

[After the PhD: Program Management in Higher Ed with Amanda Sharick](#)

Blog Post published by Kara Hisatake on Tuesday, February 27, 2018

After the PhD: Program Management in Higher Ed with Amanda Sharick

After the PhD: Exploring Career Paths in the Humanities

At H-Grad, we have made a concerted effort to better utilize our network and its members to compile useful resources for our community. (Be sure to check out our ever-expanding list of links, especially those pertaining to [teaching and TA resources!](#))

Kara (currently on the job market and in her last year of her PhD program) and Katie (experiencing her first year of post-grad life as an assistant professor) have spent a lot of time thinking about what happens after the PhD is conferred. We know that worrying about the future causes a lot of anxiety, and we also know that it helps us to hear **success stories** from those who have ***ended up in a position that they love, inside or outside of the traditional tenure-track job.***

In this blog series, we interview newly minted PhDs to learn about their process of finding their niche. We wanted to begin such a series for several reasons:

- **First**, we do not hear enough about what these folks do. Conversations are often overshadowed by a narrow definition of what “success” looks like in academia or an atmosphere of job market depression. We wanted these interviews to be candid and honest.
- **Second**, we wanted to feature the stories of new PhDs who have not only braved the job market, but who have diverse pedagogical experience because we believe they have a lot of know-how and advice to share.
- **Third, we wanted to showcase our appreciation for the deep and abiding commitment many of these folks have to their teaching, research, and service, whether in academia, or outside of it.**

Find our second post in the series below! →

Focus on: Program Management in Higher Ed with Amanda

Sharick

The second post in our series “After the PhD” features Dr. Amanda Sharick. She earned her PhD in June, 2017 from the University of California, Riverside, in English. Throughout the process of pursuing her doctorate, she served in positions at Harvard University that might be classified as working “alongside” academia. Her most recent job title is “Program Manager at Harvard University Graduate Commons Program.”

[sharickatwork.jpg](#)



[Photo credit: Amanda Sharick. Description: Dr. Sharick at work in her office, rocking the Harvard gear as part of her work outfit.]

In this blog post interview, we focus on the potential to build a career in higher education. Can we find positions that function “alongside” the academy—ones that allow us to meaningfully engage with scholarly communities?

Read on to learn about how Dr. Sharick landed the job, her work-life balance, her main

responsibilities, and how she found meaningful work post-graduate school!

“There are a lot of benefits in my position, and doing meaningful work is absolutely one of them. For me, meaningful work happens when your values and occupation align.”

—Dr. Sharick

THE INTERVIEW

Experiencing higher education from the other side: administration and program management

We thank Dr. Sharick for her knowledge of navigating different career paths and her take on where careers can go after the PhD. As you read the interview, we hope that it can lend some insight into whether or not a job in the higher education sector might be a good fit for you!

KH & KT: *Thanks for taking the time to do an interview with us, Dr. Sharick! We're really excited to learn from you. So, to start us off, can we find out your official job title and where you work?*

DR. S: I am a Program Manager for Harvard's Graduate Commons Program, where I work in an administrative and student service capacity with the graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, faculty and full-time university staff that live in Harvard University Housing. I am a part of Harvard's Central Administration, and our program began in 2008 as part of President Drew Faust's One Harvard Initiative to bridge divides and build community across Harvard's 12 professional and graduate schools.

A little background: Affordable, local housing was in short supply in Cambridge, MA, so Harvard invested in building graduate student, faculty and staff housing complexes that would also have full-time programming staff to connect residents with people outside their schools and university resources by programming in the very places they live. The programming is diverse, with an emphasis on social and intellectual engagement, professional development, academic support, wellness, sustainability, and programming specifically for international students, partners, spouses, and children. Our professional staff structure looks a lot like Harvard's undergraduate house system (Live-in Faculty Deans, Resident Deans, House Administrator, Resident Tutors, etc.), and as such my job is a mix of student support and student events.

KH & KT: *It's definitely rare to hear about programming staff for grad students, faculty, and staff. As graduate students, we've also dipped our toes into event programming, so we'd love to learn more about what you do to foster a community on campus for a more mature crowd*

(rather than the typical programming for undergraduate students). In this role, what are your main responsibilities?

Dr. S: My responsibilities are many, and I should be clear that I don't have a typical student affairs position. As is the case with Harvard, every school has its own student affairs team; however, no one team of student affairs officers serves graduates students across the 12 professional schools because, outside of housing, there are few spaces that require cross-school collaboration. Traditional student affairs programming really focuses on meeting the needs of the current student population, with a heavy focus on undergraduate student populations, and providing programs and services that directly tie back to those needs.

