



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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**\*\*Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.\*\***

**Participants:**

Shari Miles-Cohen  
Shantel Martinez  
Sarah J. Tracy  
Marco Dehnert

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**Introduction:**

This is *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Hello, I'm Dr. Shari Miles-Cohen, Executive Director of the National Communication Association. And I'm your host on *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. Thank you for joining us for today's episode.

In 2021, *Communication Matters* addressed the state of the Communication Ph.D. amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the book *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education*. Both episodes touched on some of the possibilities for reforming graduate education, including preparing Ph.D. students for job opportunities outside of the academy and the implications of career diversity or alt-ac careers for graduate education. Today's episode continues the conversation on alt-ac careers with Communication Scholar Shantel Martinez, Professor Sarah J. Tracy, and Graduate Student Marco Dehnert.

First, a bit about today's guests. Shantel Martinez is the Director of the Office of First-Generation Programs and Enrichment, which promotes the retention, progression, and diversity of first-generation, underrepresented, and undocu/DACA/Asset students at the University of Colorado-Boulder. As a practitioner-scholar, Martinez applies research on storytelling to work that seeks to address educational and systemic inequities. Influenced by her experience as a first-generation college student, Martinez dedicates her time to mentorship and programming activities that promote social justice, equity, and belonging for students who have been systemically excluded from accessing higher education. Hi, Shantel, welcome to the podcast.

**Shantel Martinez:**

Thank you so much for having me.



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

---

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Sarah J. Tracy is a Professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University and an NCA Distinguished Scholar. Tracy's scholarly work examines emotion, communication, and identity in the workplace. Tracy has published more than 100 scholarly articles and delivered over 75 keynotes and workshops for a variety of organizations. Tracy also co-founded The Transformation Project at ASU, a consortium of faculty, students, and community members who seek to discover and promote creative change processes that encourage healthy communication patterns, collaborative group behavior, and equitable forms of social organization. Hi, Sarah, welcome to the podcast.

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

It's great to be here. Thank you, Shari.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

And Marco Dehnert is a Graduate Student in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. Dehnert's research takes a critical and cultural approach to communication and focuses on human-machine communication, artificial intelligence, and intersectional rhetorics. Dehnert is also part of the Relationships and Technology Lab at ASU. With Sarah J. Tracy, Dehnert co-organized a workshop series focused on alt-ac careers for Communication PhDs, which was funded by an NCA Advancing the Discipline Grant and co-sponsored by The Transformation Project and the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication. Hi, Marco, and welcome to *Communication Matters*.

**Marco Dehnert:**

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Okay. Let's get our conversation started. So as someone who works outside of the academy myself, I know that there are a lot of perspectives on what constitutes an alt-ac career, non-academic work, or career diversity. Could each of you tell me what alt-ac means to you?

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

For me, personally—and this is Sarah—first of all, I call it alt A-C. And so you'll hear people talking about it as alt-ac or alt-ac or sometimes even AC adjacent if you're looking at Twitter hashtags. And I think of this as doctoral students or academics who take work outside of an instructor research position at a university.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

AC adjacent. I like that. Okay. Shantel, what about for you?



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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**Shantel Martinez:**

Hi. Yes. I would very much agree, and I'm very much on par with what Sarah's definition is. I think also too it's about being more inclusive, transparent, and accessible about a variety of career pathways that communication scholars, doctoral students can really come into their own light, into their own being. But I think it's about having that level of transparency to be able to even talk about these things and what does this look like in a different variety of industries.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Thanks, Shantel. So Marco, when I was in graduate school, my faculty really discouraged me from thinking about a career outside of the academy. So can you talk about as a graduate student, how do you think about alt-adjacent careers or AC adjacent careers.

**Marco Dehnert:**

Absolutely. That's such an unfortunate occurrence that faculty would discourage anyone from pursuing that type of job, and I feel like that is something that Sarah and I, we've been working towards kind of addressing that in this workshop series. And I'm sure we'll talk about that later in just a bit here. My take on alt-ac or alt-ac kind of resonates with what we heard from Shantel and Sarah here, that for me, it means imagining the value of a communication PhD or any sort of PhD beyond the traditional tenure-track academic job. And as Shantel mentioned, this could mean a variety of things. For example, it could mean doing non-academic work while staying in the academy or also pursuing a full-time job outside the traditional professoria. So I feel like the overarching question for me is how can we put our degree toward a practical and transformative views, and kind of depending on the sector that we're interested in or the industry we want to end up in, do meaningful work in things like consulting, healthcare, nonprofit, or any sort of other sectors out there.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

I think our listeners will agree that they're interested in having a meaningful impact in the world. And Marco, your words sort of resonate in that space. Shantel, so you've worked in a few different roles relating to fostering student engagement at universities and cultivating campus inclusion, diversity, equity, and access. Can you talk a bit about what led you to this kind of work as a communication PhD?

