The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

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University teaching is by nature an optimistic profession. To invest in the time and energy for graduate-level training and then go on to work with our own students is to invest in the belief that despite the ills of war, political corruption, social conflict, and natural disasters, there is hope that human beings can overcome the obstacles that we face. This hope springs not just from a vague sense that “everything will be okay” but also

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1 This paper developed in tandem with a roundtable discussion entitled “Blended Medievalist Careers” delivered at the Fall 2015 meeting of the Medieval Association of the Midwest at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library of Saint John’s University, Collegeville, MN. We extend deep appreciation to the other discussants: William F. Hodapp (Professor of Technical Writing and Program Coordinator of Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the College of St. Scholastica), Matthew Z. Heintzelman (Curator of Austria/Germany Study Center and Cataloger of Rare Books at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library), and Chad Judkins (PhD, English, 2013, Purdue University and First Lt. in the United States Army).
from seeing our own liberal arts educations help us solve “real world” problems.

Along with this optimism, the pursuit of graduate studies brings a passion for research within a given discipline or specialization. In the cases of this essay’s authors and many of its readers, that passion is for medieval studies. We share a conviction that our subject matter is valuable and worth sharing. That conviction may stem from our understanding that lessons from history and philosophy can shape our reactions to current events. It may also arise from the awareness that human self-expression in art, music, and literature can stretch across centuries and still resonate with us, suggesting that people of any time or place are not as radically different as they sometimes first appear. Indeed, there is a poetry to learning and teaching these lessons of medieval history, philosophy, art, music, and literature because they revive the very roots of the university as an institution developed in the Middle Ages.

Unfortunately, the decline of tenure positions presents a harsh counterpoint to the ideal of university teaching as a way to share these passions. We medievalists may bare the brunt of this reality; we certainly have enough colleagues and mentors whose retirements are tarnished by the news that their medievalist tenure-lines will not be filled. As this essay collection illustrates, many medievalists are already the sole individuals in their departments if not their institutions who engage in this area of specialization. Thus, the news that a colleague or mentor’s tenure-line will be ended impacts with extra poignancy contingent medievalists trying to carve out time for research and opportunities for specialist teaching.

We speculate to a degree in the preceding statements, but regardless of whether medievalists disproportionately are perceived as “impractical,” a September 2015 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education presents a drop in graduate students in the arts and humanities. It states, “first-time doctoral enrollment in history, English, and other arts-and-humanities disciplines fell 0.5 percent from 2013 to 2014, according to a report pub-
lished last week by the Council of Graduate Schools.” It is worth pondering whether those who might have enrolled in graduate studies in the humanities will experience the same passion for their chosen career or develop the skills that those who complete advanced degrees do. There may be many reasons for this reduced enrollment, but one almost certainly is the lack of full-time positions and stability of such a career path.

Those of us who do remain optimistic about the possibility of eventually finding a tenure-track position should not succumb, however, to a false idealism about when such a job will present itself. In the current market, opportunities for blended career paths need to become serious considerations. Graduate students and graduate programs alike have been called for some time to give greater consideration and discussion of how advanced degrees can benefit non-academic professions. A statement from the MLA in 2014 is the most significant to our backgrounds, stating the need to “validate the wide range of career possibilities that [humanities] doctoral students can pursue.” However, these statements often have been broad calls for action, so we hope our discussion will provide two working models that seek to strike a balance between a passion for medieval studies while transferring graduate training to complementary professions outside of academia.

