

## FINDING A HOME IN INDEPENDENT SCHOLARSHIP

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Two letters sent right before I graduated with my PhD in 2021:

*Dear Dr X (my doctoral dissertation advisor):  
[...] I have decided I don't want to go tenure track. It's too much for me at this time in my life. Do you know anything about independent scholarship? Is that even possible? Can I use my PhD "on my own?" Can I research and publish independently? [...]  
Thanks,  
Kate*

*Dear Kate,  
[...] I have never heard of anyone publishing independently! My first thought though, is that it would be too hard. You need the support of your colleagues, access to libraries, and the schedule that an academic life provides. Writing is so hard to do on your own, you really need an institution to support you. I know I could never do scholarship on my own, and I strongly encourage you to reconsider your decision to not go tenure-track. You are truly gifted, and I would hate to lose you to "independent scholarship." [...]  
Warmly,  
Dr. X*

And from Y, an informal sociology advisor from my workplace, in response to the same letter sent to Dr. X:

*Dear Kate,  
[...] You definitely cannot do sociology independently! Sociology is a "team sport," and you need the support of colleagues to do this work well. I know I personally get a lot from my mentors here at XYZ [healthcare institution] as well as at ABC University. I get ideas from my colleagues, and support in finishing big projects. I can't imagine doing this work independently. [...]  
Warmly,  
Y*

These two letters were disheartening for me. I had not yet discovered a community of Independent Scholars; all I knew was that I didn't want to go tenure-track. I was 46 years old, and it had taken me 14 years to get my PhD. I was done with academic life, but I didn't want to abandon my PhD work. It meant too much to me. I was lost.

Since there are very few professional academic, full-time opportunities in my area, a tenure track job would likely have meant leaving my family, my husband's family, my friends, and my support system. We had already moved across the country once for me to attend graduate school, and it was a disaster, both personally and for our marriage. Our marriage suffered for moving, and I promised my husband I'd never move for my job again. I was stuck. Do I stay in my hometown without a tenure track job or get a divorce and move across the country to Who Knows Where to take a low paying and grueling job?

At the time of graduation, I was already working at Veterans Affairs in research, so stayed in my current job after graduating. I decided to start a small research consulting business using a major freelancing platform. Meanwhile, I continued teaching on an adjunct basis at a few different colleges and universities around the country. I never taught more than one class a semester, though, so teaching wasn't ever going to be a source of financial security or support. The VA paid well, but was not rewarding, so I started looking for a new job.

I got a job – a disaster – at a small marketing firm. They said they liked my academic credentials and wanted to infuse more science into marketing; I wanted to be the one to imbue that science into their model. Unfortunately, it was a bust. They didn't want science after all, they just wanted the satisfaction of saying they had a scientist on the staff. I couldn't align my science values with marketing values. I never got it. After 6 months, they fired me. That might have been the best thing that's ever happened to me professionally, because I realized that I am really not cut out for business, and it spurred me on to ramp up my consulting work and my teaching.

Since the day I started consulting full-time, I have never been happier with my work. Running my own business really suits me, although I am still learning the ropes in terms of how to set boundaries with my clients and not let them suck all my time away from me in such a way that I don't have the time or energy to devote to my scholarship. I miss the companionship of coworkers and a reliable, predictable paycheck, but consulting gives me the freedom to work on my own projects.

SO, WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH INDEPENDENT SCHOLARSHIP?

In the middle of all this hubbub with work, I started trying to get chapters of my dissertation published. I had no mentors, my PhD advisor was no help, and I was on my own. I realized that publishing takes a lot of work- it was taking up a lot of my time. So, I started googling Independent Scholarship. First, I found a local affiliate of NCIS, and I immediately joined. This was during COVID, so we had bi-monthly meetings remotely. I presented some of my work to this organization. I enjoyed presenting. I then stumbled upon NCIS and was pleased to see that I was accepted as a full member!

I continued publishing. I had my first acceptance of a dissertation chapter the year I graduated; my other two substantive chapters were published this year, and two other papers were published after that. I also took opportunities as I saw them come across list serves. One of these was to coauthor a sociology textbook aimed at students in my state. I authored two chapters in that textbook, and I have to say the results of our combined work are amazing.