**Shantel Martinez:**

Yeah. So of course. Thank you so much for the question. This really is twofold. I think one, what really began this pathway are first my identities. I'm first generation, I'm a Latinx woman, and I came from a lower SES background. And from a very, very young age, I learned from my mother and my family the importance of telling our stories and advocating for not only our communities



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

---

but for others, right? Like I learned about racism, sexism, homophobia, honestly, at the dinner table, even if that language wasn't necessarily being used. And this really led me to my research with testimonials and the importance of speaking our truth to power as well as our stories into existence. Because again, I learned these amazing, amazing stories from these phenomenal women in my family. And yet, they were never seen to be scholarly. They were never seen to be something of worth to know, right? And I think about one of my favorite quotes is from Chicana scholar Dolores Delgado Bernal when she talks about the story of one highlights the conditions of many. And that has just always, always stuck with me since undergrad. But this is how I lead as a DEI scholar practitioner is showcasing to students the power of storytelling and challenging what does a scholar look like, right? What actually constitutes to be scholarship and how important our ancestral, our familial, and our community stories have with one another in the terms of being able to form bonds of empathy, bonds of community, and bonds of justice. So I think that's the first thing that one, led me to my work is honestly, the personal is political, right? And I do come from this background.

And then I would say with these identities as a first-generation, low-income student, when I was going to grad school, I could hear my parents' voice about do not put all of your eggs in one basket, right? The floor could drop at any moment, and what is your backup plan. And in undergrad, I had bartended, I had worked at Starbucks, I had done all of these things. And it was just assumed that once I was in grad school, all I would do was academia. And even though I had wanted to be an academic and I had really envisioned myself to be a professor since age five, that advice stuck with me, and I made sure that I really took advantage of all the opportunities and experiences I could as much as possible. So I started working at cultural centers as a graduate RA. I worked in publishing. I was a managing editor for three academic journals and a book series. I conducted research. I also taught. And I remember getting some side eyes and being judged for these choices because it was just like, oh, you must not be fully dedicated to the professoria or you must not be fully in it. And it wasn't that. It was that advice again of my parents of you can't afford to put all your eggs in one basket. And I remember when I got the PhD and I was getting job offers and all of these things, I just felt this massive calling of I want to be able to make a difference beyond the confines of the classroom and what does that look like and what could that be.

And so I decided to pivot. And one thing too that I will really give credit to my mentors throughout this entire process is the ability to own my own pathway, right? Because at the end of the day, you're the one who is living your life. And so what makes you happy? What makes you feel like you are actually putting your purpose into practice? And what do you feel like is the way in which you want to leave this world? And so I'll say that.



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

---

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Thank you, Shantel. I hear you loud and clear. And I'm thinking about sort of paving your own pathway, Marco. You and Sarah co-organized the 2021 Alt-AC in Comm workshop series. So when did you first realize that there was a need for this kind of workshop?

**Marco Dehnert:**

Yeah. I thank you, Shari, so much for that question, and I think it's an important one to ask. I think honestly, for me, that happened sometime during my first year in graduate school. I was never really planning to get a PhD and ended up in a doctoral program straight from a bachelor's. I'm currently getting my PhD. And as I saw my colleagues and also fellow graduate students entered the academic job market, I saw how complicated and stressful that can be. I mean it's months and months even sometimes years of trying to find a job with several rounds and all these different things. And beyond that, academic jobs aren't for everybody, and they don't need to be. Some people might really thrive in more practical jobs or are just not super invested in conducting research or teaching college students. It also really depends heavily on what jobs are available where and also, sometimes folks might be more interested in looking for something in industry or government and nonprofit positions. So there was some talk among graduate students, some of which were also looking for internships that would be suitable for them to kind of do that small pivot that Shantel was talking about in terms of like putting your eggs not all in the same basket, doing something different out there. And then obviously, when COVID hit, it was much more of a realization that there should be some sort of programming to help people make a conscious decision. Especially for grad students, it can be hard sometimes because we are in this environment where most, if not all, people around us, especially our professors and advisors, have usually little to no experience with all they see. So it can feel somewhat intimidating to contemplate even thinking about leaving academia for alt-ac job even though there should be nothing stigmatizing about that.

That's really what sparked the idea to have some programming, especially practical hands-on workshops. The idea was to give folks ideas and help them formulate what it is that they're looking for, to unsettle this unspoken assumption that most graduate students would want to pursue an academic career, go for the professorial, or something along those lines and also, to show that there's a variety of jobs out there that we could consider alt-ac or alt-ac adjacent.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

And are your colleague graduate students talking about going a different way and possibly a non-academic career or future?