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Job Market Background

A broad marker of the changes to academic teaching appears through the drop in number of tenured positions across all disciplines. In 1975, 57% of all faculty positions were tenure-track, but this figure had dropped below 30% by 2009. Projections place 15–20% of all positions as the new normal for tenure.\(^5\) Additionally, a 2013 report found that since 2005 “the proportion [of full-time professors] that are untenured but on the tenure-track declined […] from 11.3 percent to 9.9 percent.”\(^6\)

From the narrower perspectives of our own disciplines in English and French, the Modern Language Association’s 2013–14 report on the Job Information List reveals that advertised English positions are down by 8.4% and foreign language positions are down by 6.8%. These declines are for the second year in a row, with the 2012–13 report showing drops of 7.5% in English and 2.3% in foreign languages.\(^7\) Put differently, last year’s numbers come to 1,046 in English and 1,027 in foreign languages compared to the 10-year high in 2007–8 of 1,826 in English and 1,680 in foreign languages.\(^8\)

Furthermore, when we consider recent postings in the job market, we notice a dichotomy: institutions request applications from academics with either a highly specialized, narrow, “trendy,” “sexy” field or an incredibly difficult combination of skills (e.g., the ability to teach both French and Arabic from beginning to advanced levels with a native command of

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French, Arabic, and English). Because the academy is moving to a model of doing more with less, is it any wonder that those with advanced degrees fill contract, visiting appointments, or adjunct positions?

The realities of this job market also have an impact on full-time faculty. Fewer tenure-track positions increase the amount of pressure upon the professors in them to meet research quotas and to perform administrative service.9 One Canadian study even suggests that these pressures link to strains on mental and physical health. In a sample of 267 assistant professors, only 30.7% met recommended levels of exercise, compared to 50% of non-academic professionals.10 A Harvard-conducted study found that “only 70% of [those on the tenure-track] at research institutions said they would choose to work at their universities if they had it to do over again.”11 Hard work that promises reward is one thing, but inescapable stress is something else.

Although these numbers suggest bleak job prospects, they do not paint a full picture of the motivations for pursuing graduate studies. Graduate degrees represent far more than simply job credentials and are much more integral parts of our identities. The process of completing graduate school has taught us practical skills for performing research, highly developed writing, presentations, and teamwork. We also gain such mental skills as the focus for analyzing problems, the discipline for pursuing long-term projects, the organizational skills for dealing with complexity, and an understanding of how different disciplines complement and relate to one another. In short, graduate study develops passion in us for our subject area, medieval or otherwise, and from that passion, we derive a precise framework for how we understand the world.

9 Findlay, “Whatever Happened to Tenure?”
11 Wilson, “Tenure, RIP.”
Equally important to these practical and mental skills are the relationships that we build with others through these passions. The best interactions with students in the classroom create a two-way exchange that stimulates both parties, forging connections that can be important both for the short-term and for lifetimes. Through conference attendance, we also create networks with other scholars who have completed similar courses of study and share our beliefs.

Although all of these benefits are less tangible than the financial benefits of having a tenure-track job, they are just as important to our satisfaction in life. Indeed, we should view the academic job crisis as having as much to do with the choice of walking away from these passions and relationships as with the shortage of faculty positions for PhDs on the market. It is because of these stakes that we are attempting to forge middle paths for ourselves.

**Personal Histories**

Tim became involved with two closely related Native American historical sites in Licking County, Ohio — Flint Ridge and the Newark Earthworks — in 2013. He was hired to work as an interpretive guide for these sites, which provided supplemental income to the adjunct teaching he was doing while pursuing his academic job search. To earn a livable income, adjuncting was requiring him to take on five courses per semester, plus summer classes, cutting significantly into his time and energy for research and the job search itself. The interpretive work was seasonal and intermittent, but it significantly required less time than teaching additional classes because there was no prep or grading at the end of a tour.

In October 2014, the current site managers of Flint Ridge approached Tim with the proposition of taking over as the part-time curator of the park and its museum. If not the beginning, their proposal marked a defining moment for the model of his blended career path due to the close geographic and cultural relationships of the sites in the area. The Newark Earthworks
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consists of a pair of two-thousand-year-old geometric enclosures called the Great Circle and the Octagon. They respectively enclose thirty and seventy acres. The Great Circle and Octagon are also part of a World Heritage package projected for advancement as soon as 2018 and making Licking County an international tourists’ destination.

