

“Having a PhD Doesn’t Mean You’ll Impress People with Your Education: It Means You Have to Impress Them with How You Apply It”



Bonnie Lakusta



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Abstract In our interview with Bonnie Lakusta, she shares her journey from exploring psychosis and addiction to a consultant evaluating health and social programs. Planning for clinical work after her PhD, Bonnie struggled to find a role before pivoting into evaluation. She values her small, collaborative team and learning about impactful initiatives. Bonnie continues applying research skills such as data analysis and communication in her evaluation work. Though she sometimes has to explain the value of evaluation, her clients’ passions for their initiatives keep Bonnie engaged. Bonnie encourages gaining work experience prior to starting a PhD program, in order to better inform one’s motivations and goals. She advises articulating the transferable skills developed during PhD training to counter potential employer assumptions.

Contents

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?.....	238
What was the focus of your PhD?.....	239
As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?.....	239
How did you know that academia wasn’t for you?.....	239
Can you tell us more about what you did as an evaluator at AHS?.....	240
What led you to leave the AHS and move to Three Hive?.....	240
Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?.....	241

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What do you like most about your work?.....	241
And what do you like least about your work?.....	242
How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?.....	242
Do you have any advice on how someone who has recently completed a PhD could respond to these sort of questions, given your experiences?.....	242
If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?.....	243
If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?.....	243
A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?.....	244
Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?.....	244
Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?.....	244

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Bonnie: I'm Bonnie Lakusta. I did an undergraduate degree (BSc) in biopsychology – but I often tell people it was neuroscience since they seem to understand that better. That was at the University of British Columbia. I worked as a research assistant in the forensic psychology and health promotion departments for ~3 years after my undergrad. I came to the University of Alberta (UofA) to pursue an MSc in psychiatry, which ended up being a PhD.

I struggled to get a job out of university with a PhD, and I fell into the world of evaluation, which I think has a lot of transferable skillset requirements. I worked at Alberta Health Services (AHS) for a year, before moving to the Alberta Medical Association, as a permanent, full-time contractor, where I stayed for 9 years (the latter two being as an employee).

In spring of 2021, I joined Three Hive, an Edmonton-based evaluation-focused consulting firm. We are hired mostly by healthcare and non-profit organizations to evaluate programs – often based on grants. We help those programs articulate what they achieved, opportunities and recommendations for improvement and areas of strength. We do a lot of understanding (what is the program, what are the goals, environmental scans, lit reviews), data collection (creating and using surveys, interviews, focus groups) and using that data (reporting, presenting, infographics, data, etc.).

What was the focus of your PhD?

My PhD was during 2006–2011 in the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, Dept of Psychiatry, University of Alberta. My supervisor was an MD, psychiatrist, with a special interest in early psychosis/schizophrenia. I had an interest in addiction. I created a doctoral project that explored metabolic brain differences, through magnetic resonance imaging, of persons with stimulant-induced psychotic symptoms – that is, chronic cocaine or methamphetamine use inducing persistent symptoms of psychosis – compared to healthy controls, compared to persons experiencing a non-drug-related first episode of psychosis. In addition to metabolic differences, we explored symptom assessment and cognitive testing – focusing on executive functioning.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

I was confident that I wanted out of academia. I was confident that I wanted to – and could – get work in the world of mental health and addictions. I envisioned a 10-year future being a director of programming. I applied to health organizations, community-based organizations, social services and not-for-profits. I struggled to find work.

I broadened my scope to include the pharmaceutical industry, because lots of past graduates of the psychiatry program had success there. Eventually I landed a job as an evaluator in AHS, in a primary care–focused quality improvement program. Primary care supplanted addiction/mental health for the next ~10 years of my career, until my recent move to Three Hive.

How did you know that academia wasn’t for you?

The constant competitiveness of academia, the requirement to constantly be writing grant proposals and losing out to the researcher with the most wins wasn’t appealing to me. At the time I didn’t have as much insight as I do now, but now I’m even more disillusioned with the idea of applying to grants – not just in academia. There is pressure to over-promise in order to win the grant – promising to deliver on potentially unfeasible outcomes (in a limited word count!), which puts stress on your funded project. I hadn’t realized until my PhD how truly competitive academia is. I was definitely interested in leaving campus for the first time in my adult life.

Can you tell us more about what you did as an evaluator at AHS?