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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**Marco Dehnert:**

Absolutely. I mean we have a lot of folks who are trying to pivot into a UX or user research experience in tech companies and things like that. We also had I think a couple recent hires outside of academic jobs field so to speak in terms of like going for industry jobs. So there's a lot of talk happening there where people are trying to get that summer internship to get some experience, do some networking to talk to people who are not academics but who also do either research and user experience or do other meaningful work that you can really benefit from having a PhD from. So there's some talk among the graduate students that I know of in terms of like figuring out how can I put my skills that I've learned here in this PhD program or master's program to good use, even if it is not about teaching college students or conducting academic research.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Oh, fantastic, Marco. And Sarah, that brings me to you with the question about pitching your degree, right? So some communication PhDs may wonder how to pitch their advanced degree to non-academic employers. So what advice do you have about how students can talk about the value of their degree and why do employers find communication degrees particularly valuable?

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

Yeah, sure. Thank you for that, Shari. And I think one of the things for people to even think about pitching their advanced degree, they need to have permission to do that implicit or actual. And one of the things that Marco just spoke about is how a main goal of our workshop, if nothing else in our workshop series, was to provide a space where these issues could even be spoken about. So first, it's providing that space, and faculty like me have a lot of the onus on their own shoulders for figuring out how to create that space. And then once there is space available, it's exactly what you were asking about in terms of how is it that we might help students with the skills of pitching this and what makes you a successful tenured researcher and teacher are different skills than what it means to be really successful with your PhD in a non-academic atmosphere. And so one of the first things I recommend is that students engage in informational interviews with people who have left academia. They're going to be able to talk through the roller coaster of emotions that one needs to go through in order to make that leap. For some people, it's not a roller coaster. For other people, it is. And it's good to know. We know that social support is always the best from people who have had similar experiences. And those informational interviews, although it may not provide your path, it will provide a path. And so it will create some creative energy where it's like, okay, this is one way that someone made themselves a professional ethnographer. I also recommend that people engage in the resources out there. There are now some good books and good websites and good people to follow on Twitter that are experts in making the pathway, the journey from a PhD into an industry setting. And in a course that I taught as associated with the workshops that NCA sponsored—thank you very much—we used Christopher Caterin's small book recently published called *Leaving Academia* and that had a number of exercises and





*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

---

activities and so on that anyone could pick up, read that, and choose the activities that work for them. For example, Caterin recommends coming up with a 20-second version of why you're cultivating options for work outside of academia. Like you need to have a good, pithy answer, right?

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Right, sure.

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

Yeah. And there's people like Karen Kelsky on Twitter. Her Twitter following has just catapulted in the last few years, and her website originally was called The Professor Is In, and she has recently started a Facebook page called The Professor Is Out. And that is about taking on outside of academic jobs. I think also talking about skills. Most doctoral students are trained to talk about their knowledge rather than their skills. But our students have amazing skills in the field of human communication research methods, quantitative/qualitative, specific data gathering skills, and most importantly, skills and data analysis. And being able to speak about the specific types of analysis you can do and the techniques that you use and the value that this advanced training provides and be able to do that in ways that employers can see their outcomes coming to fruition is huge. If you look on LinkedIn, data science and user experience are huge areas for jobs. And so the skills, the methods. Also, another way of talking about theory—and our students are good at theory—is explaining, explaining complex situations. And theory is a word that oftentimes does not translate all that well outside, but if you can talk about what theory can do for you such as explaining complex information and understanding why a certain problem happens, for instance.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

So Shantel, as an engaged scholar, you work within the university system but also outside of the traditional tenure track. How does your research inform your work? Like what advice do you have for communication PhDs who are interested in pursuing work similar to your own?

**Shantel Martinez:**

Yeah. So this is something I'm asked a lot actually. So I still very much actively publish, one, I think because writing is also part of my self-care as it helps me make just sense of the world in which we are in, but two, it's also very practical. When I was making the pivot from kind of the traditional tenure track into more of an administrative role, a mentor from actually my undergrad was like don't stop publishing and writing. And at first, I didn't really understand why. I was just like, well, why would I? Would I have the time for this? How is this going to happen? But this comes down to power and power dynamics that operate within the university. And early in my career, I actually saw a chief diversity officer pretty much being pushed out of a role because the faculty could not build trust with this person. They were like, well, you don't publish. You've never



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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taught, but you're telling me what inclusive pedagogy and curriculum design is supposed to be. Why would I trust in you, right? And so I very much saw the importance of, again, going back and being able to translate your work and translate your direction and translating your research. So for me, my research is still rooted within testimonials, highlighting issues of equity within higher education, but I've also take issues on research trips. I'm working on my book right now. And I co-write with my students. I think it's really important to be able to uplift the next generation. But with that, I can write on my own terms. I'm not constantly chasing well, this publication must count for this or that or it always has to be in the top tier journal. I love being able to, again, have control and power over my career of where I want to live and what does my research even look like.