Although not explicitly part of the World Heritage package, Flint Ridge’s proximity of just 11 miles from the Great Circle and Octagon will also make it of interest to visitors. Its significance is its one thousand flint quarries from which ancient Native Americans made their stone-chipped tools beginning thirteen or fourteen thousand years ago. The quarries and earthen mounds build a complementary picture of the area’s early people wherein Flint Ridge is the technological base for the civilization and the earthworks are the culture’s self-expression.

By taking on site management of Flint Ridge, Tim has been able to take a step back from teaching, paradoxically leaving open more time for course prep and for professional development. In the six months since beginning to take on responsibilities as site manager, he began organizing a cast of readers for a recording with the Chaucer Studio, contributed to this article, and co-organized three conference sessions. Just as significant as opening up time, if not more so, has been allowing more energy for these professional activities. As many of us probably find true, outlining lesson plans, writing assignment sheets, and grading student papers require the same energy reserves as research. Tim’s experience has often been that, even if time at the end of a day allowed for his own reading and writing, he simply could not maintain focus.

Like Tim and many other graduate students in the humanities, Aubri has chosen to adjunct to continue in her profession and to teach medieval French literature. She finds teaching French and medieval French highly fulfilling and rewarding. However, because of the current climate in the Academy and the paucity of available full-time and adjunct positions, she applied for a language-related job for a major medical company in August of 2015. Ironically, she applied for the same position she was
unable to take a few years before because she was presented with a full-time temporary teaching opportunity. She had begun an academic job search and then received a job announcement for French speakers in the international medical company. However, when the academic job search proved fruitful, she decided to continue teaching in academe.

Aubri decided to apply for the position in the medical industry again because it would mean speaking French and aiding French-Canadian customers who purchased medical devices. It would also allow her to use the communication and presentation skills gained during her graduate study, and she would work in a team of others completing the same tasks. Aubri felt she was qualified for the position because of past jobs she had in the pharmaceutical industry and in healthcare facilities during her undergraduate studies and because of her fluency in French. Her previous experience as an assistant in the Office of Medical Affairs communicating with healthcare professionals, interacting with healthcare staff, verifying medical privileges, and acting as a liaison between her supervisor and physicians prepared her to understand the inner workings of a company based on service. She also had prior experience in Quality Control for a pharmaceutical company which included testing, storing, and disposing of medications in specified environments as directed by the corporation. As a result of that position, she was familiar with corporate management structure, protocols, and manufacturing. She decided to include these positions in healthcare and pharmaceuticals on her application along with her teaching and academic experiences.

During Aubri’s second application process for the medical position, her application was accepted, and she had a conversation with the human resources recruiter about the position within days of submitting it. During the application and screening processes, she went through several phone conversations and interviews. In addition to the necessity of practical use of the French language, she found the benefits and retirement package that were offered very attractive because these are rare in part-time and in some full-time academic appointments.
Aubri assumed she might have time to teach a class or two around her work schedule, but then learned that the hours were based on Canadian time and that she would never be presented with a regular nine to five corporate shift should she take the position. The odd hours and the necessity of a commute would not allow her to teach even one French course in the role of adjunct faculty. That fact and some prior commitments that conflicted with the company’s training schedule prevented her from taking the job. However, she currently receives job announcements from the medical corporation tailored to her profile on an almost weekly basis. Tim once remarked that this corporate “courtship” was indeed medieval, to which Aubri agreed, citing the theme of the persistent knight and the reluctant lady. She has continued her search for a full-time position with more reasonable hours or at least a part-time position that would allow her to continue in her current role as adjunct faculty.

