

Speaker 1 ([00:11](#)):

Welcome to the study religion podcast. My name is Erica Bennett and I am a current student in the religion and culture master's program at the university of Alabama. This is the third episode to a special series on jobs after graduate school and the humanities take a listen to episode one where Jacob Barrett and I listen to Bradley summer. Describe his experience with the job market after a PhD program in history. And in episode two, we listened to Pamela at Gilbert talk on her experience, advising students going into the job market as a tenured English professor in this episode, Jacob and I explore the experience of a student leaving a graduate program before completion. We listened to Jared Powell, explain his decision to leave his PhD program and what he plans to do next.

Speaker 2 ([01:02](#)):

So what stuck out with you the most during Pamela's interview?

Speaker 3 ([01:05](#)):

I think the thing that was most interesting to me about Pamela's, um, your conversation with Pamela was how this problem of the academic job market, um, especially in the humanities has been a problem for a while, that it was a problem back when Pamela was first hitting the job market. Um, and that it's not just a new thing that's happening now and that people hitting the job market right now are facing that it's been a problem that's been around and we still have not found successful ways to prepare graduate students, um, for entering a job market where there aren't jobs.

Speaker 2 ([01:43](#)):

It seems like students and faculty are all trying their best, but there are still issues between what the departments are actually doing for their students and what the larger institutions are doing to aid those departments and those students and those faculty. I also think there is kind of an issue with what faculty know about the jobs outside of academia and the overall sense that there's this like Hord state of the job market has been kind of pushed under the rug for way too long.

Speaker 3 ([02:19](#)):

Absolutely. And you know, I think we've heard from some people who have experienced, um, what's going on right now in the job market. Um, and I guess I am kind of now wondering, like, what do I need to know, um, or be prepared for if I realize partway through my PhD program that, you know, I maybe wanna pursue a career outside of academia. Um, so I wonder, are there students who have not finished their program going through or decided to finish the PhD, but ended up somewhere else, um, and kind of found a different career

Speaker 2 ([02:58](#)):

Path? Yeah, I think I know exactly who we should talk to a UA graduate, Jared Powell.

Speaker 4 ([03:06](#)):

So my name is Jared Powell.

Speaker 2 ([03:08](#)):

He was actually just at UNC chapel hill for his PhD program in English. Let me talk with him. And maybe some of these questions will be answered.

Speaker 4 ([03:25](#)):

I studied, I did my undergrad at the university of Alabama. I have a bachelor's, I was a double major in English and religious studies. And then I stuck around at Alabama for my first masters in English. So BA in ma from, from UA. And then I started a PhD program in English at university of North Carolina chapel hill. And just this past may I decided to leave that program early and I've graduated with a, a second master's in English from, from UNC.

Speaker 2 ([04:03](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. So why did you decide to go into a PhD program?

Speaker 4 ([04:08](#)):

Yeah, so I decided to go into a PhD program because for the longest time I thought that I wanted to be a teacher ever since high school. Really. I decided I wanted to be a teacher back then. I thought I wanted to teach high school. Um, and then I got into, you know, went to undergrad and did the double major and really got into English. English was kind of what I wanted to teach when I decided that I wanted to be the teacher, whatever. And I had, you know, several, I have several cousins that are teachers and they said, you should definitely get a master's because you can get paid more. So went into my master's still thinking I kind of wanted to teach high school and was just doing it to get paid more. But over the course of the masters, um, really decided that college, the college levels where I wanted to, to teach and to be an instructor and really enjoyed the research that I did in my master's.

Speaker 4 ([05:03](#)):

I mean, I did plenty of research in undergrad as well, but it really, I don't know, it took on a whole different level in the masters. And so that's when I decided to continue that and do the PhD. I went in fully wanting to be a professor, um, kind of always thought I would end up like at the, like at the liberal arts college sort of level there. Cause I really enjoyed the research, but I really was always drawn more to the teaching I think. Um, so yeah, I went in wanting to be a professor and yeah, as you guys know, you got, you gotta do the PhD to do that. So in most fields, at least

Speaker 2 ([05:47](#)):

Recently, like we talked about you just recently left your PhD program and if you don't mind, could you explain that decision for us? Why, uh, maybe not everything that led up to that, but what were the deciding factors in leaving this program?

