

Welcome to Column 18 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://www.socwomen.org/about/career.html>

March 26, 2007

HEY JANE!

“My graduate training has prepared me well for a career in academia, but I would like to work outside of the academy. What do I do?”

Good question. Unfortunately many sociology doctoral programs are not equipped to prepare students who would like to have a career outside of academia and so people in your situation find themselves “going it alone.” First you need to decide what type of applied work you want to do. For example are you interested in research, teaching, writing, or something else? Do you want to work for the government, in the non-profit sector, or in the corporate world? These are important questions because your answers will help to focus your search and will guide your presentation of self.

*The search

For those seeking academic positions, ASA’s Footnotes provides a one stop shop. If you want to work outside of academia, Footnotes includes a handful of research jobs, but you will most likely need to expand your search. If you are interested in government jobs, you’ll want to peruse local, state and federal government websites. For research jobs, you will want to check out the websites of university research centers, independent policy or survey research institutes, and consulting firms. For non-profit work, there are websites such as www.idealists.org that you might find useful. For national or international organizations, you might also check the organization’s website. For corporate jobs, you might try the corporation’s website or job search engines like www.monster.com. Just as you learn in graduate school how to read academic job ads (for example, what areas of specialization apply to you), you will have to learn how to search and read job ads outside of academia. You might use search terms such as research analyst, evaluation research, curriculum or instructional design, training, grant writing . . . depending on the type of work you want to do. Unlike the academic job market where jobs ads are posted monthly and give you a month or more to send in your application materials, jobs ads outside of academia are updated more frequently (often weekly) and move more quickly.

Networking is always useful, but is very important when searching for applied jobs. Sometimes jobs may not be advertised broadly, so the best way to learn of job openings is to develop a broad professional network. Meet and talk to people who work in your field of interest, contact your peers who have chosen to work in the applied field, and if you’ve been in academia for awhile, you might even contact former students who are working in an area of interest to you. For networking purposes, you might consider participating in applied professional organizations like the American Evaluation Association (www.eval.org) or the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology (<http://www.aacsnet.org>). Another strategy for finding job leads is to engage in informational interviewing with people in the applied field. Informational interviewing is

when you arrange to ask somebody about their job, what it requires, whether they like it and what you would have to do to get a job like that.

*The resume and interview

As sociologists we all know that presentation of self is always important. When applying and interviewing for applied jobs, be sure to present yourself in a way that matches the job description. Depending on the type of job you are looking for, you will need to move things around on your CV. You might need to cut some things out all together and, particularly in the non-profit and corporate world, you will likely need to create a resume that is much shorter than a typical CV. For many applied positions, you will want to emphasize your research experience and recent publications and presentations. Teaching, honors, and professional affiliations might be less important and depending on the job might not even be appropriate to include on your resume. Learn what the current “buzzwords” are in the area you are trying to enter and be prepared to talk about your skills in this new language. It is also crucial to list references who can talk about the skills you have that are most related to the jobs you are seeking.

It may help to show you have a variety of skills. Qualitative researchers should consider that qualitative skills may not get you a job, but that the type of quantitative research desired by some agencies is not nearly as sophisticated as you might imagine. For example, the nature of the data you collect may only lend itself to frequencies. For the cases where heavy duty statistical analysis is required, you may work in a large company where a statistician is on staff.

*Life outside of academia

One big upside to working outside the academy is that many applied jobs pay significantly more than many jobs in academia. Entry level salaries might be similar, but salary increases come faster and more regularly.

Despite the potential for a better salary in the applied world, it's hard to beat the freedom of academic life. If you want to attend a peace demonstration, you do it as long as you don't have to teach. If you want to attend a professional conference, you do it as long as you can afford it and you cancel your class. If you want to go to a sale at the outlet mall on a weekday when it won't be crowded, you do it as long as your other responsibilities are met. In an applied job, you usually have to be at an office every day for a particular number of hours. Former academics who have transitioned into applied work report feeling guilty when they surf the web and read about something they find interesting that has nothing to do with work. As academics, anything related to our interests – politics, social conflict, sociology of sports, etc. – is fair game. On the other hand, in the applied world when you leave the office your work is over for the day. Of course there are some weeks when everyone works late or takes work home on weekends.

While academia is clearly more flexible in some ways, careers outside of academia can provide a different kind of flexibility. In the applied world, people feel freer to take time off from professional work to raise children or to work part-time. True, they most likely won't become vice president of the company but they are not threatened with losing their entire career by failing to get tenure. Additionally some companies and organizations are very family friendly and accommodate their workers where they can.

Another interesting difference you can expect to encounter is that unlike most academic work which is relatively solitary, applied work is more likely to require you to work in a team and be flexible about what role you play. Working in groups can be gratifying at times, but working with other people can also be difficult. Academics have to please one another in order to get tenure and promotion but it's not the same as having to please a supervisor on a day-to-day basis.

A downside to applied work is that it is often less secure than academic work (much less secure than a tenured academic position). So, you may prepare yourself to change jobs more frequently than you might in academia. Even in one-year teaching jobs, people know they have awhile to look for the next job and can plan ahead. In the applied world, you can be out of a job in a matter of weeks.

Another seemingly small point, but something you should definitely be aware of is that in the applied world expectations about how work is presented are different than in academia. You have to know how to use Power Point and Excel to present your work as understandably as possible on paper, via computer, and on the web. Reports should have attractive bar charts and beautifully designed covers. You have to give presentations that are intelligible to the client and focus on the client's needs.

*Returning to academia

You might wonder, is it ever possible to return to academia after working in the applied world? It won't be easy, but it's not impossible. The key is to continue publishing. However, many applied jobs make it difficult to continue academic style publishing. You may not have the freedom to use the client's data for publication. Or you may be expected to work on your research on your own time. In some applied jobs you might be able to negotiate time built into your work week to work on your own research and writing. This is probably much more likely in research or some government jobs than in non-profit or corporate jobs. When you work in the applied field, your organization or company's needs come first. It's more difficult to amass the scholarly works that would make you attractive to a research university. And anyone fairly well along in their applied career is not likely to be interested in starting all over as a lowly paid assistant professor.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.

I hope this helps! Stay tuned for the next column's question on supporting your SWS colleagues.

-- Jane

Do you have a question for Jane?

Do you have experience or "expertise" about an upcoming question?

E-mail lara-foley@utulsa.edu.