A short schpiel about my academic job search by Andrea Haverkamp, PhD (she/her)

Right before the lockdowns 18 months ago, I was entering the final stages of my dissertation research and was thrilled for a hopeful career in engineering education research. I loved teaching, research, conferences, and all the peers I had met along the way. I truly felt I was on “the right path.”

COVID-19 threw my employment plans as an academic into crisis, and further disillusioned me from academia as a sector of employment and area of personal fulfillment.

Lockdown and shifting to work from home was a hard change for many of us. Half my housemates lost their jobs, and while our queer/trans community were already in dire housing and employment situations, it became so much worse. I was a lucky person in my house to keep my paycheck – but we still were short on rent all through the summer. My research funding, also, was cut short due to in-person research activities being indefinitely postponed. Instead of graduating June 2021, I was now supposed to finish in March 2021 and needed to begin the job hunt ASAP. It’s already hard to figure out how people graduate in June and don’t collect another paycheck until Fall between their PhD and a Post-Doc or Professorship. But now that potential unemployment window was wider and the time to apply was shorter. Oh, and did anyone else notice... there were barely any tenure-track jobs openings in the pandemic? As a first-generation, queer/trans, chronically poor, and marginal voice in engineering academia I was terrified that my already liminal prospects had vanished.

Meanwhile, in the higher education labor movement, I became connected to an online network of graduate and adjunct worker activists that April 2020. Hundreds of workers across dozens of campuses came together in a Slack group and began meeting weekly and sharing stories, strategy, tactics, and wins. For all the issues I held against my own institution, it became astonishingly clear that there was no “greener pasture” to turn to. I saw in real-time how my university – Oregon State University – and others across the nation clamped down on graduate worker safety, fought to deny raises and bust up unionization efforts, and continued to fund and arm campus police despite the Movement for Black Lives and the Disarm / Defund protests. Every place I thought may be a better place to work had the exact same issues. It’s systemic.

The job hunt was my personal *Sword of Damocles* throughout the pandemic and while we organized as workers. Conditions needed to be better right now – but what was I going to do with my abrupt new graduation and end-of-income date? From Summer 2020 to Spring 2021, I submitted a dizzying number of applications across the country – post-docs, adjuncts, 1-year contracts, “visiting professor” positions, and a handful of open tenure track roles. I started to branch out from mainstream Engineering Education into community colleges, liberal arts departments, and university staff positions such as advising roles. I also sent a flurry of applications to non-profits, traditional engineering jobs, equity jobs, anything. I had some call backs and interviews but no luck. I started to feel duped - as if I just spent 5 years performing queer and trans education research for a “piece of paper that can’t get me a job.”

This made me feel very discouraged and gatekept from academic contexts, while at the same time closer to all of my comrades *outside* academia. I felt alone and liminal in engineering academia. I felt connected to labor organizers and mutual aid groups. I began to *deeply appreciate* how queer folk stick together. I became really attached to my queer family in this region, the Pacific

Northwest, and as I applied to jobs in states far away, my heart didn't actually want to move away.

May of 2020, I ran for President of my American Federation of Teachers graduate teaching and research assistant union and won. Where I felt distant in engineering education, I found a new world of inspiration. Beyond all the tyrants in government and big business, most of us live with tiny tyrants every single day in our workplaces – with barely a shred of democracy or agency. Trump is not in the room for most people. Management, supervision, and administration are much closer to us for many hours a week and have a tighter grasp around our collective necks.

These various and dramatic shifts in my life altogether removed the romantic glorification of academia that I internalized. I remember a professor saying that it was the most ideal job, and I had really believed it. Aspiring workers in academia in the bottom rungs clamer and compete in this Capitalist pyramid scheme: first, PhD cohorts move far from the ones we love and the places we call home to accept barely livable 20k a year graduate assistantships (if we are paid at all), uproot and scramble again for a 1/50 shot at a post-doc, adjunct, short-term, non-tenure track role, all for the slightest chance to again be the 1/50 who succeeds in the next step at a tenure-track role. Academia relies on cheap lower-level workers like myself believing the fantasy that most of us can, within meritocracy, reach the higher rungs. It's impossible. There is not enough room for every passionate PhD graduate to become faculty in our current structure. You either persevere and adhere to the system and norms long enough to find a footing, publish the right pieces, win the right awards from the right people, or leave - on your own terms or otherwise.

In these life shifts and internal processing of pandemic events, I found a deep appreciation for the people I lived with and built community with. Queer, trans, radical, anti-fascist, Jewish, loving, committed, and critical people. It made me question why I was putting so much work into my academic job search.

- Why uproot everything I know and love to move across the country for a TEMPORARY low-paying job with no guarantee of advancement?
- Was being a professor the mythical "best job ever" I had dreamed of, or just the result of amazing marketing and Capitalist-profit-driven propaganda to swell PhD enrollment?
- Why did I dream of work and a job title – was conducting trans/queer research and being awarded another NSF grant more important than sharing meals and spending time with existing community and my found family, here?
- Yes - why move for a job, and leave all my loved ones behind? What are my values?

At the suggestion of my union organizer mentors I started to apply to union organizing positions. I was nervous, having never "worked" as an organizer before, only as an engineer or educator. I was excited at the possibility to stay close to my community and also do work which resists the very dynamic which adversely affected so many of my academic peers. In the last week of my employment at Oregon State, when I was scared shitless of not having a job lined up, I was offered and accepted a position as a labor organizer in Seattle. I now work with healthcare workers and in grocery – a big change, still scary and uncertain, but it's where I am now.

I want my peers finishing their PhDs in academia to have job security and employment that isn't precarious, temporary, and fleeting. Academia has become gig work for my generation. Bittersweet as it is, academia lost me. I don't tell anyone I work with that I have a PhD, hardly at all. It's my little secret at times. Maybe OSU can use my story as part of their marketing pivot towards grad school being for "personal fulfillment" – so many people I know finish grad school and resume retail, commercial, grocery, or care work. We all know faculty jobs are dwindling and aren't coming back, and this degree certainly didn't get me a job. Union organizing did! Let's build power across our workplaces. Labor builds everything. We deserve everything.