Speaker 4 ([06:06](#)):

Yeah, there were many factors. It was, it was many things kind of coming to head at once. I'll try to hit the main once though, I'll say first it started with, with the pandemic, the pandemic hit, um, the spring 2020 was my last semester of coursework. And you know, in, in English at least don't know what it's like in religious studies or in other humanities fields, but in English we teach that's that's, that's how we get paid. So I was also teaching two classes that semester, I think. Um, and without going into too much detail, I can say that just mental health took a huge toll in the pandemic and found myself losing a lot of interest, a lot of drive and just doing my exam, prep, my reading for my exams. I missed being in person. I missed seeing colleagues and just having casual conversations with colleagues and all of a sudden was just stuck at home, reading, grading, teaching.

Speaker 4 ([07:10](#)):

I love teaching and I love my students and really the students are what got me through the pandemic, but I did not enjoy teaching online for many of these reasons. Just I need that in-person contact, I think, to, to thrive at least in the classroom setting. So there was that there was just because of the pandemic losing a lot of that drive, um, to do the work. Then there was also seeing people who were a couple years ahead of me, my friends in the program, who I thought were quite frankly, much better job candidates than I am and who are on the job market, not even land single the first interview that was really disheartening. I always kind of had this, you know, been told by so many people the job market's terrible, the job market's terrible, but it was kind of just this vague future issue and like, well across that bridge when we get there and now suddenly that bridge was, was fast approaching.

Speaker 4 ([08:06](#)):

Um, and that was just, that was really disheartening. And, and yeah, I'd say those were probably the two main reasons. And, and then, and then as well, just seeing this kind of greater anti higher education discourse, I think in, in our political moment is, is, you know, just that's tied in with the pandemic and that's tied in with other things so that it all just was, was kind of disheartening for me. Yeah. Oh, and, and one other thing maybe to add to last one, not only seeing how bleak and, you know, sorry to any listeners who are in graduate school, but yes. Seeing how bleak the, the academic job market is. But then also on the other hand, seeing, you know, my wife and my other friends who are not in this job market and who were thriving, you know, the, the, the outside academic job market over the pandemic with work from home and, and all these different things, people are, you know, moving around, getting higher raises and things like that. And just seeing friends thrive and thinking like, okay, maybe I want that.

Speaker 2 ([09:14](#)):

So you're in this like, right. We're in the pandemic, it's hard. We're, we're struggling. And you see, okay, this job market is not what I need. It's not what I'm looking for. So knowing that you might need to get a job outside of the university system, what help, if any, did you receive from your program or your college or your university as a whole?

Speaker 4 ([09:41](#)):

I, you know, I'd say the assistance was, was kind of a mixed bag. I think there wasn't much like official institutional assistance either from my department or from the college, the university at any level, if it's out there, I had a lot of, you know, I didn't find it and I looked so, you know, maybe there's something, but it's not easy to find. Um, for instance, in my department, we have robust job support, a whole group that meets monthly, I think for the academic job market and prepping CV, prepping, uh, you know, letters and, and statements and things like that. And we don't have that for, for the non-academic job market. We, they occasionally brought in, um, speakers, which, you know, that was very helpful. They brought in just a few months ago, actually my department brought in, um, a speaker from the business school at UNC to talk about, you know, some of these things, how do we start to market ourselves?

Speaker 4 ([10:46](#)):

And if we're making that decision, which was great, but it's kind of, it's, it's that sort of stuff happened occasionally. It wasn't a regular thing. Yeah. And I can think of one instance also where we had like a panel of recent graduates from our program, one of which was a professor, the other two were not, and that was great, but that was organized by graduate students by the, the graduate student organization.

