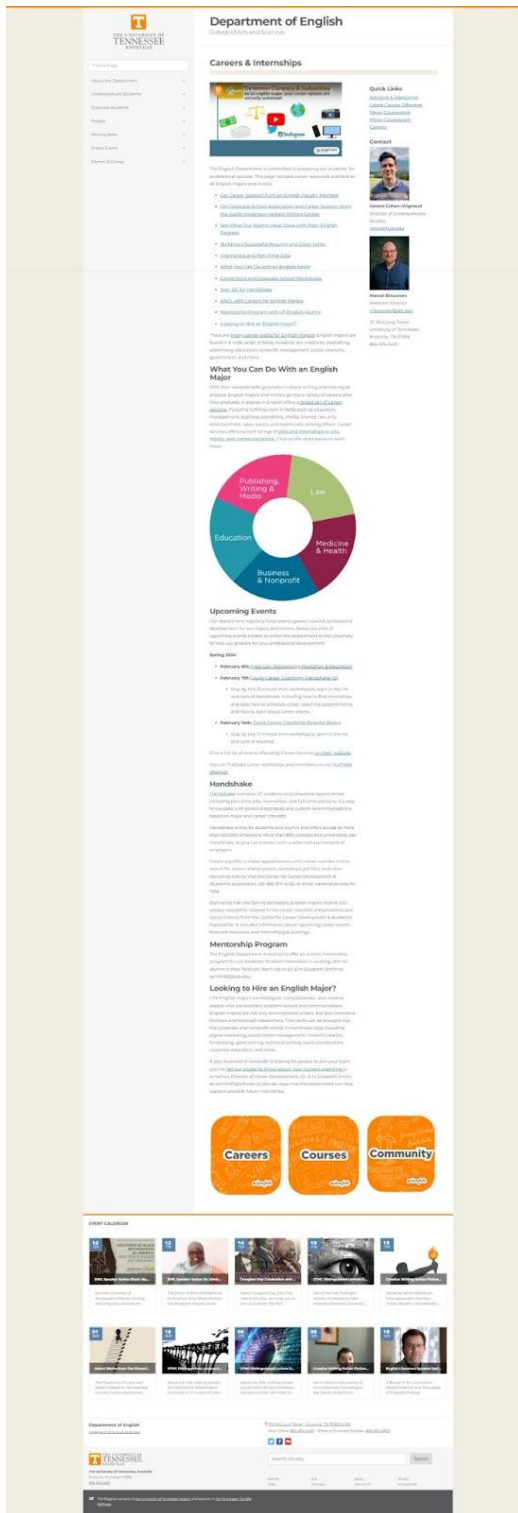
This academic-facing orientation also carries into the next tab under the initial scroll menu for *The Graduate Student Handbook* (*Graduate Student Handbook*, 2023). The handbook begins with an introduction to the program, followed by the “Duties and Responsibility of Faculty and Graduate Students,” information about the various programs, particularly with regards to requirements, such as “The PhD Program Written Exam,” and “Publishable Article Writing & Revision Process,” specific for the Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics comprehensive examination process, and a description of benchmarks that need to be met each semester and year of the five year program, set up in tabled schedule format. Interestingly, the very last entry under the “Year Five” schedule for the PhD program lists “Optional: Apply for academic positions for the following Fall” under the “Fall Semester” portion of the schedule. No specific alternatives are presented, but it is clear that alternatives to applying for academic positions are considered viable options given that the academic application process is listed as optional.

One additional feature of note is that at the bottom of every page of the graduate student website are three buttons, titled: (1) “Careers,” (2) “Courses,” and (3) “Community.” The “Courses” button takes you directly to the course directory for the current semester (*Course Descriptions: Spring 2024*, n.d.), the “Community” tab takes

you to a page titled “Community Engagement” that lists the different ways those within UTK’s English department are and can engage with the community in Knoxville (*Community Engagement*, n.d.), and the “Careers” button takes you to an in-depth page with a plethora of resources geared towards undergraduates in the English program (*Careers & Internships*, n.d.). It is the “Careers” button I’d like to analyze in more depth, as a space with a lot of potential resources that could be re-geared towards Graduate students looking to go alt-ac.