As an Independent Scholar, I agree with my mentors when they said scholarship isn't a one-man sport. It must be done in community; after all, scholarship is about being part of an ongoing conversation, and you must have others with whom to have that conversation. I have found that having co-authors greatly enhances my Independent Scholarship, both by keeping me engaged in the community, and keeping me engaged in the work. Co-authoring publications makes you accountable to others and exposes you to new ideas and new approaches to doing things.

My first collaborative project outside of graduate school arose out of my consulting business. One of my clients wanted to publish a chapter of her dissertation, and I agreed to come on as a co-author and help shape up her chapter for publication. In this role, I was a guide and publication expert, and she was the subject matter expert. We rewrote the chapter together; I walked her through the publication process, and we got it published. She was thrilled and, with my help (but not as a co-author) she later published a second chapter from her dissertation on her own. This was the beginning of a beautiful long-term partnership. She and I recently completed another paper, this time collaborating from the beginning. I find that collaborating with her is great because she comes from a different academic

discipline, so we are able to combine our expertise to come up with something that neither one of us would be able to do on our own.

Another partnership I value is with the chairman of the board of a nonprofit organization on which I am on the board. Like my first collaborator, she and I come from complementary but different academic backgrounds, and we often have competing views. Rather than this being a hindrance, this has proven beneficial for our writing relationship. For example, she and I are currently co-writing a debate piece in which she is arguing for a medical model of pediatric bipolar disorder, and I am arguing for a traditional sociological response to the problem. This is valuable because it will (hopefully!) be published in a medical journal, and while the debate has been healthy for both of us to expand our viewpoints on the topic, it also gets the sociological viewpoint out to a medical audience. This partnership was highlighted when we published a paper in *Bipolar Disorders*, the leading medical journal about bipolar disorders, and in the journal's podcast, the paper was billed as being a "mandatory must read." My sociological approach to bipolar disorder was new to this audience, and it was because I collaborated with someone with medical and psychological *bona fides* that I was able to reach this new audience. I am excited to continue to collaborate with her because it allows me to extend the sociological imagination to new people and new audiences who may not otherwise hear my message. She also encourages me to see a new viewpoint and expand my own views, which is valuable. In addition to the debate we are currently writing, we are also coauthoring a book chapter.

As part of my consulting business, I have been able to publish as well. For example, I have written a paper with an anesthesiologist about a new education program for medical interns. Consulting, as a part of my overall Independent Scholar identity, has given me the opportunity to collaborate with people outside my discipline, with whom I wouldn't normally have been able to collaborate. This has broadened both my publication base and my knowledge of different writing styles.

My newest venture is embarking on a solo authored book. I always thought of myself as an "article person"- I never thought I had a book in me. My ideas always seemed limited to 20 pages, and writing a book always felt daunting. But recently, an idea that has spawned one book chapter, and an upcoming article, has started to come into shape as a larger book project. I'm excited to join the ranks of Independent Scholars who write books and am eager to expand my skills as a researcher and writer as I embark on this new project. For this project, I will also be writing my first grant proposal, in the aim of being able to secure a grant funded income so I can put consulting on hold while I research and write the book. Applying for a highly competitive nationally funded grant seems like a long shot, but someone has to win these, so why not me?

Belonging to professional organizations and presenting at conferences has been vital to my work as an Independent Scholar, as it keeps me engaged in the work of the discipline and connected to other scholars. It keeps me part of the conversation. The first conference I attended was when I was a second-year undergraduate, I attended the Pacific Sociological Conference in Portland. I went by myself because my university did not support these kinds of activities for undergraduates. I was so nervous even though I was just watching. I mingled with real sociologists! I remember I met a heavily tattooed faculty member who was writing a book, about the sociology of tattoos and that is when I realized the power of sociology to study things that I hadn't even imagined were possible. I was so proud of myself for attending that conference, I really got to sense what sociology was all about, outside of the confines of my small university. Looking back at it now, this was my first foray into Independent Scholarship.