But additionally, through my roles, I have experience with crisis communication, right? And writing those pieces, writing strategic communication plans for department, and I constantly see myself, both myself and my research and my career, as that bridge of how do I translate this work so that it showcases why this matters, how can I connect and build an ecosystem for my students so that way, again, they feel representative and they have a place here on campus. But in terms of a couple pieces of advice, two things. One, your identity and your self-worth is not tied to the academy or your productivity. So first, reclaim your identity. I have been in therapy for many, many years, and I absolutely love my therapist. And she has said that working with people who are getting out of the military and out of academia actually have many parallels because oftentimes we tie our identity so much to our profession, and it's everything we know. So it's really reclaiming your identity and reclaiming your self-worth I think that's really big. I think secondly, going back to what Sarah and Marco have really said, is learning to translate your experience as much as possible. I have chaired so many searches for DEI roles, and I get PhD students, I've gotten adjunct faculty and assistant professors. And again, it goes back to on their CV. I can see all their knowledge, but I want to know how does this actually translate into real life experience. What have you done? Have you done project management? Have you built curriculum, and are you saying this in your cover letter and your role? I know, again, right now, user experience and design is huge, but also learning and development is a big area where they want to see inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum design for whether this is tech companies or other nonprofits. I think being able to really translate your experience as much as possible and being able to talk to as many right a variety of audiences, doing those informal interviews. That has really helped me in my own career.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Thank you. I'm going to move on to talk a little bit about the comm workshop sessions that are available on NCA's YouTube channel. So as our listeners may know, the recordings of the 2021 Alt-Ac in Comm workshop series sessions are available on the NCA YouTube channel. I was impressed with the variety of career paths that the workshop presenters talked about. And I'm





*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

---

wondering Sarah, if you can talk a bit about what all ac career paths can look like for communication PhDs?

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

Sure, of course. And I think those people that were represented in our workshop provide a great picture of that range. And so I would want to highlight some of the positions that they have. And it was a mixture, Shari, of both the completely alt-ac left, academia, never looking back and then also, the ac adjacent where we had some people who had one foot in academia and one foot in industry or community work. And so for example, Dr. Rahul Mitra. He's at Wayne State. He is a full-time tenure track professor. But he does so much community outreach with a variety of organizations in conjunction with his research, and he leads huge research teams. And he bakes it into his research and teaching where as part of his teaching he does these group projects with his students, which are also community oriented. And so he has this larger picture than someone who is just staying in within the confines of academia. We also worked with Dr. Christine Kiesinger, and she provides mindfulness meditation and professional enhancement trainings in corporate contexts. And so she does a range of workshops. She still does an adjunct course here and there, but she has done executive coaching, for instance. We worked with Dr. Eric Waters, and when he worked with us, and as you'll see on the NCA YouTube channel if you go and watch his session, he had one foot in academia and one foot in industry when he spoke with us. And at this point, he's made the transition to really focus primarily on industry, training small business owners as an executive coach, as an organizational leader. He has a background in the automobile industry. And so he came in with that.

And that's one other thing I would share, Shari, is that if we want to cultivate alt-ac positions, one thing to think about also is our PhD recruitment and what is it that we could do in order to recruit from people who already have some history in industry. So that was an aside. Back to other kinds of jobs that can have great background and an opportunity in industry positions, Nancy Baym was one of our workshop leaders, and she leads interdisciplinary research at Microsoft research. So this is a pure research position, and it really isn't about Microsoft branding. But Microsoft does research about how their products, for instance, Microsoft Teams, how it's affecting people, how it connects people. And her background is in communication. She was a tenure track professor for years and now is in that private sector. We also worked with Melinda Rea-Holloway. She is president and CEO of Ethnography Incorporated, which is a professional ethnography firm. And so she does behind-the-scenes work, watches the way people unload and load their dishwasher, how they use the toothpaste tube. One of the things she shared with us is that most people do not use the dishwasher the way that the dishwasher is designed. That's helpful feedback that you don't know unless you're in someone's house watching them.



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Absolutely.