At the very top of the “Careers & Internships” page (Figure C.3) the “Careers” button takes you to, there’s a 4-minute instructional video discussing the skills and careers you can get with an English major, as well as some general tips for advancing toward those careers. This is followed by a small blurb about the function of this page and a list of hyperlinks to different forms of career and professionalization support. These include:

- Get Career Support from an English Faculty Member
- Get Graduate School Application and Career Support from the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center
- See What Our Alumni Have Done with Their English Degrees
- Building a Successful Resume and Cover Letter
- Internships and Part-Time Jobs
- What You Can Do with an English Major
- Career Fairs and Graduate School Workshops
- Sign Up for Handshake



(Figure C.3: UTK’s English undergraduate web page titled, *Careers & Internships*)

- ENGL 499: Careers for English Majors
- Mentorship Program with UT English Alumni
- Looking to Hire an English major?

This is followed by another short blurb discussing the widespread utility of an English major, and another link leading to a specific page created by the University of Tennessee (Figure C.4), detailing the many different career options for English majors (*What Can I Do with This Major*, 2023). These include nine different careers: (1) “Writing/Editing,” (2) “Business/Industry,” (3) “Public Relations/Advertising,” (4) “Technical Communication,” (5) “Government,” (6) “Education,” (7) “Publishing,” (8) “Law,” and (9) “Nonprofit.” Each potential career path has a dropdown section with three categories, (1) “Common Career Paths,” (2) “Employers,” and (3) “Strategies.” At the very bottom of the page, there is a final blurb with bullet points titled, “Getting Started and Advancing in Major.” Then the page transitions into a separate section with four different categories, all containing lists of helpful links: “Professional Associates,” “Related Resources,” “Occupational Outlook,” and “Employment Opportunities.” Back on the main “Careers” page, there’s another section titled, “What You Can Do with an English Major,” which provides two more helpful resource links and a colorful wheel of different English career options with links to UTK webpages for each of them. These career options include “Publishing, Writing, & Media,” “Law,” “Medicine & Health,” “Business & Nonprofit,” and “Education.” The webpages each of the careers on the wheel lead to include a short blurb about how the English major can be useful in the selected career, followed by interviews with alumni who went into the selected career (*Writing, Publishing, and*

[Back](#)

What Can I Do With This Major?

English

English is the study of composition, literature, written communication, and grammar. Coursework includes writing courses, reading various authors and writings, and analyzing works of fiction and nonfiction.



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Writing/Editing

Business/Industry

Public Relations/Advertising

Technical Communication

Government

Education

Publishing

Law

Nonprofit

Common Career Paths

- Administration
- Research
- Grant writing
- Development/Fundraising
- Engineering
- Volunteer (coordination)

Employers

- Nonprofit organizations
- Local service organizations
- Churches and religiously affiliated groups

Strategies

- Volunteer or intern with local service organizations.
- Learn to work well with people of diverse backgrounds.
- Develop excellent communication skills.
- Take a course in grant writing.
- Join a service organization or get involved in community service projects.

Getting Started and Advancing in Major

- English majors develop skills—in written communication, editing, problem-solving, and working independently and in a team—that are valued by employers in nearly every profession. A bachelor's degree in English is very broad and is sufficient for entry-level positions in business, industry, and nonprofits, as well as in areas such as entertainment, sales, television, and museum work. Because English can lead to many different career paths, it is important to identify an area of interest and plan to gain the right skills, experiences, and credentials to enter that field.
- A major in English is also good preparation for continued graduate or professional training in areas such as English, law, political science/government, public administration, communications, medical/medical humanities, and health-based professions.
- Be proactive, determined, assertive, and confident in order to secure freelance writing opportunities. Save samples of written work to be used for a portfolio. Cultivate other career opportunities in order to supplement a freelance writing income.
- Seek out and engage in internships in business or government to demonstrate skills and interest in working in desired fields following graduation.
- Get involved in organizations and gain experience in leadership roles that reflect interests in business or government roles.
- Obtain additional areas of expertise such as journalism, broadcasting, technical writing, or position the specialized positions.
- Conduct informational interviews or shadow professionals in careers of interest to learn more about their jobs.
- Join relevant professional associations. Attend their conferences and read journals.