Um, so as far as an institutional level of support, I didn't have much in that regard. Okay. And I don't think that that's unique to, to where I was. I think that that's, uh, again, I did a master's at, at another institution as well, and it was the same way there, I'd say in my department, um, in my English department at Alabama, not much institutional support, even for the, for the ma students who most of the ones who were there with me were doing kind of what I was planning at that time, getting this to be a high school teacher.

Speaker 4 ([11:45](#)):

So they were kind of doing, you know, not the higher ed, but anyway, um, now on the other hand, I did have some, some great support on the individual level. Like when I told my faculty advisors and my committee that this was my plan, there was very much, you know, admitting, okay. You know, we've only ever been professors. All of my committee members happened to have all always been professors. There were some faculty members in my department that have done other careers and come into this. Yeah. But that they weren't on my committee. And so they all said, you know, this is all we've ever done professionally, but we'll help you however we can. And we think this is the right decision and, and definitely, you know, no shame or anything, they were very helpful and very encouraging. Yeah. And trying to connect me with, with people that they knew or sending me job offers that they thought are job listings, rather that they thought I might be a good fit for mm-hmm <affirmative>. Um, so a lot of the support was from individuals and, you know, even then there was a limit to what they could to understandably, you know, I, I, I don't blame them cuz yeah. They've been in this career for a long time. Yeah. How can I expect them to, to really know

Speaker 2 ([12:56](#)):

Others and they, they were never trained outside of what, like what they were training you for. That's exactly. Probably their upbringing into the system as well. Right. I feel, um, AF with talking with you and then also talking with, um, Soer, it seems like there's a disconnect between the individuals, like the professors trying their best to help acknowledging the system and then a disconnect between them and the institution as a whole. Right. Does that make sense? Like, do you think there is this like disconnect happening?

Speaker 4 ([13:28](#)):

Yeah, I agree. You know, I went to the career center and I've sent students to the career center before and I think it's wonderful for undergraduate students, but I didn't have a great experience as a graduate student going there. You know, I went there to talk about how to turn my CV into a resume and, you know, the person they paired me with was, was pretty sure it was, you know, an undergraduate student intern who gave good advice, but not the advice I needed. You know, it was kind of the advice that a freshman or a junior, you know, an undergraduate might need preparing their resume, um, from scratch, not trying to pivot like I was doing. Um, yeah, I think the resources at the career center were definitely more aimed for undergraduate students who are building a resume from scratch, who aren't, you know, trying to career pivot.

Speaker 4 ([14:20](#)):

I mean, that's what I'm doing is career is pivoting my career. There's all this emphasis in for the undergraduates. I noticed it in Alabama. I noticed it here at UNC to the undergrads, to the English majors saying cuz all the parents, my parents did it too. You know, what are you gonna do with an English degree? What are you gonna do with a religious studies degree? And there was so much

emphasis in undergrad on, oh, you can do all these things with an English degree. But for some reason that just stopped once we got into graduate school and it's just like, okay, I mean, I guess the assumption is if you're in a PhD program, you're gonna be a professor and the whole, you can do other things mentality that they do for undergrads. Just kind of doesn't happen.

Speaker 2 ([15:03](#)):

Yeah. That I have seen that. That does make sense because of course you can do things. We all have very marketable skills, but if you're gonna tell me I can do everything with an English degree, I can do so many things with a religious studies degree. You're gonna have to help me see what those other things are. I, I may not know because I haven't been through college before I don't have a job. So yeah. I think that, yeah, I never thought about that of like, oh, you can do everything, but what is that? Everything.