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

Yeah, yeah. It's fascinating. She's done work with Disney, with a ton of companies. And then finally, Nicole Martin who served in what sounds like is a similar position that Shantel works in, as Director of Inclusive Excellence at University of Kentucky. And so Nicole has stayed in academia but has moved into that administrative position. And so that is a huge range. And also, as Marco noted, we have a couple doctoral students here at ASU right now who have found alt-ac jobs, both in user experience, one with Epic Games who is helping understand the inclusivity issues with 3D video games and another at Juniper Networks which is a computer networking company in Silicon Valley. And so it's exciting to see those paths, and hopefully, people taking those can help others in the future understand the journey to get there.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Oh, absolutely. And it's so nice to hear this sort of diversity of landing strips, right? I mean corporate sector, game design, the nonprofit sector, government. Yeah, just a wide variety of possibilities. And Marco, sort of given the focus on traditional academic careers in many PhD programs, some graduate students may feel uncomfortable or unsure about pursuing an alt-ac career. Do you have any thoughts on strategies that graduate students can use to reflect on whether a non-academic career is right for them? And what would you recommend those students looking to do so, what sort of soul-searching they might undertake?

**Marco Dehnert:**

Yeah. Thanks again for another very important question. And as Sarah mentioned earlier, this kind of was also one of our intentions, to just have some sort of programming that people could attend from all over the place virtually, is to just have a platform for folks to think through what does it mean to even play with the idea of even leaving academia or doing something in addition to a traditional tenure-check position. That was really one of the goals we had when we initially started planning and also conducting that virtual series, to kind of give people a platform to start thinking and even talking about what it could look like here. So I think the first and also probably most challenging thing to do is to realize that leaving academia or even thinking about leaving academia is absolutely not a bad thing. You're not betraying your institution quote unquote or your advisor or your discipline or your department or anything like that. It can be hard sometimes because there's oftentimes this assumption that graduate students will at least somehow continue the line of scholarship of their advisors. But what I would recommend is that I would encourage you to seek a conversation with your fellow graduate students, your trusted mentors, both inside and outside your department or your academia, and also, your advisor themselves as soon as possible. I strongly believe it is always easier for your advisor to work with you throughout the



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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process if they know what it is that you want to get out of your PhD. So if you are sure earlier on in your project, in your program that you are thinking about leaving academia or doing something on the side as well, talk to your advisor. Hey, do you have any thoughts on how we could get access to some internships over the summer or talk to some people? Do you maybe know some people? Could you connect me to someone? And I think it's just easier if you have this open conversation with your advisor along the process.

Something else I wanted to say is that while it is great that you might be doing some soul searching in the process of your graduate program, maybe this will happen before or even after you get your advanced degree, right? Sarah already mentioned that we should reconsider the ways in which we recruit for PhD programs. So what does it look like if folks already have industry or government or nonprofit experience and then choose to do a PhD or a master's degree? How can we incorporate that? And maybe the goal is clear from the very get-go that yes, this is an advanced degree, but I'm never intending to even end up in academia, right? And the same might be true down the road of your career. Let's say you're an early career scholar or you just graduated with your PhD one or two or three years ago. Just because you already have a tender direct position doesn't mean you cannot think about doing something on the side as well, this adjacent ac concept we were talking about here or even leaving academia entirely. So I think there's a lot of room to kind of think through the ways in which people at various stages of their careers can think through what it means to do alt-ac work in addition to what it is that they're doing in a university context or even outside of that.

For me, it really comes down to one major question if I was thinking about leaving academia at any stage of my career. Where do I see the purpose of my work located? Who is it I want to talk to? Who is it I want to work with? What type of work do I think is meaningful? And how can my skills and the knowledge and the experience I've gained contribute to that work? It may not be like advancing theory or writing cutting-edge publications or teaching college students. All these are great, but maybe someone is interested in doing research or transforming policy or even doing meaningful work in nonprofit organizations. So I believe that once you're a little bit clearer on the purpose of your work and where you see your own purpose, you can consider the steps you need to take to get yourself there. Who can I talk to? Who can I network with? Can I have a conversation with my advisor? Maybe my colleagues and my trusted mentors as well, other graduate students. And we've already talked a little bit about some strategies, how you could get some experience to talk to people. Sarah already mentioned those informational interviews. You could do some networking practices and things like that to kind of get your foot out there and try different things, talk to different people, and get some experience here and there.



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Marco, Sarah, Shantel, where were you all 25 years ago, right? When I was talking to my parents about not going to work as a faculty member at a university. And instead, I was going to go work at a nonprofit organization. I could have used this framing with them 25 years ago. I've had a great career in the nonprofit sector, but I do remember that sort of dread with thinking, oh, I've invested all of this time and being a university professor just doesn't speak to my heart, right? That's not where my passion is. And I think it's fantastic that you all are making space for graduate students and professionals who have already earned their degrees but want to do something different to really sort of step out there with both feet and jump in. And thinking about sort of having had a mentor back then who would have been able to advise me would have been really helpful, and I know how important mentorship is to you, Shantel. So can you talk about the role that seeking a mentor could play for a communication graduate student who is interested in an alt-ac career? Are there any practices you would recommend for comm grads looking for support as they navigate the sort of non-academic job search?