Professional Associations

- American Association for Advertising Agencies
- American Copy Editors Society
- Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management
- American Management Association
- American Marketing Association
- American Medical Writers Association
- Association of American Publishers
- Business Marketing Association
- Freelance Publishers of America
- National Council of Teachers of English
- National Newspaper Publishers Association
- Society of Christian Book Writers and Publishers
- Society for Technical Communication
- Editors Guild of America

Related Resources

- Publishing Central
- Teachers English Abroad
- The Editor
- Writer's Digest

Occupational Outlook

- Editors
- High School Teachers
- Kindergarten and Elementary School Teachers
- Librarians
- Middle School Teachers
- Postsecondary Teachers
- Teachers, Career/Technical and Broadcast News Analysts
- Technical Writers
- Writers and Authors

Employment Opportunities

- Book Jobs
- CreativeWired
- Freelance 401(k) Jobs
- Journalism Jobs
- Journalism Intern
- Media Release with Photos
- Public Media Jobs

Accessibility

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(Figure C.4: A web page from UTK’s English undergraduate site titled, *What Can I Do with This Career?*)

Media Careers, n.d.; *Legal Careers*, n.d.; *Careers in Medicine and Healthcare*, n.d.; *Business and Nonprofit Careers*, n.d.; *Education Careers*, n.d.). This then leads into the section titled “Upcoming Events” on the main webpage (*Careers & Internships*, n.d.), which gives a detailed overview of upcoming professionalization events hosted by “either the department or university.” These include links to the events and their registration pages.

Then there’s a section all about Handshake, the third-party site UTK uses to provide students and alumni with professionalization and career opportunities, along with a link. This is followed by a description of the English department’s mentorship program (which doesn’t specify whether it’s exclusively for undergraduates or not), and the page ends with a final section titled “Looking to Hire an English Major?” with a link and contact information for the Director of Career Development. This concludes the full extent of the current graduate English website and included sources, and this overview provides us with insight into several places of opportunity for adding to the alt-ac resources already available to students.

Suggestions

One thing that has stuck out to me as I’ve embarked on this rhetorical analysis of UTK’s English graduate website is the immense potential of the website for providing a centralized, easily accessible space for housing alt-ac resources for graduate students. These qualifications (central and easily accessible) are very important because, well, after a lot of researching, and asking graduate students both from the last 10 years, and who are currently in the program, and consulting with some faculty, it has become abundantly

clear that, while there has been some considerable effort to produce various alt-ac resources for graduate students, no one really knows where any of them are. This is likely because they are either scattered, or labeled as undergraduate resources, or hidden away in the wilderness of various google drive folders. This necessarily leads, therefore, to what will be my most significant suggestion from this rhetorical analysis; that we must have a central, easily accessible location for alt-ac resources for graduate students so that they, and any faculty hoping to provide students with such resources, can easily *find* and *access* them. It is also incredibly important to have a visible space for alt-ac support and resources to send the message that it is not only an acceptable path for graduate students, but quite a normal path as well.

Now there are, of course, endless recommendations I could make as to all the ways alt-ac careers could be represented, alt-ac resources could be shown or displayed, and alt-ac opportunities could be created. However, for the purpose of my suggestions regarding this analysis, I'm going to discuss the changes that might be made with already existing resources, hoping to make the case for creating an additional webpage on the graduate English website devoted solely to alt-ac career resources where all of these resources can be compiled and presented for easy access. So here are my suggestions for the resources that should be included on such a webpage:

- A description or link to the Editorial Assistantship(s) (*Funding Opportunities*, n.d.) offered as part of the funding opportunities for the graduate program would be a useful opportunity to further develop alt-ac skills and could be presented as such.

- A direct section/links to the “What You Can Do with an English Major” section (*Careers & Internships*, n.d.) from the undergraduate career page that’s geared specifically toward graduate students.
- A direct link to the superbly helpful separate page created by UTK (*What Can I Do With This Major*, n.d.), detailing the many different career options for English majors, including: (1) “Writing/Editing,” (2) “Business/Industry,” (3) “Public Relations/Advertising,” (4) “Technical Communication,” (5) “Government,” (6) “Education,” (7) “Publishing,” (8) “Law,” and (9) “Nonprofit.”
 - This would be incredibly helpful to graduate students who often face a crisis of identity when they’re faced with leaving academia, and often don’t even know where to begin when thinking about non-teaching, or non-tenure track careers. But it should be placed directly on a page of graduate student resources, so they don’t discount it as only for undergraduates.
- A direct link to the *Graduate Student Placement Handbook* and links to the alt-ac resources contained within directly posted on the website (Henry, 2022).
- A direct link to the document titled “Other Important Career Resources,” which was developed for graduate students, and links to the alt-ac resources contained within directly posted on the website (*Important Resources and Recommended Websites*, n.d.).