Teaching within a Blended Career

Our statements about cutting back our amounts of teaching are not to dismiss its satisfaction as a second major component of involvement in academia. They are instead describing a recalibration of expectations in order to strike a more sustainable balance. Admittedly, many of the courses taught by adjunct faculty are the introductory and general education courses whose students bring wide ranges of ability and enthusiasm for the subject matter. Although these courses can demand great deals of patience, depending upon the student make up, the arrangement of working a second, nonacademic job provides a case of less being more. Fewer students in fewer sections in a term allows for more focus on the classes for which we are responsible.

Moreover, general education courses do not entirely preclude the possibility of bringing in specialized content upon occasion. Our specializations help us to see the world in unique ways, and taking opportunities to draw on that knowledge provides students with learning experiences that we can uniquely offer them, even if the course does not strictly demand that content.
One of Tim’s most successful examples has been to incorporate a mini-lesson on the history of the English language into the composition classroom. Within a single class session, he briefly demonstrates how English evolves through Old and Middle English before reaching Modern English by reading aloud for students texts in all three forms and by demonstrating different etymological influences that have shaped English through invasion. He also discusses modern dialects and neologisms with his students to demonstrate how language still is not stable. Tim’s hope is to provide a context for students to think about why standardized language is important, especially when they might exclusively associate language study with the tedium of grammar and mechanics.

Literature surveys present even greater opportunities for incorporating medieval content. These courses cannot be exclusively medieval, but their thematic nature obviously allows anyone to incorporate specialized material into the study. The theme of “the mythic and the heroic” allowed Tim to incorporate the Genesis creation story, Ælfric’s Life of Saint Edmund, and J.R.R. Tolkien’s neo-medieval The Hobbit alongside the Iroquois creation story, John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men, and Malala Yousaf sai’s I Am Malala. These discussions drew on older definitions of “myth” as “origin stories” and allowed the students to consider how we still to look to ideals such as the American Dream or empowerment through education as guiding narratives in our lives. Heroes then are the people who fulfill these narratives. Tim makes these kinds of thematic connections from medieval and Renaissance works to other periods, and being an adjunct does not prevent him from taking these opportunities, which are just as, if not more, satisfying for exploring specialized material with students as they would be for full-time colleagues. Additionally, having his doctorate has caused Tim to be invited with more frequency to teach these more desirable literature surveys that allow him to incorporate his specialization. In time, he may also be asked to teach period surveys.

Aubri has also had extensive experience in teaching general education courses such as French 101. Like Tim, she has incor-
porated her medieval specialty by introducing language students to Old French and Middle French, thus showcasing the evolution of modern French. Students often do not realize that language is not static. They are also unaware that there was a complex process of written communication before the invention of the printing press. Aubri has had opportunities to incorporate discussions and experiences related to textual studies and manuscript culture into her basic language classes. She has taken her French 101 students on excursions to rare manuscript libraries where they have heard presentations by experts in the field. Students were also introduced to French cuisine during course excursions. They were delighted to discover that they were eating lunch at a locally owned French buffet on a trip to the Lilly Library. Students were presented with several authentic French dishes they had never eaten, and they adventurously tasted each one. On a later excursion to the Art Institute of Chicago, students had lunch at the oldest crêperie in the US after they completed their assignments on different periods of French and Francophone art. They curiously studied the menu, competing to see who would order the best meal! Students’ enthusiastic responses indicate that they enjoy experiential learning, and they often comment that these are their favorite activities at the end of the semester. Because of the success in student engagement and experiential learning, Aubri infuses her specialty into her teaching rather than focusing on presentations of verb conjugations. Students in her basic language courses are fulfilling their language requirements and are often from different backgrounds and specialties. She finds their reactions and observations intriguing.

Aubri also enjoys teaching medieval and Renaissance surveys in addition to basic language courses. These are rare opportunities to focus on her specialty, and students’ reactions to Marie de France’s Lais, the chivalric exploits portrayed in La Chanson de Roland, and the comedic medieval farces are inspiring. She has had the good fortune of linking medieval art and literature in some of her courses and has taken students to art museums in her area to view medieval works. Survey courses
allow her to introduce students to medieval music, manuscript culture, medieval art, and Old French. Because students are often unfamiliar with medieval society, Aubri relishes the chance to introduce them to the myriad elements of medieval culture through the lens of literature.

