



## WORDPRESS FIX

Rachel:

Hey everyone! I'm Rachel Stumpf, I am a postdoc at Boston University and I am hosting today's episode of Vitamin PhD, Pathways to Entrepreneurship. When I was working on my PhD and had just met someone for the first time, one of the comments I often heard was, "Oh, you're getting a PhD, does that mean you want to be a professor?" This assumption that PhD equals professor has persisted both inside and outside of academia even though research has shown that for quite some time, PhDs have sought out a variety of career pathways. Whether out of desire or necessity because we also know that opportunities for tenure track professor positions have shrunk substantially. By the way, we'll link some of this research in the show notes so that you can take a look for yourself. The point is, PhDs are out in the world doing lots of different things, but for many of us, there are definitely still challenges in figuring out what options are available and how to pursue different kinds of career pathways. Today our guest is Dr. Maren Wood, who is the co-founder of Beyond the Professoriate, and what's fascinating about Maren's story is that she has not only carved out her own career path as an entrepreneur but she's also helping other PhDs find their own career path in her work with Beyond the Professoriate.

Thanks so much for being on vitamin Ph.D. today, Maren. We are so excited to have you. Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to be here. for listeners who aren't familiar with "Beyond the Professor", can you give us a little bit of background as to what your organization does?

Maren:





Yeah, so we've been around for six years. I'll tell you what we do as I give you a little bit of history about the organization. Six years ago, Jen Polk and I started an online career conference for PhDs called Beyond the Professoriate and that was basically all we did. Jen was doing her career coaching and I was doing research and writing for a variety of different professional organizations in the chronicle of higher ed. Over time we decided that we wanted to provide year-round professional support for PhDs because the once-a-year conference was a good shot in the arm if you were considering careers outside of the academy but it takes a long time. For both Jen and I, I think it took us a couple of years to make the transition ourselves and that's not uncommon. We realized that there was a need for more community and support primarily for PhDs who were outside of institutions of higher ed. We do work with graduate students but primarily we're working with postdocs, adjuncts, and faculty in a community platform where we're providing coaching, mentoring, resources, support, events, and interviews for people who no longer have access to career support on their campus and find that they need to transition into a new career beyond the professoriate.

Recently, actually this past year, we were getting feedback from people that there was not a lot of support for people who were actually interested in faculty careers. Then a lot of PhDs in this hyper-competitive academic job market are considering both academic as well as professional careers. I understand that that's a bit of a false division, but you know, languages are sloppy. We have started offering support for people who are interested in faculty careers as well; webinars, events, courses, and interviews. We're about to have our very first faculty job market conference. This will be held all online in September. We now see ourselves as an organization that provides professional development for all the PhDs regardless of what your career ambitions are to provide support, mentorship, coaching, and encouragement in a time when it's most needed, which is when you're on that job market trying to figure out how to leverage your Ph.D.

Rachel:

I noticed that you've also created this institutional space called Aurora. Can you talk a little bit about what that entails and how that came about?

Maren:

Yeah, we started this community platform by Beyond the Professoriate about two years ago. We got a lot of instant interest from institutions that wanted to buy access for their students. But we have a vision for our community that we wanted it to be a place where people actively sign up as members on their own accord. Having institutions buy access and dump a whole bunch of people into this platform that weren't really wanting to be there, would check it out one time and then bounce out, was not really a strength for a community and would become more like a graveyard than an actual community. We also had a lot of feedback from people who've attended our conference as well as our community and in our own coaching that PhDs really want more support, more structure around their career exploration.





I got in touch with a friend from graduate school, Susan, who now works at a teaching and learning center. We started brainstorming ways in which we could provide our programming to institutions in a way that would provide that kind of structure. What we developed was Aurora, which is only available by institutional subscription. It has two programs of study, one to support PhDs interested in faculty careers, one to support PhDs and professional careers. You can move between both of them. Then the heart of it is a career exploration video library where we're interviewing PhDs. We either one-on-one or sometimes as part of career panels.