- A direct link to the UTK Career Center’s web page titled, “Non-Academic Job Search,” which includes incredibly helpful resources to guide students through alt-ac professionalization (*Non-Academic Job Search*, n.d.).
- A direct link to a specific resource on the “Non-Academic Job Search” page, a sample resume with annotations titled “Resume Writing for Humanities PhDs: Tips and Tricks.”
- A direct download link to the worksheet I’ve developed titled “Alt-Ac Skills Analysis” (Figures B.1, B.2, and B.3).

Once these resources are added in the form of a webpage, they should be regularly checked and updated, both to ensure that the links stay working/current, and to make sure that any additional alt-ac materials that come up/are developed can be added to the site. This will be a far easier process with a foundational webpage already in existence.

Conclusion

If all of these resources were available in one easy to find, accessible place for graduate students, it would make their transitions into alt-ac careers that much easier. They would feel seen and cared for; it would make what is often an acutely painful, confusing time that much less painful and confusing, and it would give them the professionalization opportunities they deserve after five years of hard work at their program. It will also make it so much easier for faculty to have a space of compiled resources to direct their students to. And yes, this issue of accessibility and ease that I keep returning to is absolutely paramount in considering how best to immediately support

graduate students looking to go alt-ac. You may perhaps be thinking (and justifiably so)-
well, you found all these resources. You compiled them. They can't be that hard to find.

And that is a valid point to bring up. However, I'll respond by pointing out that I was able to find these resources because I made it my job to find them. I've spent two years talking to people who went through this journey about the resources they used, spent hours upon hours scouring the labyrinth of UTK's online resources, asked folks in all different places about alt-ac resources, and therefore got access to resources that not many other people currently have. I've made myself a specialist, of sorts, in alt-ac resources. So, yes, I suppose the short answer is that it is humanly possible for other graduate students to put in these hours of work to find these resources for themselves. But the real question is why should they have to? And why should faculty, who are often so busy with numerous other duties, have to either? The truth is our graduate English website here at UTK is already beautifully set up to include this page with these resources. Much work has been done by so many people, and that work deserves to have a proper home where those resources can get the recognition they deserve. And also, our graduate students deserve to feel seen in this major life change that can often feel incredibly daunting. So let's do this for them. Let's do this for all of us, because chances are, each of us knows, or will know someone in our community who will benefit from these resources. Let's look out for them in this way, and put these resources together, as a way of showing up for them; showing up for our community, to which we all still belong, even if some of us choose to go alt-ac.

As we near the conclusion of this chapter, and consequently this project, I think it's important that I take some space to point out several possible limitations of this study.

Firstly, I'd like to address one of potential bias: it's significant to note that I myself am in the Rhetorics, Writing, and Linguistics (RWL) track at the English PhD program at UTK, and half (five total) of my participants also graduated from the RWL track. They may have been showing support for a fellow RW-er, we RWL-ers could be super interested and enjoy being involved in qualitative research projects, there could be many reasons. But the fact that this project was RWL-heavy is worth noting and could have impacted one of my findings in particular: the usefulness of rhetorical knowledge as a transferrable skill. If there were more of the other English tracks would they have said the same thing? My non RWL participants also discussed the usefulness of rhetorical skills and concepts, but with an RWL-heavy group of participants, it's hard to say if so many would have talked about rhetorical knowledge if things were skewed differently.

Another potential limitation is that Zoom was used to record my interview transcripts, and Zoom AI was used to transcribe them. This, while a huge time-saver for me, was not the most accurate transcription software available. While I have checked over participants' stories and interview excerpts many times for accuracy and have sent a copy of my findings chapter to participants so that they could discuss any potential inaccuracies with me, there's still some potential for small inaccuracies in their interviews.