**Shantel Martinez:**

Yes, of course. And I also have that constant conversation with my parents even now about, you're a professor, right? And I'm like, not exactly. What does this look like? So I still have this conversation to this day. But mentorship, yes, it's so incredibly important as it can be really scary to make this move, right? And so some of the first words of advice is find a mentor who is kind, find a mentor who is invested in you. And it's okay if you have multiple mentors and find mentors outside of academia, right? Just like Marco said, I know so many academics who their mentees are an extension of their egos and their prestige, and that's unfortunate. But I think that's real. If we said that wasn't the case, I think we'd all be lying. But I think about going back to that piece of advice that Marco said. Have that open conversation as difficult as it may be, but really be open. My students, my doctoral students who I work with, we talk about this all the time where I'm like, what is your backup plan? if this doesn't necessarily work out, what is your backup plan? Kind of going back to that parental advice I got from my own parents of like don't put all your eggs in one basket. If everything crumbles down, what are you going to do? How are you going to pivot? And I always say find a mentor who is supportive of you having this conversation. And if they are not supportive of you having this conversation, find a different mentor, right?

And when I'm working with my doctoral students, I always say, at the end of the day, you're the ones who are in control of your lives. You're the ones who are sleeping in your beds and paying your own bills. I am not paying those bills of yours, and I got my own student loans I'm still paying back, right? But all I ask is for them to make an informed decision. So again, show me your evidence. Why are you choosing this out of option A versus option B? And we talk it out. We role play. We figure things out together. And I think that's what's so important about having a mentor is, again, being vulnerable together and talking about well, what will this look like in a different



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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way, shape, or form? But also, other pieces of advice that I would say is one, put yourself first and be practical. You may not also get that job within three months, and that could be really devastating of, I just made this huge pivot, this huge life decision. Why isn't this paying off for me? And it's going to take time. So be patient and allow yourself to understand you may have some ups and you may have some downs. But just use as many of those resources as possible. So LinkedIn, build networks, connect with others, and you'll get those informal interviews. That's some of my biggest piece of advice is you are only as good as your network. So network, network, network.

But also, do that soul searching, just like in the last question with the conversation with Marco. Take that step back and ask yourself, what brings me joy and how can I implement this. Because y'all, we only got one life, and we need to really make sure that at the end of the day, we're doing something, even if it's scary, but it's on our own terms and it's what we want to be and see within our own lives.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Look, you all are definitely talking about and you're sort of perfect examples of folks who are sort of committed to expanding the universe for graduate students and communication PhDs to sort of think about themselves as professionals in different spaces. But graduate programs haven't necessarily caught up with you all. So many graduate programs prepare students for traditional academic job search, but fewer programs prepare them for a non-academic job search. So Sarah what, would you say are some of the key differences between an academic and a non-academic job search?

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

Yeah. And what you just said, Shari, I just want to underline that, that this is something that ethically I feel like our doctoral programs need to look at. When we can see, first of all, it's just good practice to allow a range of options to at least be discussable and be possible. But especially when those of us in the field can see how tenure track jobs are changing, if we are going to continue to recruit doctoral students, from my heart, I feel like I need to really think about how is it that we can provide them a path toward a meaningful life in a number of different spaces. And so I just wanted to underline that before going into how to do the search.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Sure.

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

A lot of what Shantel said, I would just emphasize that then. The networking is different. If we think about how important it is that the strength of weak ties, who are we surrounding ourselves



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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by. So it may be that there might be a year where instead of going to two academic conferences, one figures out how to go to a more professional conference. And oftentimes, one's mentor is not going to be able to provide the advice here. This is not only a situation of the mentor or advisor, somebody who is steeped in academia doesn't know; it may be that they don't even know that they don't know.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Sure.