In terms of workload, I work about 40 hours a week (sometimes more, I am salaried) to design and implement programming at a specific Harvard Housing property called Peabody Terrace, which has close to 500 units and approximately 800-1,000 residents each year. (The property was built in the 1960s as some of the first "married" student housing at Harvard and was also some of the first to offer students, regardless of race, affordable on-campus housing. You can listen to the first few minutes of my Harvard Memorial Church campus talk on the importance of this building's history & my experience as a Program Manager at Harvard [here](#). [We suggest going to 7:10 to hear Amanda.]

[peabodyterrace.jpg](#)



[Photo credit: Amanda Sharick. Description: A photo of one of the many events that take place at Peabody Terrace.]

KH & KT: *Right, so your position is fairly unique in terms of student affairs—and Peabody has some amazing history. As you point out, many feared that “Harvard wouldn’t look the way it used to” in terms of religion, class, race, and ethnicity after it was constructed. In fact, we encourage everyone to listen to the above clip of your talk; it’s so powerful and details some of the work you do. So, if your position focuses on Peabody Terrace, what does your everyday work-week look like?*

DR. S: Truth be told, my average work-week is pretty fast paced but also self-paced, which probably says more about my personality than anything. Each day offers something new—a new opportunity to collaborate, a new problem to solve, a new person to meet or learn from, etc.—which I love! In terms of routine, I do regularly collaborate with our Faculty Directors, who are senior Faculty at Harvard (tenured full professors), and I manage a team of 10 resident Community Advisors (similar to RAs in undergrad, but there are no on-call responsibilities) to develop monthly programs that support the well-being of a very diverse community of Harvard affiliates, as well as the overall mission of Harvard University Housing. Managing this team includes a range of responsibilities: hiring, training, coaching, staff evaluations, monthly meetings, etc. Working with Community Advisors to develop thoughtful and interactive programs has been a highlight of my job. We have a lot of fun thinking of ways to enrich the community. In a nutshell, I am responsible for "Making Harvard Home" for everyone living on campus.

One example of how we do this is also one of my favorite series: the "Meet the Scholar" (MTS) program. I work with our Faculty Directors to invite faculty or private industry professionals to campus to meet our residents and share their experience or research in a range of formats. In our traditional format, a small group of residents have the opportunity to enjoy dinner in our Faculty Directors' apartment with the guest speaker before they give a public lecture to a larger audience in an adjacent common room. From an academic standpoint, the goal of MTS series is to encourage interdisciplinary engagement and provide residents with opportunities to see how different disciplines tackle big questions. From a student affairs perspective, these events help build community and a sense of belonging amongst often underserved graduate student populations, disrupting some of the traditional hierarchies of academia. I love this series because it gives students the opportunity to network with other residents, faculty and private industry professionals they might not have otherwise met. As someone who came to Harvard without a lot of social capital, I appreciate how these events expanded my social network and provided opportunities to learn and develop professionally outside of the high-stakes setting of academic conferences.

The other administrative aspects of my job include things like managing financial records, programming budgets, weekly email campaigns, working with other departments throughout the university, and within the larger organization of Harvard Housing and Campus Services.

KH & KT: *The MTS series sounds like such a good experience, and really great programming. Can we ask about the history of this position: How did you end up finding this job?*

Dr. S: I found this job, in part, because I was its target audience. I moved into Harvard Housing with my spouse, who began a graduate program in 2013. I was dissertating remotely and applying for tenure-track teaching jobs, which was a very isolating process. I started attending events in the common room of our building to make friends with my neighbors, who were mostly graduate students too. Long story short: I began working with Graduate Commons as a Community Advisor part-time while I was writing and working as an adjunct professor teaching "Intro to Literature" courses at a local college in Brookline, MA. During this time, I learned how to develop programming, facilitate events, and gain experience working with graduate students outside the humanities, which was really an eye-opening experience. In 2016, the Director of the Graduate Commons Program invited me to apply for a full-time position. Later I would find that my experience as a Ph.D. student was considered a valuable asset—especially my ability to connect with graduate students and design events specific to the different stages of graduate programs (coursework, exams, dissertating, job searching, etc.).