My first real experience at a conference was at the American Sociological Association's annual conference four years later. Again, I went by myself, even though most universities host trips for students who are presenting, but my university didn't have any support for undergraduates who were presenting. It is very rare for an undergraduate to present at a national conference, especially by themselves, and

especially in a regular session. Seasoned faculty members get nervous doing these presentations, so think how nervous I was! I traveled across the country by myself and figured it out by myself. I apparently had all the makings of an Independent Scholar back then – the grit and determination that are needed to do things on your own.

Getting the paper ready for presentation was a challenge. I did what Independent Scholars do best: I utilized my network of resources, as thin as they were at that time. I had a term paper that I wanted to turn into a conference presentation (which was later my first publication), and I turned to the only scholar I knew outside of my university. (My university mentors weren't interested or available to help me: they were all adjuncts and didn't have the motivation or the bandwidth to go out of their way to help me) and this scholar was a family member who held a PhD in accounting. She scoured the paper, and I remember late nights on the phone with her, trying to get it ready for presentation. Finally, it was accepted and the presentation went well, I was so pleased. This was my first real entrée into the profession; little did I know I would be doing this on my own for decades to come. This story shows the power of mentors.<sup>1</sup> Having that accounting professor help me get my paper ready for presentation, and her having the faith in me that I could do it, meant everything to me. Mentors are critical to all academics, perhaps Independent Scholars especially. "Independent" is a misnomer- no one goes at this endeavor alone, and all Independent Scholars need others, both inside and outside of the academy, to pave the way for us.

I have since presented in dozens of conferences, both in graduate school and as an Independent Scholar. Presenting at conferences, and belonging to professional organizations, is critical to my success as an Independent Scholar. It is always nerve-wracking to present at a conference, but I'm getting better at it. In the last few years, I haven't been able to present as often as I would like because of finances, which is one of the drawbacks of being an Independent Scholar. Faculty often get funding for presenting, but as an Independent Scholar you must pay for it or scramble for funding.

Another core tenet of being an Independent Scholar is volunteering. I volunteer on the boards of two nonprofits: NCIS, and Research & Conversations about Bipolar Disorder, Inc. I get a lot out of my involvement with these two boards, not least through meeting more potential collaborators. I met one of my collaborators on the board of R&C, and we routinely do presentations together, keeping my presentation skills sharp. I also volunteer for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI. For NAMI, I am an In Our Own Voice Speaker, where I travel around the county speaking about my own experience living with a severe mental illness. I find volunteering to be rewarding and it enhances my experience as an Independent Scholar because it informs my experience and broadens my network, which enhances my potential for scholarship opportunities.

The last, but certainly not least, component of being an Independent Scholar for me is teaching. I have taught at six different colleges and universities, at all levels of my field, from sociology 101 to graduate level courses. Teaching is one of the reasons I wanted to go tenure track, because I love teaching, but I find that adjunct teaching allows me to teach the courses I want to teach, at the schedule I want. I don't have to balance a load of 4-6 courses; I can balance my consulting with teaching with service with research. Teaching helps me connect my research to a new community of learners and helps me connect with perhaps future PhDs or even future Independent Scholars. In my consulting business, I have helped several undergraduates with their theses, and it is very rewarding to work with junior scholars, not to mention the PhD students with whom I have worked. I consider this part of my consulting business to

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 3.1. on mentoring.

be part of my teaching vocation, to reach out on a one-on-one basis to individual students and help them in their scholarly, academic and writing careers.

### HOW IT ALL TIES TOGETHER

Wearing all these different hats- publishing, consulting, teaching, presenting, volunteering, and service, all these make me an Independent Scholar. I have been able to cobble together a career composed of things that I love. My career as an Independent Scholar mirror that of the tricorn hat of academia: teaching, scholarly work, and service. I do the same things as an Independent Scholar – but at my own pace and without the pressure of the tenure track. I do not march to the beat of anyone else’s drum; I can do what I like when I like. Yes, there are financial constraints, hence the teaching and consulting, but both of those hats give me personal satisfaction and enhance my role as a scholar.