My final limitation also serves as a sort of transition into the future work I'd like to see done based on the work I've done here. I have spent almost two years working on this project; I started interviewing participants when my daughter was only three months old and she's now almost 20 months old. I have been very attached to, engrossed in, and

devoted to this project, but I've had to do so while teaching, tutoring, tutor-training, being a new mom, and simply having a full plate. What I would like to see in future work is more time spent on developing alt-ac resources. For the resources my participants and I have suggested to be fully developed into usable resources and material change within departments and programs. For others to start or continue pushing for humanities departments to reflect the realities of the job market in their professionalization efforts, resources, and strategies with graduate students. I have been attempting this in advocating for manageable changes within my own department based on this research (specifically with regards to website development), and will continue to do so, but I hope that others will read these suggestions and begin to incorporate them, build upon them, further develop them, and user-test them. Add to them, edit them, improve them. Push and speak up for them. Some recent extensive and highly encouraging edited collections have been developed specifically to support PhD graduates in the sciences looking to go alt-ac (Christopher R. Madan, Ed., 2022; Madan, Ed., 2024) and some amazing work has even been developed (as recently as February of this year!) to support humanities PhD students wishing to engage in public-facing and community-based work upon graduating (American Council of Learned Societies, 2024). The development of such recent and extensive resources show that there is a larger conversation around alt-ac professionalization support for PhD graduates, and that conversation is gaining traction. While there may be seemingly more extensive alt-ac support in the sciences, there are incredibly helpful resources being developed in the humanities, and these resources and the conversation they're a part of, need to be further developed and explored. This is the

start of a conversation that I hope others will continue and branch out from with their own ideas, experiences, and insight.

One potential method for pushing for institutional change that I have touched on in my research, but could and should be taken further, is what it would mean to focus on learning from the decolonial frameworks of Indigenous Studies and applying them to the institutional structures that have led to the issues I've outlined in this project, particularly in chapter 2. What would it look like to enact reconciliation through research (Wilson et al., 2019) into the issue of too few academic jobs and not enough alt-ac professionalization?

Another area that should be further developed is a much deeper dive into the kind of adaptive transfer, specifically recontextualization (Baird and Dilger, 2017), that my participants pointed toward with their thoughtful consideration of context when adapting their prior skills to alt-ac contexts. This recontextualization of academic-facing skills will be invaluable to humanities PhD graduates embarking on alt-ac career paths and should be further explored to offer specific support and guidance to how best engage in this kind of transfer. Such knowledge and support would only further aid graduates in the challenging transition from academia to other careers.

All I have left to say is that working on this project has been a true honor, a joy, and an unexpected comfort. When I first embarked on my journey into alt-ac and found myself staring into the unknown precipice of this project, I never imagined it would have led me to such feelings of gratitude, support, acceptance, and inclusion. To my participants, I owe everything. Your involvement in this project, your time, kind words,

support, and camaraderie have meant more to me than you could ever know. In sharing our collaboration through this work, I hope also to share this sense of support and acceptance with other graduate students who may be feeling scared, alone, confused, and disheartened as they begin their alt-ac journeys. I hope this work gives you the comfort it has given me. I hope you feel seen and supported. In closing, I'd like to include my participant Shauna's response from the end of her third interview when asked if there was anything else she'd like to say to graduate students going into alt-ac careers:

“It can be hard for a while—as you're going through this process—to recognize just how smart and capable and creative you are. But try not to lose sight of [the fact] that you got accepted into this program for a reason. You're smart, you're capable, you're creative. And who's to say that academia isn't going to work for you, because maybe it will, and that's awesome. But maybe it won't, and...if you get to that point...there's nothing wrong with you, and there is another way. And if you decide to go that route, it'll be hard, but it's nothing you can't accomplish because you're in a PhD program! And you're already doing one of the hardest things.... So just [don't] lose sight of who you are and what you want...You can be successful,” (Shauna, personal communication, February 16, 2024).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Layout/Questions

Survey on Alternative Academic Professionalization Opportunities in PhD Programs

You are invited to participate in research on Alternative Academic Professionalization Opportunities in PhD Programs because you are or have been in a PhD program and are pursuing/have pursued an alternative-academic (non-teaching within a university or any career outside the university job market) career.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to explore past and current PhD students' alternative academic professionalization opportunities within PhD programs. This study is being conducted by Amber Kent-Johnson, a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, under the supervision of her advisor, Lisa King, Associate Professor of Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics at the University of Tennessee.