None of this is to suggest in either of our cases that a career consisting of general education is comparable to being a department’s medieval specialist. Instead, it is to demonstrate that one can make opportunities to bring in specialized content in satisfying ways even when teaching almost exclusively general education courses.

**Academic Skills in a Blended Career**

Our emphasis above on teaching is not to say that the pursuits of our secondary careers have just been “side jobs.” We have been able to translate academic skills into these careers naturally as well. Foremost has been the ability to make oral presentations. Mastery of material and presentation style proves very important because of the necessity of communicating with many people on a daily basis. We regularly engage groups and customers through asking and answering questions while making progress toward explaining a larger theme or greater issue. As curator of Flint Ridge, Tim’s spoken portion of a tour can last anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour-and-a-half: the same lengths of time as many college class sessions. Presentation and teaching skills are also applicable for Aubri because she would be aiding customers and teaching them technical details about their medical devices. Additionally, she would help them solve problems and would employ her verbal skills to convey, communicate and postulate about the suspected defect or malfunction.

Other academic skills than presentation ability also fit into each of our secondary career paths. Research strategies are another skill set that Tim has found applicable to interpretive work at Flint Ridge and the earthworks. One important application is as a complement to good presentation. As Native American scholars, historians, and archaeologists address new problems,
Tim’s interpretation evolves by incorporating new material. Research skills are also vital for synthesizing academic material into mediums more accessible to the general public. One project Tim completed his first summer as site manager was setting up a display case at the Great Circle’s museum explaining the importance of stone-chipped tools constructed at Flint Ridge in relation to the cultural expression represented by the Earthworks. His academic research and writing background has also helped him to write a collection of short essays for self-guided tours of the various sites.

Experience working with a historical period of literature also has given Tim what he calls a “contextualizing perspective” that is helpful to his interpretive work. By this, he means the ability to think in reference to the events and values of a time period other than our own. It is of course a skill necessary for any kind of academic work and one that is honed through graduate-level training. Although this perspective taking could apply generally to any culture and its time period, Tim's work with late medieval culture potentially provides a narrower connection as well. Specifically, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century worldviews represent the European values that collided with the pre-existing Native American cultures of the Western Hemisphere. Where there is overlap, great sensitivity in presenting European and Native perspectives that did and continue to conflict is necessary, but there is potential for cross-feed between the two content areas.

Aubri likewise has academic skills that transfer between her careers. In addition to presentation and communication, her fluency in French has been invaluable in her job search. Because it is sometimes difficult to find someone who has experience working in healthcare facilities and pharmaceuticals who also speaks French, Aubri’s candidacy for a job in the medical device industry was a direct result of her ability to speak the language and engage French-Canadian customers effectively. Her years of communicative immersion training and teaching prepared her very well for industry specific training as well as acquiring specialized and technical vocabulary. Although she has no prior background working with medical devices, she was offered a
package that was comparable to someone with at least two years of prior experience based on her language ability.

Furthermore, a natural extension of Aubri’s French skills would be translation between a French-Canadian customer and other peers and supervisors who are primarily Anglophones. She would translate from French to English in order to document problems that customers encountered as well as to suggest or verify solutions she discovered during her interactions with customers. Thus, her previous experience in communicative language teaching has become an important aspect in her model of a blended career in the medical industry.

