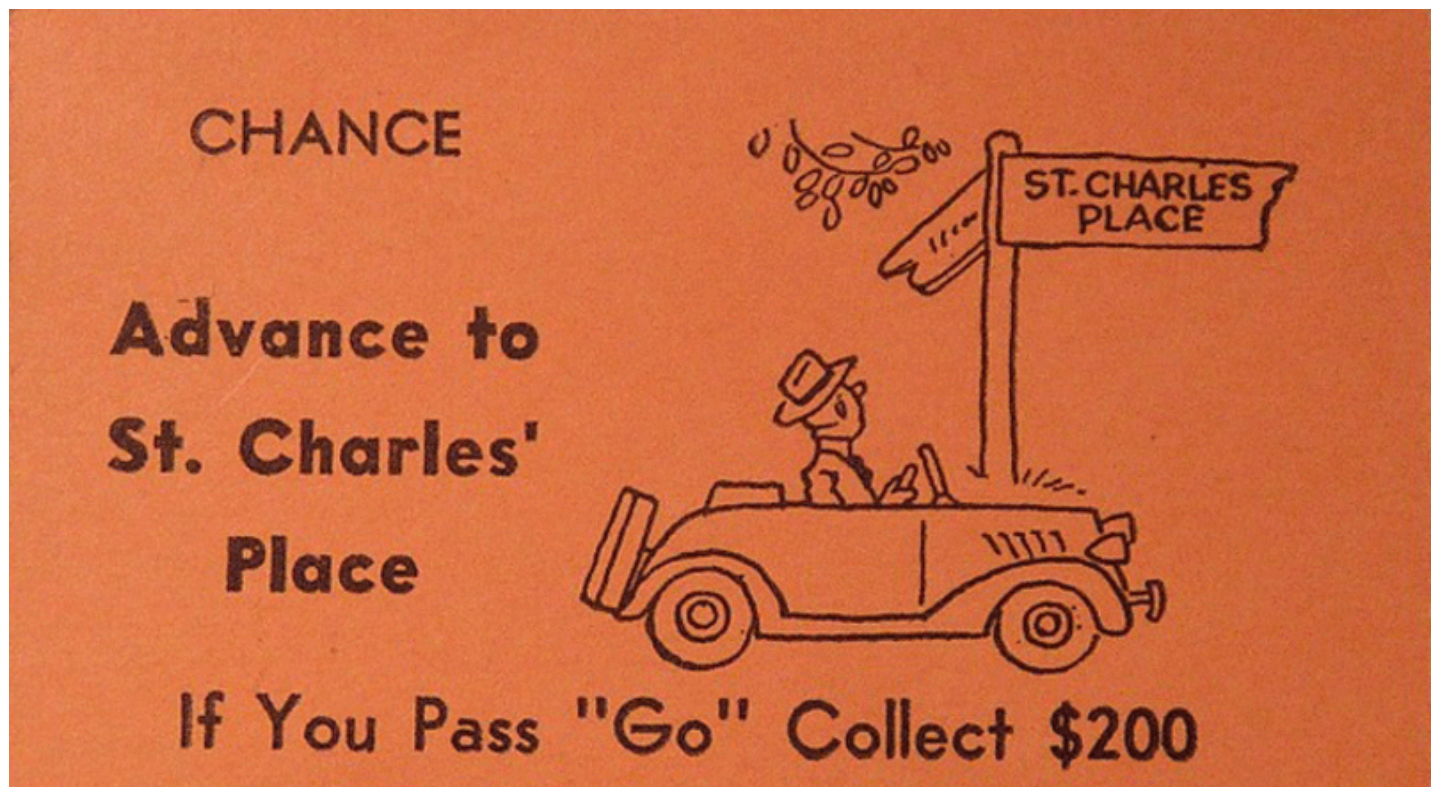


Figuring Out Where You Want to Land After Graduate School



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Image: Chance card from Monopoly (c. 1936-1937), by Parker Brothers

If you're in a doctoral program, you're supposed to want to work at a research university. But when I was mulling my career options in graduate school, what I mostly felt was uncertain. In fact, the only thing I knew I didn't want was a job at a research university.

My secret desire was to teach at a liberal-arts college, but I had plenty of doubts about that, fueled by my advisers' antipathy toward the idea. Ultimately, I did ["come out" of the liberal-arts closet](#). But it was only when I asked my professors — "How did you know where you wanted to work?" — that I realized how few of them could answer that question with certainty.

The (Myth of the) R1-Liberal Arts Dichotomy

A few years ago, when I was plotting my own future, I spent some time asking Ph.D.s what motivated them to pursue one career over others. Many fellow students, and even some of my professors, said they pursued a job at a research-intensive university (especially an R1) simply because it was the expected path, and the most valued. Sure, you might apply for positions at liberal-arts colleges — just to be safe — but that was merely a backup plan. Even if you accepted a position at a liberal-arts college, you only kept that job long enough to get the kind you *really* wanted (meaning one at an R1 university).

I also noticed that the distinctions people made between R1 universities and liberal-arts colleges seemed based more on limited knowledge, or even stereotypes, than on actual knowledge and experience. Many seemed to think

in black-and-white terms: If you want to do research, take an R1 position; if you like teaching, work at a liberal-arts college. Indeed, when I mentioned my plan to accept the tenure-track job I'd been offered at the University of Richmond, one of my advisers responded, "But you're good at research!"