What will my participation in this study involve?

If you agree to this study, you will complete an online survey. This survey will ask questions pertaining to your experiences with alt-ac professionalization in your PhD program and will take approximately 10 minutes.

Participation in this study is 100% voluntary, and all survey responses will be kept confidential unless you've given your permission in writing to do otherwise. At the end of the survey, you'll be asked if you would like to continue participating in this study by

completing an interview with Amber. If you decide to do so, you will be prompted to enter your contact information so that Amber can contact you to schedule an interview.

What if I want to opt out at any point?

Your involvement in this study is completely up to you, and you may opt out at any point, up until the survey responses are submitted. After the survey is submitted, your responses cannot be removed because they'll be anonymous and therefore unidentifiable as yours.

Are there any potential risks?

Most research involves some possible risk to confidentiality, so it is possible that someone could learn of your involvement in this study, or see your study information, but we believe this risk is highly unlikely given the steps we're taking to ensure your information stays secure.

What are the potential benefits?

You may not benefit directly from this study, but the information learned through this research has the potential to benefit university humanities departments and the PhD students working within them by exploring alternative academic opportunities.

What will happen with the information collected from this study?

Information collected for this study will be used in publications and research presentations. The survey is anonymous unless you choose to continue participating in the research study and enter your contact information at the end of the survey. The

researchers will discuss interview confidentiality procedures with you and give you a chance to ask questions before conducting any interviews.

If you do not enter your contact information, no one will be able to link your responses back to you. Your responses to the survey will not be linked to your computer, email address, or other electronic identifiers. Information provided in this survey can only be kept as secure as any other online communication, so to remain anonymous please do not include your name or other information that could be used to identify you in your survey responses.

-

Who can answer any questions I have about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research-related problem, contact Amber Kent-Johnson at akent9@vols.utk.edu or 315-341-8448, or her advisor, Lisa King, at lking33@utk.edu. For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

Statement of Consent

I have read through this form, been given opportunities to ask questions, and have my questions answered. If I have any additional questions, I've been told who to contact with

them. By clicking the “I agree” button below, I’m agreeing to be in this study. I can save or print a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I can simply close out of my browser.

- Yes, I agree to participate
- No, I do not agree to participate

Questions

1. Background/Demographic Information:

1. What’s your age?
2. Gender identity?
3. Ethnicity?

2. Career Information:

1. Can you describe your current occupation?
2. What led you to your current occupation?
3. Would you consider your current occupation alternative academic (as in, non-teaching within the academy, or any role outside of the academy)?
Why or why not?
4. If you are working towards an alt-ac career that’s different from your current career, how would you describe that alt-ac career?
5. What skills does your current career involve?

6. How often do you see yourself drawing upon the skills you learned in your English PhD in your current occupation?

1. Very Often
2. Often
3. Somewhat
4. Not often
5. Never

7. What type of skills do you draw on from your English PhD in your current occupation?

3. Alternative academic professionalization opportunities

1. Which of the following best describes your response to the below statement:

1. There were enough alt-ac professionalization opportunities in my PhD program

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

2. There needed to be additional alt-ac professionalization opportunities in my PhD program

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

Conclusion and Possible Further Participation

You have now reached the end of the survey. If you would like to continue your participation in this research study by completing a follow-up interview, please enter your contact information below. If you would like to end your participation, simply hit enter and submit your survey results. Thank you for your participation in this study!

Interview Information

If you choose to opt-in to interviews, please leave your information below. The interviews will be approximately an hour long and will take place via Zoom or phone call. The purpose of the interviews will be to expand upon your responses in this survey and continue exploring alternative academic professionalization opportunities for PhD students in humanities programs. If you have any questions, please reach out to Amber Kent-Johnson at akent9@vols.utk.edu, or 315-341-8448, or Lisa King at lking33@utk.edu.

