The importance of finding mentors
How I landed my job in consulting
Navigating the challenges of a job search
FROM THEOLOGY TO CONSULTING

Thanks for sharing your story, Greg. Can you tell us a little about yourself?

I recently completed my PhD in Near Eastern studies with a focus on Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Languages. My educational background is in theology and religious studies and working in ministerial settings. Much of this interest grew out of my own religious upbringing and drove me deeper into the study of history, languages, philosophy, and more! My education at Johns Hopkins has proven wonderfully expansive and enriching (and challenging!). It helped me develop my personal thinking and lifestyle in substantial ways. While my current work is not strictly "humanistic," I could not be more grateful for the humanities education and exposure I have had at Hopkins and former institutions.

What or who inspires you everyday?

I'm inspired to find ways to meet the needs of those around me to the best of my ability. I think of myself as a helper to those I encounter in various capacities. As a researcher and teacher at JHU, that involved mediating complex information to students at the start of their educational journeys.

What brings you enjoyment and fulfillment daily?

Daily enjoyment and fulfillment often come to me through simple things: time playing with my son (especially outdoors), being with my family, getting outdoors, and making as well as enjoying good food with those close to me.

What extracurricular activities were you involved in at Hopkins and Beyond?

I was not involved in many extracurriculars at Hopkins, but I am active in getting outdoors to hike. I think I've frequented just about every Maryland state park between the Eastern Shore and the Appalachian Trail!
I also enjoy learning about recipes and trying out new languages (currently I'm digging into Arabic!). I'm teaching myself to play the piano, and I like reading and learning about new things. I don't think I'll ever lose my interest in the Hebrew Bible, theology, and their impact on cultures past and present.

You have recently transitioned to consulting. Congrats! Can you tell us about your new position post-graduation?

I have spent the last year trying to transition out of the tenure-track academic career trajectory toward that of a consultant. I'm especially interested in public sector consulting and the opportunities it affords to meet the needs of the federal, state, and local communities.

I have started a position as an Analyst at The Clearing, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. The Clearing primarily serves clients in the public sector, meeting the needs for our federal government and local states, including the District of Columbia. Getting this position took a long time, longer than I ever would have expected when I started out!

Could you outline some of the steps you took to get the Analyst position at The Clearing?

The initial steps involved learning how to network using resources such as LinkedIn and the JHU ONEHOP mentoring platform. These resources might seem "boring" or "pointless" to the average PhD student, but they proved to be critical for me over the past year with regards to making meaningful connections and learning about industries and positions of interest.

Finding a mentor in the business world to turn to on a regular basis throughout the year was also absolutely critical to me. I learned about standard business practices, hiring procedures, networking "etiquette," managing job offer expectations, salary negotiations, and so much more.
Were there any things that didn't work out for you during the job application process?

Filling out serial applications (sending lots of applications to businesses without contacts) was not a good idea. I would also advise against aimless applying. There were times when I applied across industries and different sectors. However, none of these applications amounted to anything since I hadn't prepared myself sufficiently for these specific career trajectories. Pro Tip: information about "branding" from Dawn Graham in her book "Switchers" helped me think better about this. I think it’s an incredible resource for PhDs who want to make a transition out of academia into other sectors.

Could you share a few lessons learned during the job search?

Before searching for jobs, I would have said I hated networking. I don't like the idea of sucking up to people and making "fake" relationships for personal gain. I learned over the last year that networking isn't that bad and can be enjoyable. I met a lot of great people who taught me lots about consulting and shared their own experiences.

People are typically eager to help where they can and are happy to make new contacts and build meaningful professional relationships. Also, I never thought that finding a job would take an entire year. I think there was a certain sense of "entitlement" having a PhD from Johns Hopkins.

Wouldn't that just guarantee a job offer? No! It takes time to find the right fit with a company that interests you and that is likewise interested in you. I would thus advise all PhDs to get started on their job hunt well before their graduation since the process can take a very long time.

With regards to the job searching process itself, it can be rather discouraging. It proved helpful to take various times off and just set the project aside. Sometimes I needed to focus on my own research and writing as well as have time for my personal wellness.
Instead of spending every evening filling out applications and making phone calls, it was important for me to get outdoors, cook good food, or read a good book. Finally, finding the right fit with the company required me to get clear on who I am, what I want from my career, and where I can best match these two realities.

There are limitless jobs out there, but I couldn't get any of them if I wasn't able to demonstrate clearly how my experience and skills matched the industry needs. Again, while the language of "branding" feels funny to me, comments from Dawn Graham's book "Switchers" were really informative and helpful, even though I was initially a little resistant to her ideas.

Job searching, as you shared, wasn't as straightforward as you expected. What did you find the most challenging?

The first challenge was time. The process takes far longer than I ever imagined! I started looking for full-time positions in early spring of 2021 and didn't get a job offer until a whole year later! The second challenge was attention. It's quite difficult to manage the "distraction" that networking and job hunting can pose while finishing your PhD. I found it helpful to section off specific times for career work so that these endeavors could remain contained and not impact my academic progress. The third challenge was related to feelings of personal worth. Applying for jobs with a humanities PhD feels like throwing your resume into a black hole.

You pour yourself into an endless series of LinkedIn messages, informational interviews, and job applications, but at the end of it all, you don't have a job... until you do :)

What helped you navigate these challenges?

There were several things that helped me fight the challenges. First, it was important to remember that I was incredibly thankful for my PhD, and it didn't really matter what someone else thought of it. I'm very interested in Near Eastern history and the Hebrew Bible. Even if employers could care less about this work, it has enriched my life and is something I wouldn't ever want to go without. Second, reminding myself of what I call the "small networking gains." 99% of my networking contacts and conversations never turned into interviews or job offers, but that doesn't make them pointless.

I learned a lot about the consulting industry, business cultures and practices, and the lifestyle to expect through all of these conversations. If I had spoken to my eventual employer or interviewed for a job without having had all these former conversations, I might not have secured an interview and the job offer!

Finally, you need just one job offer. It's hard to count how many applications I filled out over the last year for positions across various industries. However, the number of rejected applications doesn't matter. It just takes one job to get started.
I would have encouraged myself to "keep my eyes on the horizon" and think about what's ahead in the career path even when it's tempting to get bogged down in research.

What would be your advice for fellow graduate students navigating a PhD program?

If I could have advised myself at the start of the PhD program, I would have encouraged myself to "keep my eyes on the horizon" and think about what's ahead in the career path even when it's tempting to get bogged down in research. It's also important to think about what one values about the research. Is it the subject matter? The research and public speaking? Personal interaction? The experimental method? I would also advise other students to keep your eyes wide open to venues inside and outside of academia where your unique interests could serve the needs of others. You might be surprised to find where that can lead you!

Were there any JHU-specific resources that helped you along the way to get your new position?

Hopkins provided me with two critical resources. The first one was the PHutures Office, it was an incredibly helpful resource to me. The regular seminars and educational sessions were instrumental towards my professional development. The second resource was the ONEHOP mentoring platform that helped me find a career mentor who stuck with me throughout the course of the year (and beyond!) and helped me navigate the different factors involved in the job search. Ultimately, it was through one of my mentor's contacts that I actually received a job offer.
"I would also advise other students to keep your eyes wide open to venues inside and outside of academia where your unique interests could serve the needs of others. You might be surprised to find where that can lead you!"

GREG CHURCH