At AHS I worked as an evaluator with a program called Alberta AIM (Access. Improvement. Measure). AIM worked with primary and specialty care practices to improve their work processes – that is, improve access for patients, improve office efficiency, improve scheduling and appointment times, improve the patient experience, all leading to happier staff and physicians, better patient experiences and quality care, and, often, more fee-for-service payments for physicians. My job was to write the reports to the Ministry of Health to show if AIM was delivering on all those claims: Was the program working? What was working well? What wasn't? How do you measure it? I had the benefit of working alongside a mentor, a retired long-time evaluator doing a little bit of consulting work. That mentor really got me excited about evaluation. He lent me textbooks, he taught me about types of measurement, and he taught me how to create logic models and develop evaluations plans. AIM had a small team (~7 people). We all worked closely to deliver the AIM curriculum to practices, and to measure the outcomes.

I left AHS because of the opportunity at the Alberta Medical Association.

What led you to leave the AHS and move to Three Hive?

I left AHS after only about 14 months to become an independent contractor in evaluation. I had secured a full-time contract with a group called Toward Optimized Practice (TOP) at the Alberta Medical Association (AMA). TOP had a nationally funded grant to implement a screening program in primary care. My job was to use a prescribed framework (called RE-AIM) to evaluate this screening program. I needed to develop a measurement strategy that would answer to our funder about what change the program was making at the individual patient level – > were more patients getting screened? My strategy had to be scalable across our entire province. The grant lasted for about 3 years, at which point I continued my independent contracting with TOP (they had other grants and other projects) and took on a couple of smaller clients as well. After ~6 years as an independent contractor, I accepted full-time employment at the AMA, where I stayed for another 2 years. By that time, my scope of practice had expanded beyond evaluation to more 'generalist project lead', where I was a jack-of all-trades, leading various healthcare quality improvement initiatives.

I left the AMA to move to Three Hive in 2021. I liked that Three Hive was exclusively evaluation focused. I liked that Three Hive would provide me with the opportunity to work in those social service, community-based, not-for-profit organizations that were originally so appealing to me. I liked that it was owned and operated by two women, in my age group, with families. I didn't wait for a job posting. I contacted the two owners and asked if they'd be willing to meet with me. They were.

Around 2016, I decided that I could apply for my CE, credentialed evaluator, designation. This designation is offered by the Canadian Evaluation Society in an effort to contribute to the professionalization of evaluation as a career. Individuals who meet specified years of work in evaluation and experiences may apply for the designation. I mention this because after getting a PhD, it hadn’t occurred to me that I may require additional credentialing or education later on. ‘PhD’ were not the last letters to be added to my signature.

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

At Three Hive I am a project lead. I support our CEO in writing proposals in response to organizations that put out requests for evaluation services. When we land a new contract or client, I step in to learn more about the work and kick it off. I facilitate meetings, where we not only seek to understand the client’s needs but also try to build evaluation capacity in new, often not-for-profit teams. I work with clients directly to build an evaluation plan that will answer their questions. I then work with our small but mighty team of evaluation associates to implement those plans: we design data collection tools, administer surveys, do interviews and focus groups, analyse administrative data and synthesise it all together in whatever deliverables are needed – often interim or progress reports, final reports and presentations.

At Three Hive we also build capacity in evaluation through Eval Academy (<https://www.evalacademy.com>), a website with the vision that anyone can evaluate. We aim to provide resources that build awareness and familiarity with evaluation. We are all content creators – creating blog posts, template and tip sheets, with the goal to build evaluation capacity.

What do you like most about your work?

I love my team. I have learned that I thrive in small groups of like-minded folks. My work at the AMA started with a small group of highly functioning over-achievers, which I loved, but as the team and scope of work grew, the office politics grew too. I like that Three Hive is less than 10 individuals all with a vested interest in the success of the company.

I like that my role exposes me to parts of my own city, province and country that I would never know about otherwise. I get to be a point-in-time learner about amazing, often charitable, work being done close to home. I value meeting team members who are passionate about their work.

I like evaluation. It’s not the addiction/mental health–focused career I thought I’d have, although I’m closer to that now than I ever have been before. But evaluation

suits me. It suits my inner data-geek. It suits my love of writing with clarity and purpose. It even suits the reluctant public speaker in me.

And what do you like least about your work?

I heard somewhere that evaluation is the biggest growing field that no one has ever heard of. While it is growing, we still have to explain what we do regularly, and why we're worth spending money on. Even when we are hired, it's disappointing to learn that sometimes we are a box-checking activity because the funder wanted evaluation. I do believe evaluation is valuable, but it's only as valuable as the clients make it to be. Often our reports and presentations are shelved, collecting dust in perpetuity.