KH & KT: *What an amazing story! We totally feel you. The whole process of entering the academic job market—including formulating applications, searching for jobs, and going through the whole gamut of interviews—can be hugely isolating and intimidating for sure. We're so incredibly cheered to hear that people find Ph.D. experience valuable outside of the traditional academic circle. Now that you've had this position, what do you feel are its benefits? A lot of PhDs are concerned with finding meaningful work outside of academia, where much of life is defined by research. How do you find meaning in your work? What are some of the "highs" and "lows" of the job?*

Dr. S: This is the million-dollar question! There are a lot of benefits in my position, and doing meaningful work is absolutely one of them. For me, meaningful work happens when your values and occupation align. In academia, this meant working with students—helping them obtain the critical thinking, reading, and writing skills they needed to pursue their goals—and, of course, conducting research that challenged the dominant discourses of Victorian Studies. I loved spending my graduate career thinking about how second-gen Jewish immigrant women disrupted the centers of political and religious authority of the nineteenth century.

In my current position, however, I feel like I get to use those same passions but to new, and at times more immediate, ends in ways that are invigorating and intellectually challenging and on a scale I couldn't have imagined for myself. My job is essentially to use university resources to improve the lives and "Harvard experience" of the 1,000 people living at Peabody Terrace. This is a big task and takes a lot of effort to get to know the community each year and learn what would make their experience at Harvard better or more meaningful. Thus, most student affairs positions require

creativity, problem-solving skills, and critical cultural awareness to do well. But I absolutely love the work. The way I feel doing this job is how I used to feel teaching my Summer Bridge students at UC Riverside or my students at Newbury College—like I was actually making a difference by widening the scope of their experience and network of possibilities. One low of the job? Hmm...Unfortunately, the most difficult obstacles come from meeting other people, often other academics, who see this as unimportant and less intellectually "rigorous" work. And while I understand that I am not shaping the next generation in the classroom, I feel like the current state of political affairs is a result of, in part, because we don't put as much emphasis on learning outside the classroom, on learning how to have conversations across differences. There is a power dynamic in the classroom—Professor/Student—that serves an important function, but it cannot be the only setting for having rigorous and, at times, really difficult conversations. We need safe spaces for these high-level conversations outside the classroom, too!

***KH & KT:** We love hearing that you consider your work meaningful—the results of programming experiences often feel a lot more immediate; classroom learning takes time! We're hoping that the more we're able to highlight the work that PhDs do, the better people will understand its importance, both inside and outside of academia. It's especially disheartening to hear how academics can look down on these roles. In that respect, what is it like to work in a fully academic environment with a PhD, but not in the role of a traditional tenure track professor? Do you still feel connected to the academic world?*

Dr. S: Absolutely! I love working in an academic environment because there's an emphasis on all members of the university community continuing to learn and grow, including full-time staff. I learned that you don't need to be a tenure-track professor to contribute to the mission of higher education in meaningful ways. I want to emphasize that **generative and inclusive academic environments don't create themselves**. Administrators can and do play a role in creating these environments alongside faculty, staff and students. I think one of the gifts of this job has been to really think critically and expansively about the university structure, and all the people outside the classroom that make its day-to-day operations—and what happens in the classroom—possible. From dining service workers to the president of the university, I think I have a better appreciation for how important each branch of the university is to its overall success.

***KH & KT:** As we know from our own experiences, deciding what a "generative and inclusive academic environment" actually means takes more than the participation of faculty and students. Administrative staff and in my [Kara's] experience, the ethnic resource centers on campus have been essential to establishing a sense of a larger community that is welcoming to the things I am concerned about, including academia. You know that so many of us struggle with any sort of work-life balance, if such a thing exists! What is your "work-life" balance like in this position?*

Dr. S: Okay, this isn't a fair question entirely because I am a recovering academic, aka workaholic. However, my job is a 9am-5pm, Monday through Friday position. I do work some nights and weekends, but I adjust my hours to stay at 40 hours a week. The best part is that I get to leave most of my work at the office, and I have weekends and major holidays to myself. Since I host events late into the evening, my job is a live-in position, so I receive a housing stipend for an apartment that is about a 5-minute walk from my office. I don't have on-call responsibilities per say, but I do have a work cell phone that I keep on me at all times in the event of a student or building emergency. Most student affairs jobs in university housing have live-in and non-live-in positions that are with or without on-call duties. Work-life balance is definitely different depending on what level of responsibilities your job requires.

I should also note: I am the daughter of a Mexican immigrant and a first-generation college student, which means a couple things: 1) I didn't really grow up with this concept of work/life balance. My parents worked all the time to pay the bills, and I had to work while I was in high school and college. You work until the job is done, which I recognize isn't always healthy or ideal. And 2) coming from this background, I had to learn how to not stress about achieving work/life balance. In Student Affairs/ Event Management things happen that require you to stay late or longer than anticipated. Sometimes a team member needs support at their event because attendance is higher than anticipated, or there's a crisis with a resident that takes another hour of my time to mediate and redirect to proper resources. These are aspects of the job and a couple of the reasons why my position requires me to live "on-site." My personal well-being goals most of the time are to find some time to exercise for 30 minutes each day and make sure I keep my Thursday date night with my spouse.