Speaker 4 ([15:33](#)):

Yeah. And I think, um, yeah, to get back to the point about the disconnect between the individual professors and whoever versus an institutional way of helping, um, I think it's like the first step that has to happen is recognizing those individuals that are able to, you know, like I said, we have some faculty members who have done other careers and come to academia and so have some experience departments I think, should be making committees with those faculty members, bringing those in, to speak to their graduate students. I'm sure they're already bringing them in to speak to their undergrads, to bring 'em into their graduate students as well. Um, and yeah, I think like that's, that's the first place to start, perhaps

Speaker 2 ([16:22](#)):

My next question would be what skills have been useful to learn while in your PhD that are preparing you for the job market outside of academia? Um, just like looking on the upside, what skills do you think you have now?

Speaker 4 ([16:39](#)):

Yeah, well, you know, and full disclosure still looking for that job. Yeah. So, so can't say for sure, what's helped me get the job, but I can say what I hope will help me get the job, um, the ability to, to write well and to you to write in all sorts of different modes and, and, and genres. I think, um, at least for the types of jobs I'm applying to the ability to, to research research skills are I I'm really trying to bring those forward. Um, and this is a, a spin that, that I keep trying to push and that others that I've talked to in this process have, you know, mentioned how, as I said, in, in, in the English, both of my master's and in my PhD in English, we teach a lot. I, I teach most semesters. I taught two classes a semester and all those interpersonal skills of, of interacting with students right.

Speaker 4 ([17:38](#)):

And managing it's project management. I like to think it is, at least I'm trying to, to at least make that case in my job applications, that that's project management experience in a way. Um, and so those sorts of those interpersonal skills and, you know, keeping up with, you know, I've got 19 students or 20 students, however, many students in a class who are all doing, yeah, they're all doing, working on the same assignment, but each assignment has its own twist because it's their individual thing. And I mean, keep track of that and who struggles with this and who excels at this and, and bring all those threads together. Um, to me, those skills, those classroom management skills seem important to all sorts of, to applications outside of, of academia.

Speaker 2 ([18:21](#)):

Yeah. Now did you, uh, sit and reflect on these skills and say, Hey, oh, classroom management, that's just project management or did you have someone outside, uh, yourself help you see and acknowledge that?

Speaker 4 ([18:36](#)):

Yeah, it's a combination. Um, some of these things, yeah. I've, I've come to that on my own and thinking about, okay, how do I pivot this and others it's, I've, I've been grateful to, you know, as I said, individual professors have put me in touch with people and those people have really helped. Um, I've, I've just been struck by how generous people have been with their time and giving advice. Um, yeah. So it's been a combination of reflecting on these skills and also talking to others who have been in the similar situation. Like the, one of the, one of my main contacts that's been very helpful has his PhD in history from UNC and now works in product in digital product management at, uh, I forget some bank, I forget which one. Um, and he's been very helpful in pointing to, you know, the skills that we have as academics that he used, but then the ones I haven't thought of or confirming the ones I have thought of. So I'd say it's a combination of self-reflection, but also advice from, from peers who have been through this,

Speaker 2 ([19:38](#)):

You have a great point though, that we have great professors. They're great humans, we know great humans outside of academia, but is it doesn't need to fall on their shoulders that we're trying to find these jobs.

Speaker 4 ([19:51](#)):

I, I think it certainly doesn't need to fall on the students' shoulders where, you know, we're underpaid overworked. Um, I think that, you know, depart every level of a university, the department level, the college level, the university as a whole level, they keep all these, they keep track of their alumni and who, what the alumni are doing. And, you know, it's time to pull on those networks, those on, on those alumni networks, uh, sure students can do that. They can hop on LinkedIn and they can, and they can search whatever. But, um, I think that the institutions bear some of this response, uh, uh, they should bear this responsibility and pull on these networks and, and do, and do that sort of work.

Speaker 2 ([20:43](#)):

What would you say was the best advice and the worst advice you received while on your academic journey and now into your career journey?