It's worth stating what should be obvious: Faculty at both types of institutions do research and teach classes, albeit to varying degrees. Too many academics erase the variation *among* Research I universities and *among* liberal-arts colleges — not to mention the similarities between those types of institutions. For example, research expectations have grown for faculty at liberal-arts colleges (too). However, you may face less pressure to secure a research grant if you teach at a private liberal-arts college with a sizeable endowment than if you are at a public institution strapped for funds.

Another example: While it's true that liberal-arts faculty teach more classes than R1 faculty, we don't necessarily teach more students. For example, I teach five classes a year, with enrollment in each course capped at about 15, 20, or 24 students. Even if I taught five classes at the cap of 24 students each, I would still only have a maximum of 120 students. Meanwhile my counterparts at a large research university — teaching three classes with at least 70 students in each — would have 210 students. Since my institution is exclusively undergraduate, I also have the good fortune (in my opinion) of *not* having to serve on master's theses and dissertation committees (or help those students navigate the academic job market) but, I do serve as an honors thesis adviser for one or two undergraduates each year.

Of course faculty advisers often ignore all the other options for a faculty career, too, including community colleges, historically Black and Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges — not to mention careers outside of academia.

What If You Don't Have A Clue?

In the spirit of sharing advice that I had to learn the hard way, I'd like to offer some tips for finding the career path that feels right to you. If you're 100 percent certain of the path you wish to pursue, good for you! But if you're conflicted, as I was, then testing out other options along the way is a must, and will make you a more well-rounded academic. How else are you going to make an informed decision?

During grad school — no matter what your advisers are telling you — try to pursue a variety of opportunities to gain training in research, teaching, and applied work. Serve as a research assistant and a teaching assistant (and teach your own classes if possible), but also seek out internships and opportunities to gain experience outside of your university. Take advantage of whatever pedagogical and teaching training your department and university has to offer; attend pedagogical workshops at professional meetings or other universities. While you're at it, consider which aspects of academic work you excel at and like best. Don't wait until you finish grad school to discover that you loathe teaching or that spending time alone in an archive gives you hives.

I highly recommend doing a research and/or teaching fellowship at an institution that is different from the one where you're earning your Ph.D. Having that experience not only makes you a better candidate, but it's one of the best ways to get a sense of what life's actually like at other types of institutions.

Short of that, look for opportunities to visit different institutions — attend talks, stay with friends, or, better yet, shadow a faculty member at another campus for at least a few days. If your program or university does not have a

formal shadowing program, make your own arrangements to do so.

And don't limit your forays to academic institutions. Consider doing a summer research internship for a nonprofit or think tank.

My brief stint working at a nonprofit agency during college turned out to be less enjoyable than I'd hoped. I hated doing anything that felt like busy work (e.g., filing, copying), and I hated having a boss even more. Worse yet, the office attempted to maintain a politics-free environment, despite advocating on behalf of LGBTQ professionals. Yet that internship experience reinforced my desire to work in academia, so even a bad experience can lead to something good.

Unfortunately, I never got the opportunity to work or observe faculty at a liberal-arts college before I accepted my current position at the University of Richmond. But working as a diversity fellow at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee the summer after my third year in grad school gave me a taste of faculty life at an urban research university and a chance to teach students with different backgrounds than those at my graduate school.

Make connections with Ph.D.s on various career paths. Get to know people at academic conferences, and ask them what life is like at their institution. Talk to recent alumni of your program about their jobs and ask how they came to the path they're on. The danger of relying exclusively on the advice of professors and students currently in your Ph.D. program is that they're unlikely to know much about life outside a research-intensive university. (And, no, studying at a liberal-arts college [is not the same](#) as working at one.)

Do your homework. After finding that people in my Ph.D program had little useful advice about life at a liberal-arts college, I turned to the Internet for [others' reflections](#) on [careers](#) in the [liberal arts](#). (Later, I added [my own post](#)— along with a link to this handy [chart by Terry McGlynn](#)— to the small chorus of voices on the subject.) I also took time to read some [stories](#) of Ph.D.s who had pursued alternative careers (#altac). It was reassuring to know that the choice to work at a liberal-arts college, or a research university, or outside of academia wasn't so obvious, and it was extremely helpful to find others had talked about it publicly.

Finally, before the time comes to apply for jobs, [assess](#) your personal needs and those of your family. If you are pursuing a faculty career, identify which attributes of a job, department, campus culture, and community you care about most — and worry about institution type later. Remember that within each of the [Carnegie Classification categories](#), institutional culture will vary greatly. You might find a Research I university where faculty members genuinely value and reward good teaching and where the work environment is comparable to that of a liberal-arts college. Likewise, some liberal-arts colleges place a premium on strong research and scholarly productivity and will offer resources akin to those of a research university. Treat each campus visit as an opportunity to investigate if the department, institution, and city would be a good fit for you. Interview *them*.

And if you wind up in a position that's not your ideal fit, remember, it's not the end of the world. Treat it like what it is -- a learning experience and a temporary chapter in your life.

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