KH & KT: *OK, agreed. This question isn't totally fair. But we appreciated what you said about the dangers of the "workaholic" academic lifestyle, and that the definition of work/life balance is really dependent upon context. Anyway, work/life balance is a thing that is only seen in impossibly glossy magazines. Now that you've achieved this position, where it seems that you find a lot of meaning and are able to help impact many experiences, where do you see yourself in the future? How can you utilize the skills you are building upon in this position? Would you ever return to academia, or do you feel like these kinds of jobs that function "alongside" the academy are a better fit for your needs and wants?*

Dr. S: If I am being completely honest, I would love to eventually be a Dean of Students someday. To have an administrative position that still allows me to get in the classroom once a year would be a dream. I don't think I would have known this about myself without doing this job. I also think that if I do reach this goal someday it will be because I took this job and learned how to manage a team, work across departments, create programming, develop ways to critically assess and evaluate the results of our work, and then implement the measures for improvement. As far as returning to academia, I think if the right opportunity presented itself it would be hard to turn down. But, even then, I would be drawn toward the administrative end of a Dean/Provost position, a position that would allow me to effect change for a wider constituency than a classroom typically offers. I guess it comes down to my deep desire to make a tangible difference in the lives of students, to make sure vulnerable student

demographics are supported and funded in ways that allow them to do their best work and be contributing members of the university. I know how hard it was to be a first-gen college and then graduate student, and my desire is to remove the institutional obstacles that stop students, from all walks of life, from doing their best work.

***KH & KT:** Thanks for that candid answer. We hope you get to achieve that Dean of Students dream! We would love to work in an institution with you as an administrator. We wanted to ask you more about your experience of working while you were still completing the PhD & keeping up with your scholarly interests. How do you balance your scholarly work and your everyday work? Was it difficult to earn and complete your PhD while simultaneously working full-time? Is continuing your scholarly research a priority?*

Dr. S: I am able to balance my research and everyday work because I draw energy from one into the other. My everyday work with Graduate Commons often provides me with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction—something that doesn't always happen in academia, no matter how hard you work. And, in this way, working full-time was critical for me to finish the dissertation. I think the reason for this was that I had something else other than my research, my publication record, or teaching evaluations to remind me that I was more than the sum of those things. My everyday work with Graduate Commons connects me to people in one of the most intimate settings—their homes—and helps me keep my values and not my anxieties or fears in perspective. And it is from this position that I feel the freedom to continue pursuing research projects and professional opportunities at a pace that works for me. I have been able to publish a couple pieces and conference regularly since I began this job. This is, in part, due to the connections I made prior to leaving academia. So grateful for these opportunities.

On a more pragmatic note: I have a very supportive Program Director as a boss. Find one of those if you can! While I was finishing my dissertation, I had access to a flex work schedule for one semester so that I could make time to write and revise my chapters, which was an awesome privilege. Our Program Director insisted that my professional development would ultimately benefit the program. And to be fair, the experience and lessons learned by finishing the dissertation have certainly informed my academic support programming today, which is also why I am now in the process of writing up a handbook cataloging these event ideas for my department.

***KH & KT:** We're going to try our best to find a boss like that! And it certainly worked—we are certain that the fact that you finished your dissertation benefitted the program. Thinking about this process of job hunting and the topic of completion: If you could give your younger self some advice, either before you went to grad school or while you were writing the dissertation, what would you say?*

Dr. S: I would tell the younger me that was applying for jobs before finishing the dissertation—don't apply too widely unless your circumstances require you to do so. You can't unread rejection letters, and they take a toll even if they were for a job outside your primary field. I think I did some harm to my confidence by applying widely (35 jobs) my first time out. If you decide to go out early, make sure you feel ready and have a plan for dealing with rejection. Whether it's a ritual of throwing the letter in a fireplace or treating yourself to some form of self-care, just have something in place to help you manage the negative feelings and move forward. To the younger me trying to decide whether to leave academia: go watch the "Second Chunce" episode of NBC's Parks & Recreation—season 6, episode 9—and realize that you are Leslie Knope in this scenario, furiously trying to hold on to something when it's okay to let go. And while you should have faith and give yourself every possible chance to succeed on the tenure track job search, you must always remember that you CAN change the dream if/when getting your dream job doesn't work out like you planned. In the words of cut-throat political operative Jennifer Barkley: "[You can] get a new dream. Effect change at a higher level...And you can trust me because I don't care enough about you to lie."