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

And that you need to find someone else outside of your academic bubble to go to, and that takes some courage. When you were talking, Shari, about how you wish people like us were around when you went out, I mean it took something for you to do that. I mean to ever make a choice that is different than the norm. And so that's really impressive. I think also the way that you promote yourself in academia, sometimes self-promotion, self-branding is really looked down upon. Now some of that is changing as we're asked to Tweet out our articles and so on. But one needs to think about okay, how is it that people get to know me in terms of what I am able to do in terms of their preferred outcomes. And so it is listening to industry. It is examining job ads. I remember when I was a doctoral student, I started looking at job ads for academic jobs early on so I could think about okay, well, where are the jobs coming and so on. And so LinkedIn, many academics view LinkedIn as a spam machine, but that is the place to be. And you can do things where you can get rid of all the emails, where they just email you all the time. So I had to do that to get up on LinkedIn. But look at the people who are in our workshop that's on YouTube and see what their LinkedIn profile looks like. And Christopher Caterin, again, has recommendations. It's very different than academic vitae. In fact, Caterin even goes so far to say that he has heard a number of people say that saying you have a PhD is actually a detriment. I know, I know. That was my reaction too. I was like, what? I've worked on this for how many years and you're telling us not to use it. But he provides some good rationale for that. So it does take some of that self-branding, and it's a different type of being able to promote yourself and to create those conversations in a place like LinkedIn.

And also, really talking about the outcomes and skills that you can bring in terms of what industries' outcomes are. And recently, I was doing some work with—I do a little bit of coaching on the side of my work outside of Arizona State. And this person had come to me because of my qualitative research methods expertise, and she had really learned this very, very rigorous type of qualitative research methods when she was a doctoral student. But she had transitioned into working in industry. And so what worked in academia is not going to be what the industry needs in terms of very quick analysis, quick coding and so on. And so we did as much unlearning or encouraging her to unlearn, which kind of broke my heart a little bit because I love qualitative data





*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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analysis. But she had to do some unlearning of what had to happen so that she could do what needed to happen in her industry position.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Sure, sure. But even still, her foundational knowledge of data analysis will always be helpful. It's just sort of unspooling the depth, right?

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

Yeah, it's what got her hired, Shari, was that depth of knowledge and that she was able to communicate it. And then there were just some bumps in the road in terms of okay, how do I make this work in my new setting, which is to be expected.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

So Marco, I'd just like to ask you, so what would you recommend that comm students do to prepare to an alt-ac career and what sorts of resources are available for communication PhDs who are seeking this kind of work?

**Marco Dehnert:**

Yeah. Again, thank you for this question. And I feel like our entire conversation thus far has already been touching on a lot of resources, strategies, things that folks can do who are interested in this type of work, in this type of pivot in their career. So let me just maybe highlight a couple or so that I think are the most, well, maybe the most useful depending on what it is that you're wanting to do or maybe also the most successful ones out there.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Okay.

**Marco Dehnert:**

What you look at in terms of—from my personal experience in my own network—what folks have been able to use to accomplish alt-ac jobs out there. So just to highlight again what has come up already in this conversation. Networking, networking, networking. It's all about that. And it's not necessarily about landing a job. I mean earlier in the conversation, Sarah mentioned informational interviews. And this is the term that we use from Caterin's book where he basically just recommends just reach out to people and talk to them. It's really not about presenting yourself or asking for a job or anything like that. It is just reaching out to people who do some sort of work that you're interested in or who have a job that you could see yourself doing as well and to have a conversation with them. Ideally, you can invite them for coffee or chat with them over Zoom or on the phone and just come prepared with a few questions about what it is that they do on a day-to-day basis. And I think that is a really useful strategy to just, first of all, get to know people and



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

---

also, really get to know what people are doing, right? Oftentimes, we hear terms like consulting or any other types of terms out there that people use to describe their jobs. And if you've never done anything like that, it can be really difficult to understand what it is that those people are doing on a day-to-day basis. So I think the best strategy especially for our communication folks is to just talk to people and get to know them, let them talk about their job. And I'm sure you're surprised by how many folks are actually really happy and excited to share what it is that they're doing because I feel like that most people have that sort of passion and are really excited to share that.

And maybe a first informational interview leads to new connections, and maybe this person can guide you to something new. And even if you feel like, oh, this is really not something I'm personally interested in, that is a valuable insight that you just gained that you didn't have before. So I think that's really a useful skill or a useful tactic to reach out to people, talk to them, and things like that. And I know that that can be difficult, especially as a graduate student. We all have social anxiety. It might be weird to just contact someone of the blue on like something like LinkedIn. But it might take some trial and error here and there. There are some also some strategies that we go over in our workshop sessions and things like that of like how to phrase it and how to present yourself in terms of asking for this type of informational interview so to speak. So really comes down to networking, making those connections. And then second of all, once you know a little bit more about what it is that people are doing and jobs that you might be interested in, what do you need to get to that level that you can also see yourself doing that job? What kinds of skills should you brush up on or learn that will likely help you in your later career? Is it something like a specific data analysis method? Is it something like translating your academic lingo into more industry jargon or less jargon at all? So what types of skills could you or should you even brush up on as you're moving through your PhD program or even your other academic efforts as well? And there's lots of resources to do that. You could use online learning resources like LinkedIn Learning. There's also some other resources like maybe this podcast episode but also NCA prep talks, maybe a campus career center, a specific methods class on campus that you might be able to take even for credit as you're getting your PhD so you're doing additional labor on the side here to really help you develop some skills and move closer to your desired career option after all.