The transfer of skills and ideas also moves from our secondary careers to inform our research. Tim has learned that flint was a major construction material used throughout England and in East Anglia particularly. Indeed, this knowledge begins to color the lines from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in which sparks fly from the hooves of the Green Knight’s horse as it gallops out of Arthur’s hall (line 459). What kinds of imagery are further associated with flint in Middle English literature may be an interesting avenue to explore. In Aubri’s case, she sees the potential to investigate lines of inquiry combining her interests in the medical industry and medieval studies. Given her research experience in textual studies and manuscripts, she plans to focus future research on images of the body and depictions of medieval medical practices. She has also recently become a member of the Society for the Study of Disability in the Middle Ages.

**Broader Applications and Observations**

There admittedly are many aspects of our experiences that are highly particular to our situations. Not every community contains historical sites that are up for World Heritage nomination, nor does every community have a major medical industry. Nonetheless, the transferrable skills we found align well with those used by many people in similar situations. Teaching helps with making oral presentations. Research skills provide reliable information in a world in which the Internet is glutted with con-
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Conflicting facts and opinions. The ability to think within different contexts builds empathy. In an increasingly globalized world, multilingualism is a major asset. We feel these points bear emphasizing, even if they’re not original observations.

What we hope is a more insightful observation is that graduates on the job market should be attuned to the issues and opportunities within the communities where they live. By doing so, they can explore ways of tailoring their previous work experiences and academic abilities to unique and exciting career possibilities available to them locally. During the courses of our respective job searches, it was very easy to feel like the rest of our lives were on hold. Indeed, in many ways they were because the hope of being hired into a full-time position meant being prepared to move within a year’s time and made us hesitant to take on challenges unrelated to our research and job searches. Although Tim’s initial decision to begin working as an interpretive guide with Flint Ridge and the earthworks was geared chiefly toward supplementing his teaching income, it also provided an outlet through which he met new people and acquired new applications for his skills. Aubri is still in the process of trying to blend a career in the medical industry with a teaching career in the humanities. She hopes her search for a position in the medical industry will be fruitful and provide intriguing opportunities to use her knowledge of French language and culture. In both of our cases, there are dichotomies presented by the differences between the two halves of our respective career paths, but we find the differences interesting and complementary ways to continue developing our skill sets without abandoning our passions for teaching and medieval research.¹²

We would suggest that many who find themselves adjuncting “full-time” would benefit from a second job that provides a path for moving forward with their skills as a way to com-

¹² We hope nothing in our discussion has implied that we have been dissatisfied with the students and colleagues with whom we most closely work. In fact, we have been fortunate in our roles as contingent faculty members because our tenured peers have always treated us with respect and appreciation as we have negotiated our blended career options.
bat frustration and burnout. In our situations, second jobs have also become opportunities for blended careers. Just as important as recognizing local opportunities for using one’s skill set is the flexibility that the path of a blended career provides. Having the responsibilities and income from the second job provides Tim with a reason to limit the number of classes he teaches in a semester. These limits in turn leave him with more time for pursuing research and writing while at home. By limiting her teaching to a part-time position while continuing her job search, Aubri finds that she has time to return to medieval projects that she has wanted to complete and expand since graduate school and to focus upon her academic writing and conferencing. While she has yet to find a suitable solution for what she envisions as her blended career path, she appreciates the flexibility that her current position affords. Indeed, being able to find the time to complete our medieval research and participate in conferences allows us to remain fully engaged with our areas of specialization.

We do not wish to depict our emerging blended careers as perfect solutions. However, there’s another type of flexibility in our situations: the ability to transition. After a few years of achieving publications and administrative experience, we could return to the academic job market. Alternatively, for Tim, the goal of achieving World Heritage status for the earthworks provides the possibility of movement toward greater involvement at the historical sites. Aubri would like to construct a model including teaching and using her language skills to benefit those outside of academe. She plans to find a balance between corporate and adjunct positions to achieve her goals in teaching and medieval studies while remaining on the job market. Neither of us intends to transition away completely from teaching and research, but that ability to move by degrees has proven to be important for maintaining optimism while finding blended careers that balance our academic passions with the necessities of daily and long-term living.