***KH & KT:** Seriously, what awesome advice! I [Kara] am finding it absolutely true about being on the job market: apply to places you are serious about, and take care of yourself while applying. We're adaptable. One last question: do you have any advice for grad students seeking your kind of position?*

Dr. S: Where to start? First, don't wait to learn about the field of student affairs. It is a really important field that has traditionally served undergraduate students. Over the last decade, institutions and administrators have pushed to include more training and emphasis on supporting graduate students, especially those that are coming from underrepresented backgrounds. There are more and more opportunities for graduate student affairs work at institutions, and I think the field could absolutely benefit from having qualified PhDs in their ranks. Again, the higher education professionals I know have degrees in serving students, and I don't think PhDs can expect to jump into a position without learning the field. However, what you lack in coursework on the graduate student experience, you make up for with your own experience and abilities to have successfully navigated a graduate program, academia, university resources and services for students. And you probably have an idea what would have been helpful to you while in graduate school. So, if you are applying for student affairs or housing administration jobs, don't sell yourself short. You aren't overqualified. You are a highly-qualified asset.

The other thing I would suggest is to find people on your campus who have student-facing administrative positions and ask them for an informational interview. Learn their story and path to the job they have. If they are willing, ask them to share their resume or CV—they look much different than an academic CV. Try putting your current experience into student affairs resume categories to see what your strengths and weaknesses are before applying for a student affairs position. Most of the time, graduate students should lead with any service positions and front load any mentoring, coaching, and budget management skills, if possible. As with academia, student affairs jobs typically look different at community colleges and public universities than they do at private institutions. It helps to know which type of academic environment you would like to be a part of.

One more thing: networking is quite possibly more important here than in academia. (That's right. Spoiler alert: academia is about who you know.) This is, in part, because the intangibles of student affairs positions, like being able to make people feel welcome or having an intellectual conversation without it devolving into a discourse on agency and the free market is difficult to fit into a job description. Like all job applications, it's important to stay away from jargon and offer strategic examples of how your work illustrates your abilities to meet their job description.

Want more of a birds' eye view of the student affairs world? Take a look at the programs from their top organizations and conferences, like NASPA (National Association of Student Professionals Association) & ACUHO-I (Association for College & University Housing Officers International). Other universities are also doing a great job developing opportunities to discuss graduate student services. For example, Washington University in St. Louis hosted its first "Promising Practices" Symposium (<https://source.wustl.edu/tag/promising-practices/>) to tackle the topic of graduate student affairs (many thanks to Lisa Valela, Tara Bartley, & Ashley Hopper for introducing me to these organizations). Of course, the Chronicle for Higher Education is a great resource for tips on trending topics in the field of Student Affairs.

Lastly, don't be afraid to branch out. You can do this.

Thank you for sharing your experiences, Dr. Sharick! These are amazing resources to check out: you offer some solid advice about local resources for exploring potential career paths in student affairs, programming, and higher education in general. Congratulations again, Dr. Sharick, on finishing the dissertation and doing a knock-out job of supporting the larger community at Harvard. It's probably never said enough, but your work is highly appreciated.

Are you interested in a career in administration in higher education? Here is what you would need to prepare & here are the resources that will guide you through this process.

Is a career in higher education right for you?

The materials that you would prepare for a career in higher education administration, like many other careers that fall outside of the traditional academic track, are of a different genre than those for the 4-year university job.

Applications for positions in higher education administration have different timelines and require different materials. Importantly, they require a resume not a CV, and your cover letter should speak

to the specifics of the job ad: your experience with public speaking, managing events, or supervising students. This requires knowing your audience, your genre, and your transferable skills.

- <https://www.chronicle.com/article/From-Doctoral-Study-to-/238708>
- <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/alt-ac/pieces/have-you-considered-staff-position>
- <https://phdsatwork.com/week-in-the-life/monique-rinere-intro/>

We recommend checking out [ImaginePhD](#), a site for exploring a variety of careers for PhDs. For this particular topic, check out the “job family” entitled “Higher Education Administration.” ImaginePhD provides many resources, including sample job descriptions, sample career paths, and help analyzing job ads & interviews.

"Generative and inclusive academic environments don't create themselves. Administrators can and do play a role in creating these environments alongside faculty, staff and students."

—Dr. Sharick

Do you work in administration? Are you considering a career in this type of position? Share your wisdom!

Email us, (editorial-grad@mail.h-net.msu.edu) or join in the conversation on Twitter (@hgradlist).

Posted in:
[Resource Blog](#)