Speaker 4 ([20:55](#)):

Yeah. Well, the best advice was advice. I didn't follow. Um, but looking back on it, it's the best advice that was, um, one of my pro my undergraduate thesis advisor, and one of my, my absolute favorite professor at UA in English, at least as an undergrad. Um, you know, when I told him I want to go to, to graduate school, he said, you know, are you sure? And this was kind of the first taste of the, the, my, uh, sit down and have the job market talk, I guess. And he said, you know, he pushed me. He said, I think you should do law school. You should do something else. If there's anything else you can imagine yourself doing besides graduate school right now, I think you should try that first, take a year or two and do something else. And then if you still want to go back, go back and you know, how a 21, 22 year old Jared was just like, that's absurd.

Speaker 4 ([21:54](#)):

I know what I wanna do. I'm not listening to you. How dare you. But, uh, I, I wish I had listened to that advice. I think all the time that I, I needed, cuz I just did it straight through undergrad, master's PhD and I needed a break and should have taken a break at some point, um, to think about what else was out there that I could do, um, and could be happy doing. And so that was the best advice that I did not follow and now wish I had followed. Um, and you know, if I had listened to it, then maybe I still would've decided after that year or two, that, that grad school is for me probably would have to be honest. Um, worst advice, huh? Yeah. I'd say there's not really been any bad advice, but there's been, uh, there's been lack of advice, you know? So

Speaker 2 ([22:50](#)):

Do you think if PhD programs were set up differently and faculty were equipped to mentor students heading to all different career types that you would've needed, the break that you wish you would've reconsidered. So do you think it's a structural thing or just like, uh, no. You need a break from school anyways.

Speaker 4 ([23:16](#)):

Um, I mean, I think a break from school still, would've been nice just to have a break from school. Um, that's something I tell all of my students, no matter if they're considering graduate school at all, um, I don't quite get into the job market talk with, with them cuz I don't know, it's something about a graduate student. I, I save that for their, for their professor advisors, but I do tell them, you know, I think that I wish I had taken that break. That is a good question though. If it wouldn't have been necessary in the same ways, I think if my program or my institution were set up to give this sort of, um, assistance and help that, that, yeah, that, that Jacob's question is, is, uh, and, and one that we've been talking about, I, I think a break probably still would've been nice, but it would've been more of a, you know what, let's just take some time and chill out more than a, let's take some time to explore other career options.

Speaker 2 ([24:17](#)):

What do you think departments and institutions could do better to help their students moving

Speaker 4 ([24:26](#)):

Forward? I think drawing on those networks, they have alumni networks bring those in, um, you know, like I said, my, in my department, graduate students organized a panel of grad of recent graduates, have that be a semesterly or at the least yearly event and have the department be doing, you know, bringing these people in. Um, so there's that, I think there's what I'd love to see is so many of my, you know, fellow graduate students, myself included, we don't get paid in the summer. And so we seek out work in the summer often it's internships of some type. I did my first summer here at UNC. I did an internship. Um, well, the, the, the, the U the unit within, within units, UNC that I did, my internship doesn't exist anymore, but it was the center for global initiatives. It's now been reorganized into broader UNC global, I believe.

Speaker 4 ([25:27](#)):

Um, but so this TAC aimed internship specifically aimed for first, second year PhD students and worked with, uh, you know, opening access to, to international opportunities for, for, um, traditionally

marginalized groups. And, and so like I did that internship and the reason I found out about it was because of a friend who was in the program a year before me did it. And I told someone after me, and, and it's been a chain of, of English grad students at UNC that have had that internship for like the past four years. And I can think, and you know, other friends have done other internships in the summer. So we're already doing this thing. If they can find a way to give us credit, you know, credit hours for that, or, you know, some sort of, I don't know, degree certificate, you know, something along those lines to recognize that that's work.

Speaker 4 ([26:20](#)):

That's not just a side hustle to get you through the summer. Like that's legitimate work that can lead to your career. And then I think just like being open to change, I think that, that we think of academia as this liberal placed free thinking place to be. But I was involved in some student government last year and been, and so sat in on a lot of, uh, meetings that involved all sorts of people at all sorts of levels of the university and things are slow to change things that need to change or slow to change sometimes. And I think that this is one of 'em that we need to be listening to the needs of the graduate students and, and willing to yeah. Adjust the curriculum or adjust our practices for helping students find jobs and things like that, so that they they're, the, the needs are met.