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

I think 10 years ago, being young with a PhD made me desirable as a way to add some credibility to the work I was doing. For example, working in primary care where often the end user or client is a physician, having a PhD doctor on the team seemed like an important title. This became less relevant as I grew older and more distant from my PhD.

I credit my PhD with getting some people to pay attention to me when I was new in my role(s) and had less real-world experience.

Having said that though, I actually believe my PhD was more of a career blocker than enabler. I believe that graduating with a PhD, particularly in a discipline that people don't understand outside of medical practice, without any experience made potential employers unsure of what to do with me. While I have no evidence, I suspect they asked, "Will she quit after a short time to pursue something bigger and better?" "Will she be research focused instead of operationally focused?" "What actual skills does she have?" "What does she actually know about what we do and how we operate?" I've often told people that I educated myself out of the job market.

Do you have any advice on how someone who has recently completed a PhD could respond to these sort of questions, given your experiences?

I think the key for using a PhD to gain a non-academic job is really being able to speak to the transferable skills (which I've mentioned). Probably a lot of people (i.e., those doing the hiring) don't actually understand what doing a PhD means or entails, so speaking about things that translate to a work environment may help, such as having deadlines, bosses to answer to, multitasking on multiple projects at

once, teamwork. Then, adding on the more concrete skills that may be relevant to a job: data analysis, writing, reporting. And finally some of the softer skills: dedication, perseverance, and commitment.

Having a PhD doesn’t mean you’ll impress people with your education. It means you have to impress them with how you apply it.

During the interview for the first job I got after my PhD, they asked me to share with them what I understood their job to be. I had done a lot of research about the department and nailed the question. I think that’s what got me the job, because I could prove that I understood operations.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

Today there are graduate degrees offered in evaluation. Someone with a PhD in evaluation would likely be very employable. But for anyone wanting to get into evaluation, I would suggest that a PhD is *not* required. A master’s, particularly in epidemiology, public health or related fields would be great matches for evaluation.

Evaluation is for those who like the process of research – and the fundamentals of research. That is, identify a problem, pose a question about the problem, determine and develop data collection methods to answer your problem, analyze your data and write up the results. The skills are 100% transferable. The subject matter is not.

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

As I just mentioned, it is much more common now to receive an education directly in evaluation, rather than relying on transferable skills. More organizations are hiring evaluators. Entry level jobs abound. I would recommend completing an undergraduate degree, or perhaps a master’s and applying for evaluation jobs. Work for a couple of years, build some real-world experience and *then* decide if you want to pursue a PhD. Ask yourself, what would a PhD do for you that you can’t do now?

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

This is not true for my position, but I'm closer than I ever have been. It's been one of my career regrets. I got a PhD in psychiatry and landed in evaluation but instead of pursuing evaluation in a topic I care deeply about (addictions and mental health) I stayed in primary care for 10 years. Only recently did I make a career change that brought me closer to things I care about. That career change (from the AMA to Three Hive) was, at least in part, *because* I wanted to care more about my work. Now, I work with social service agencies. I work in the human sector with many diverse and vulnerable populations. It feels much better and keeps me engaged.

Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?

Freedom to choose what I work on? Or freedom with respect to things like work/life balance, answering to a boss, etc.?

I'm lucky in my current role that we're a small company and my boss is collaborative and engaging. She'll often share potential new projects with the team leads and ask us if we're interested in the work. Having said that, we are a contract-based organization, so we need a regular stream of new contracts to stay in business; we can't decline everything if it's not up our alley. So, I have a say, but not total freedom.

However, with respect to freedom in other areas, I used to think a career in academia was ideal: set your own hours, travel for conferences, and work on your passion. I now see the challenges: constantly fighting for grants and writing publications to prove your worth, working your own long hours, and risking your passion becoming laborious. Outside of academia you have freedom to choose a job or career that is less competitive and demanding (which appeals to me).

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?

To my surprise, people have asked me about whether they should do a PhD. My answer is always "why". Do you want it for the prestige? Do you think you'll earn more money (how do you know)? Will it get you into more senior positions sooner

(how do you know)? If they answer anything other than a desire to be in academia, my recommendation is to do a master’s, gain some work experience for at least a couple of years, then reconsider the PhD.

I wish that I had gained work experience before completing a PhD. My world-view when I graduated would have been much more realistic.

Thank you for sharing your journey with us, Bonnie!