Interview Permission

1. Yes, I agree to be contacted by Amber Kent-Johnson for the purpose of completing an interview

2. No, I do not agree to be contacted

If you answered “Yes,” under Interview Permission, please answer the following:

Interview Contact Information

1. Name
2. Email

Appendix B: Email Recruitment Script

Hi [Name],

As per your discussion with [word of mouth contact name]/As a fellow UTK student, I'm reaching out to ask if you'd be interested in participating in a survey for dissertation research that'll help inform future graduate students about alternative academic careers and the ways in which participation in UTK's English PhD program has the potential to support graduate students' alternative academic journeys.

If you're currently working within an alternative academic field (which I'm defining in my study as any non-teaching position within academia, or any career choice outside academia), then your responses would be greatly appreciated.

Please respond to this email if you're interested in taking the survey and you can always email me back at akent9@vols.utk.edu with any questions about the survey, including a discussion of any possible risks, benefits, and what your involvement in this study will include.

Thank you!
Amber

Survey Link: https://utk.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3KOz1rp0kWvnaJM

Appendix C: Interview Questions

C.1: Round 1

Alternative Academic Professionalization Opportunities in PhD Programs Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as a follow-up to your survey response! The goal of this interview is to learn more about the reasoning and background behind your answers, as well as to expand upon them/ask related questions in addition to those within the survey.

1. In the survey, you discussed that you were either currently in an alternative academic (non-teaching within the academy, or any role outside of the academy) career, or actively working towards one. Can you tell me the story of how you got into your current career? (Or, if you're currently pursuing it, what led you to pursue it?)

Interview Questions

C.2: Round 2

In the survey, you discussed what skills your current career involves and how you feel your PhD program helped you develop those skills. I'd like us to spend some more time expanding on your answers.

1. Was/is there support for you to develop alternative academic skills in your PhD program? What forms did that support take?
2. Are there additional forms of support you would find/would have found helpful in your PhD program, for developing your alt-ac professional skills? Please explain.
3. If you answered yes to question 2, how do you think these resources could be implemented in a PhD program?
4. What are the most helpful resources you found, outside of your PhD program, for helping to develop your alt-ac career-related skills?

Interview Questions

C.3: Round 3

We've reached the final round of interview questions. In this round, I'd like to expand more on what your alternative-academic career has meant, and means, to you. Therefore:

1. What does working in an alternative academic career mean to you? How do you feel about your current career?
2. Is there anything you would change about your educational process/experience, if you could?
3. If you could give another PhD student advice about going into your alt-ac career, what would it be?
4. Any final thoughts you'd like to share?

VITA

Amber Kent-Johnson specializes in alternative academic professionalization, qualitative research, and community-based research. She received her bachelors in Cinema and Screen Studies from Oswego State University in May 2016, her masters in English from Cortland State University in May 2019, and will be receiving her doctorate from University of Tennessee, Knoxville in May 2024.

Amber's professional experience includes her participation in an Equitable Assessment Pilot from January 2022-May 2022, and her role in the pilot as a Program Assistant from August 2023-May 2024. She has extensive writing center experience, having served as a tutor across universities since August 2018 and also serving as a Writing Center Coach, Tutor Trainer, and Researcher.

She has been teaching since August 2019 in her capacity as a Graduate Teaching Associate teaching English 101 and 102, she was a finalist for the Hodges Excellence in Teaching Award for PhD students in Spring 2021 and has mentored and trained other instructors.

She has a book review published titled, "Review of Multimodal Composing: Strategies for Twenty-First-Century Writing Consultations: Edited by Lindsay A. Sabatino and Brian Fallon." She also has two forthcoming co-publications.

Finally, Amber has presented "Creating Meaningful and Effective Formal Writing Assignments" in a faculty workshop with Dr. Kirsten Benson, in collaboration with TLI (Teaching and Learning Innovations) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in November, 2022. She has also presented "'FYC Writing Assessment: Using Rubrics as How-To Guides for Students to Meet Instructor Expectations" in the GSOLE 2021 4th

Annual Online Conference, 9, Jan. 2021, in an online poster session. She had a Canceled poster session at the 2020 CCCC Annual Convention due to Covid-19, titled "Expanding the Norm: Including Kinesthetic Learners Through Digital Multimodal Assignments." This would have taken place on 26 Mar. 2020, in Milwaukee, WI. She also has been accepted for an "Alt-Ac Skills Analysis" workshop in the forthcoming 2024 Nexus Conference at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.