An internship is also a good idea if you're trying to learn what it is that people are doing or if you're trying to brush up on some skills or make some connections and get some networking out there.

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

Two other things I didn't mention earlier were a company called Aurora, Beyond the Professoriate, Aurora, Beyond the Professoriate. And a number of universities are already connected to them, and students have free access to their resources. So at ASU, for instance, ASU pays a subscription. So that's something that students should look into for their universities or if you are a student government, that might be something you push for. And then the other thing I was just



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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going to add is that on my personal website, SarahJTracy.com, Marco and I did put together the syllabus with all of our activities for the course that we led as connected to the workshop series. And that's freely available under course resources. And so if other faculty wanted to see what that course looked like, it was a one-unit module. So it wasn't a full three-unit semester class. Or if people just want to take a look at those activities, they're available there.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Sarah, thanks so much. And we do provide these links on our page. So listeners, you can go there to find them. And as you know, this podcast is called *Communication Matters*. So to wrap up, from each of you, how does the push toward alt-ac careers show that communication education and research matters outside of the academy? So let's start with you, Shantel.

**Shantel Martinez:**

I think having a background PhD in education is so incredibly valuable. It can translate into so many industries, in so many positions. But again, it goes back to how are you able to translate your experience, your research into it. But I know so many people when they say, oh, you have a background in comm, immediately, that door is open whether in terms, like I said, crisis communications or strategic communications planning or the power of storytelling and marketing. I've led many, many marketing campaigns, which I wasn't necessarily trained as a doctoral student, but I was able to learn to translate my PhD in terms of critical cultural studies to showcase the importance of inclusion and inclusive marketing and inclusive language. So I think that, again, we have so much value that we bring to a variety of tables. But going back to what Sarah was saying, I think we really need our graduate education and our PhD programs to catch up to what the rest of the world sees our value to be. But it is incredibly, incredibly valuable.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Thank you. Thank you, Shantel. And Marco?

**Marco Dehnert:**

My answer is resonating a lot with Shantel's answer here. I'm also convinced that there's a huge demand right now for people with advanced degrees in communication, whether it be focused on things like education or research or practical work or other things like that. I think as Shantel mentioned, our field can be really prone to where it can be applied in all kinds of field or sectors or industries and things such as nonprofit organizations, like helping them craft a more convincing support program, figuring out how small businesses can thrive, like one of our speakers talked about in the workshop series, or also, just thinking through the ways in which things like social media or market data are like complicating politics and social issues right now. I think there's a huge demand for communication experts and all the skills that we are developing and also learning throughout your doctoral journey and graduate school journey here as well. So I would



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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say communication matters a lot, and to also resonate with what has been said over and over in this conversation here is that it might just be an issue of translating our advanced degree into some more practical applications.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Thank you, Marco. And Sarah, we'll close with you.

**Sarah J. Tracy:**

Yes. Well, I think that promoting communication education and alternative academic careers is a win-win-win. It's a win for the students to have options, first and most importantly. Second of all, it's a win for our communities and businesses to infuse them with the expertise gained in the communication discipline. We need those listening skills. We need connection, interrelatedness, strategic communication. And so it's going to make our communities and businesses and nonprofits stronger. And then third, it's a win for the academy. The more that our disciplined expertise is valued outside of the academy, the more it is valued inside the academy. And that shows up in multiple material, financial, and symbolic ways.

**Shari Miles-Cohen:**

Thank you, three. So win cubed for students, communities, and the academy. Love that. Thank you for joining me today on *Communication Matters*. If you haven't already, be sure to check out the NCA Career Center for advice related to both academic and non-academic careers. And be sure to check out last year's alt-ac in comm workshop series on NCA YouTube channel. Thank you.

In NCA news, registration for the NCA 108th Annual Convention will open on July 1st. Discounted early bird registration rates are available until September 16th, 2022 and offer significant savings to all attendees who register before that date. Please visit the registration information webpage at [natcom.org/registration](http://natcom.org/registration) for more information and deadlines. And I hope you'll tune in for the July episode of *Communication Matters*, which will focus on video games and teaching. Professors Ian Bogost and James Paul Gee will join the podcast to discuss what instructors can learn about teaching from video games and how video games can serve as instructional tools.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram, and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, established theory, and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities, and in our world.



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 48: Alt-Ac Careers

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The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands of scholars from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

*Communication Matters*, organized at the association's national office in downtown Washington, DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with content development support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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