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### The Altac Track: Carving Out a New Professional Space for PhDs in Academe

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# The Altac Track: Carving Out a New Professional Space for PhDs in Academe

E [ethosreview.org/intellectual-spaces/the-altac-track/](http://ethosreview.org/intellectual-spaces/the-altac-track/)

by **Dr. Donna M. Bickford and Dr. Anne Mitchell Whisnant**

8 April 2014

In the national discussion around career prospects for PhDs (especially in the humanities and social sciences, where there are more new PhDs than full-time faculty lines), increasing attention is being paid to the “alternative academic” sphere, colloquially known by its Twitter hashtag, #Altac.

Conversations about altacs—generally PhDs employed within the university but not on the faculty—overlap in interesting ways with concerns about the adjunctification of the academy, graduate and professional student education and career preparation, and the digital humanities. Altacs disrupt the belief that if you don’t get a full-time faculty position, your only choices are to adjunct for poverty wages or leave academe. Yet our professional paths demonstrate the possibility of carving out interesting and fulfilling careers in academic administration while retaining connections to one’s scholarly identity and disciplinary home.

Via Twitter, our writings for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other outlets, and our participation on panels at the Modern Language Association and American Historical Association, both of us have contributed to the conversation about the pleasures of altac careers.

Donna started as a fixed-term lecturer at the University of Rhode Island while searching for a tenure track job. Five years post-PhD (with a distinguished record of publication, conference presentations, and a Fulbright fellowship), in an increasingly worsening job market, she began to look at alternatives in the business world or in high school teaching. Then, a colleague sent her an advertisement for the Director of the Carolina Women’s Center at UNC, a position she assumed in 2006. In January 2012, she moved on to become the Associate Director of UNC’s Office for Undergraduate Research. Donna also holds an adjunct faculty appointment in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Anne, meanwhile, entered graduate school planning to become a professor and exited it married to one, with an infant in arms. When she finally sought full-time employment five years later, her family’s inability to relocate dictated a multi-pronged job search close to home. That led to a career in academic administration, first at Duke University and, since 2006, at UNC, her alma mater. Since 2006, she has been Deputy Secretary of the Faculty for UNC’s Office of Faculty Governance. She also holds adjunct faculty appointments in the Departments of History and American Studies.

We met early in our UNC careers and have worked on several projects together, most recently co-convening an “[Altac Working Group](#)” supported by the UNC [Institute for the Arts & Humanities](#). We have brought together more than a dozen UNC PhD-holding staff employees to develop a proposal for a coordinated, yet flexible program of research, teaching, and professional development support for campus altacs. With relatively minor structural changes and modest financial investment, we believe the University could more effectively leverage its altac staff to



support Carolina's educational mission.

The working group is concentrating on three major projects. First, we surveyed the approximately 140 altacs we identified on campus (115 of them responded) to learn about the issues other Carolina altacs are facing. We're also compiling a list of scholarly contributions by working group members to demonstrate how our work enriches the university's intellectual life. And we're developing a list of current research funding, professional and leadership development programs, teaching awards, and advancement opportunities that are, or could easily be, open to altacs.

Of course not all academic administrators with PhDs continue as scholars. But many do, and we add materially to the research, teaching, and service activities of our campuses while developing specialized administrative skills built upon a scholarly base. With some modest support, even more of us could bring these complementary abilities into better alignment, for the benefit of all. In an age of scarce resources and persistent demands that universities do more with less, we believe modest, strategic investment in this underutilized pool of committed and able scholars could yield large benefits—both for the universities that employ altacs and for each of us individually.

*Donna M. Bickford earned her PhD in English at the University of Rhode Island in 2000. She is the Associate Director in UNC's [Office for Undergraduate Research](#) and holds an adjunct faculty appointment in English and Comparative Literature. Bickford directed the Carolina Women's Center at UNC-CH from 2006-2011. She was a Fulbright Scholar Grant in Fall 2003 and taught at Abo Akademi University in Turku, Finland. She studies contemporary U.S. women writers and the connections between literature and social change.*

*Anne Mitchell Whisnant earned her PhD in history at UNC in 1997. She is presently Deputy Secretary of the Faculty in UNC's [Office of Faculty Governance](#) and holds adjunct faculty appointments in History and American Studies. She is the author of *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History* (2006), the scholarly advisor for *Driving Through Time: The Digital Blue Ridge Parkway* (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/blueridgeparkway/>), and a co-author of several other research studies about history in the National Park Service.*