What Do You Mean, ‘Job’?

By Leonard Cassuto | AUGUST 21, 2017

Language," warns Laura Kipnis in her powerful new book, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*, should be used with care in academe today. It "shapes reality," and with it, "the narratives that decide people’s fates." Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern University, focuses on the excesses that often accompany Title IX investigations at colleges and universities, but her rhetorical caution applies to other campus practices, too.

Consider the words we use to describe the career choices faced by graduate students. Here’s a fragment from an ordinary exchange I overheard last month between two humanities professors:

"I had two students on the market this year."

"How’d they do?"

"Not badly. One got a job at [a four-year institution]."

"That’s a nice placement."

This dialogue isn’t hard to decode. One of the professor’s students got a job, and the other one didn’t. But let’s look more closely at the words being used, and especially at the assumptions beneath them.

First of all, "job" in this conversation means "faculty job," with the implication that it is on the tenure track. Second, "market" stands for "academic job market."

Those terms form part of a familiar but deceptively dangerous shorthand. They don’t save syllables so much as direct our thinking down specific routes. They imply a default career path for Ph.D.s toward the only "real" job: working as a professor.

Humanists who promote what the American Historical Association calls "career diversity" have been sensitive to these dangers for some years now — and they’ve been trying to revise terminology along with practice. The term "career diversity" is itself a good example. I’ve come to prefer it to its main competitor, "alt-ac" (for "alternative academic"), because "career diversity" privileges multiple outcomes equally.
A quick pause on the word "outcome." I like it better than "placement," which is another instance of pernicious shorthand — it implies "placement in an academic job." For that reason, the recommendation by Angela Brintlinger, a professor of Slavic studies at Ohio State University, that we "ban the word 'placement,'" is sound advice that we would do well to adopt.

As for "alt-ac," the term has thoughtful origins. Katina Rogers, an administrative director at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, is one of the early leaders of the alt-ac movement. On her blog, she describes alt-ac as "not so much a specific job, career, or field, but rather an approach: a way of seeing one's work through the lens of academic training, and of incorporating scholarly methods into the way that work is done."

In other words, alt-ac is academic work that gets done in a setting outside the college classroom. The whole concept offers a useful reminder that colleges and universities don't have a monopoly on scholarly thinking, and that a myriad of jobs across society offer intellectual interest and excitement.

But the everyday usage of alt-ac has departed from Rogers's definition. Instead of expanding the definition of "academic," the term is mainly used to describe second-choice alternatives to the default standard of the professor's job. It implies assessment and ranking.

There's an irony that accompanies this usage. Kathleen Flint Ehm, director of the Office for the Integration of Research, Education, and Professional Development at Stony Brook University, sums it up when she says that today, "the 'alt' career is to become a professor."

Given that most Ph.D.s don't wind up on the tenure track, it seems silly to use alt-ac to describe alternatives to a norm that isn't really a norm. Most uses of alt-ac unfortunately convey the very "Plan B" mentality that the term was coined to oppose.

Jim Grossman, executive director of the AHA, and Anthony T. Grafton, its former president, have warned against viewing nonprofessorial work as "Plan B." Their essay, which was reprinted in this newspaper in 2011, is one of the most influential early statements advocating career diversity.

But Plan B-type thinking persists — enabled by the words we use. If "getting a job" equals becoming a professor, then what should we call it when someone gets hired to do something else? (And if a "good job" means a low teaching load, then what does that say about teaching?)

Finally, let me return to that conversation I quoted earlier. You'll remember that one of the professor's students got a tenure-track job — but did you wonder what happened to the second graduate student? He got erased from the conversation so casually that you may not have seen him disappear.

If we cut students out of the story when they don't get academic jobs, we're saying that those nonfaculty outcomes don't matter. Which means that the story isn't about the students themselves. Instead, it's about the professor's definition of employment. (The exchange also suggests that "placing" one of two students is a desirable result — never mind the other 50 percent.)
We should also reckon with the metaphor of ownership implied in the phrase "my students." The dyad of adviser and graduate student provides one of the organizing principles of doctoral study, but if students believe that they "belong" to their advisers, they'll be reluctant to seek advice from other precincts.

That exclusivity has always posed a problem, but never more than now, when graduate students need advice from different sources as they consider multiple career paths. As professors, we often complain that we don’t have the experience to offer advice on nonfaculty careers — which means that our students should be encouraged to seek it elsewhere. But many graduate students have told me that they’re reluctant to do that for fear of offending their advisers. So the idea of a single Adviser is, well, ill-advised.

We enforce a further, and different, kind of exclusivity when we speak (usually in sacred intonations) about "The Profession" — meaning academe, and particularly professors’ jobs within it. That’s another example of our narrow and destructive shorthand. (Aren’t there other professions out there, too?) In next month’s column, I’ll continue this series on career diversity, with a spotlight on the new study by the Council of Graduate Schools to track that range of professional outcomes.

We have to overhaul our language for a lot of reasons, starting with the need for self-awareness of the messages that we convey by the words we use. Our careless terminology puts us at odds with the very policies that we’re trying to introduce to our workplace.

It won’t be easy to change how we speak and write about graduate students’ careers. Old patterns are hard to banish — they lurk on the periphery of consciousness, and often sneak back into speech. But we must use new labels if we’re really going to change how we think and behave.

In the end, we have to talk and write differently for the sake of our students. We need a student-centered employment narrative. Until we honor — not just tolerate, but actively encourage — the diverse career paths facing our students, we’re not working on their behalf. When we focus on the few who get professorships, we’re telling a solipsistic and unsustainable story about ourselves.

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This article is part of:
The Graduate Adviser

A version of this article appeared in the September 15, 2017 issue.

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