Speaker 2 ([27:16](#)):

Yeah. What are your next steps? What jobs are you looking at? What do you think you're interested in now? More, just like a, a fun, little, like, get to know Jared, <laugh>

Speaker 4 ([27:28](#)):

You just, yeah. So one hobby that I picked up over the pandemic was digital art, like 3d art and 3d modeling and pixel art and a little bit of teaching myself some game development. And so that is, um, the industry I'm trying to break in. Like, that's my dream industry right now is I'm trying to break into the video game industry, ideally as a writer, a narrative designer, something like that, kind of drawing on that knowledge of literature and those research skills. Um, I'm also looking more broadly at, at tech here in the planning to stay in the, in the research triangle. And there's lots of tech jobs around here. So tech, technical writer, um, learning and development, those sorts of jobs that really capitalize on the skills from the, from graduate school.

Speaker 2 ([28:18](#)):

Do you have anything else, uh, that is on your mind that you would like to say before we finish the recording?

Speaker 4 ([28:26](#)):

Yeah, I think I, I, I, I really liked the point that, that the disconnect between the individuals wanting to help and the institution laying the groundwork to do that help because, you know, like my professors, my advisor, my committee have been incredibly helpful and supportive these last six, seven months since I told them my plan eight months, I guess, since I told 'em my plans. Um, and I'm forever grateful for that. And yeah, I, I, I just, I hope that they can that, and again, not just UNC, not just UA, but I think this is everywhere departments everywhere in the humanities and probably in other fields as well, you know, can find a way to harness those individuals and make something institutions are made of individuals, I guess. And so the individuals with the mind to do this work are there is just a matter of

bringing them together and giving them the resources they need so that it can become an institutional thing. And I think it can be done. It's just, it's gonna, it'll, it'll take some work.

Speaker 2 ([29:32](#)):

The interview with Jared really shows just how unprepared students are to leave the academy. We have acknowledged that the academic job market is hard to succeed in, but we are not preparing students to expand their job search horizons. Jared explained that it is not a problem. An individual can fix. These are issues that go deep through the departments, through the entire institutions that the departments are a part of the skills Jared has gained are extremely applicable to so many jobs outside academia, but he had to figure that out practically by himself with of course, those closest to him offering all the help they could, but that still didn't seem like enough.

Speaker 3 ([30:14](#)):

Jared really echoed some of the issues that Bradley experienced. So to me, that shows that issues facing graduate students after graduation are systemic issues, not a sparse problem experience within some humanities department.

Speaker 2 ([30:29](#)):

Do you think that people can thrive in nonacademic jobs after a PhD program?

Speaker 3 ([30:35](#)):

Actually, that makes me think of Shannon Tr for Shorey. Um, she got her PhD from, uh, UNC chapel hill and is working outside of the academy right now.

Speaker 5 ([30:47](#)):

Yeah. I'm Shannon Tr for Shri. So I went to a meetup about watching horror movies and we would just go to this like random house in Raleigh <laugh> and watch horror movies with 20 other people. Um, and one of them worked at red hat and she posted the job on her Facebook. And I said, okay, you know

Speaker 1 ([31:05](#)):

What, next time on the special series of the study religion podcast, we listened to Shannon Troper, Surey a UNC chapel hill PhD graduate who has transitioned into a job outside the academic system and hear her advice on humanities graduates who wish to do the same. The study religion podcast is a production of the department of religious studies at the university of Alabama. This episode was made with the help of Jared Powell, Jacob Barrett, and Erica Bennett follow the department of religious studies on Twitter and Instagram at study religion or on Facebook, facebook.com/r E L UA. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to our podcast on SoundCloud, Spotify, or apple podcast and give us a rating and review.