We're also offering what we really love is called spotlights, which is a deep dive into one specific career path. What is data science? What is UX research? What does a day-to-day work life look like in those particular career fields? That's the heart of Aurora is to provide an eLearning platform that has questions, exercises, guided learning, an assessment, and quizzes to help PhDs explore career options and learn job search strategies.

Rachel:

Wow. That is so exciting. It's amazing how much Beyond the Professoriate has really expanded over just the past couple of years. I'm wondering if we can go back a little bit to the beginning. I know you said that you and Jen Polk co-founded Beyond the Professoriate and at the time the two of you were doing different things. She was doing some career coaching and you were doing some research and writing. How did the two of you meet and how did you decide that you were going to embark on this endeavor together?

Maren:

Jen and I actually knew each other back in olden times when we were both doing our master's degrees in history at Carlton University in Canada. Then we both went our separate ways. We didn't really hang out. We knew each other. We were in the same program. We weren't really friends. She went to the University of Toronto. I went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We both did our PhDs.

Then I ended up back in this space after I went on the job market in 2009, the academic job market which was an awesome time. Everything was imploding and it was chaos. Jobs seemed to be being pulled faster than they were being posted. At the end of three years, I just realized the type of job that I wanted to have, I just wasn't going to get it. This academic career path that I was on had come to a close and I was broken-hearted and lost. I had never thought about doing anything else other than being a historian and a university professor other than maybe K to 12 teachings.





I entered the space of this all tech world online and I could see this person's name and I was like, oh, Jen Polk. I remember her. Jen came to this from a slightly different perspective. She finished her Ph.D. I think in 2011 or 12 and she never wanted to be a professor. In her program at the time, people didn't really talk about doing anything else. She left the Ph.D. program just feeling really unprepared and lost. We started having these conversations and we thought, what can we do that can help? What can we do for ourselves?

But for all these, we can't be the only two people. Of course on Twitter and LinkedIn and Facebook, you could see people having these kinds of conversations. We wanted to do something that was low cost because everyone's broke. We wanted to do something that was accessible and so we came up with this idea to try webinars and online career conferences as a way to get started. We were so excited the first year we had a hundred people attend and we were like, Yay, this is awesome. Now of course we have over 600 people in town; it's definitely grown but it just was proof of concept to use an entrepreneurial work.

We just kept having conversations every year cause we were planning this conference and then I just pitched this idea to Jen of what happens if we start a community? Jen loves building communities. She was like, yes, let's build the community and the community is growing. It is a challenge to figure out how to reach PhDs and graduate students from a marketing perspective once they leave the academy. We're also finding that just too many PhDs are not having access to or being able to access resources on their campus. They feel stigmatized if they explore career options. They're not supported by PIs. Maybe their campus doesn't have great career support and we wanted to provide universities with an opportunity to support their students, too. We would like to see suffering end and we would basically like to be put out of business. We would like everyone to get the career support that they need while they're in graduate school so they can successfully step out and be competent on the job market from the minute they earn their Ph.D. or even before. In those conversations and again talking to universities about how we could support them and their students to reach PhDs, we decided it was really important for us to partner with institutions as early as we possibly could to get our programming and content into the hands of students while they were enrolled in their Ph.D. program.

Rachel:

I'm also curious when you were first getting started and reaching out to universities and figuring out how to build this community, what kinds of skills did you feel like you needed to develop in order to create this business? I'm guessing from the Ph.D. there's definitely transferable skills but probably there are other things that in starting a business one does not always learn in a PhD program.





Maren:

I had to learn everything. I would say that almost nothing from my Ph.D. directly translates into what I do now and that's okay. One of the big things that are mentioned at Beyond the Professoriate in our mission statement is to help PhDs leverage their education. We really think of the Ph.D. as education, not specifically as training for professional careers. I think that if we think of it as training, too often PhDs are being set up to fail in professional careers because the training doesn't actually translate into the types of careers that Ph.D.s often have. We do go through a long period where we have to learn an entirely new career. That's not uncommon for professionals. Very few professionals have a single career. Lots of people change jobs every three to five years. It's very normal.

I'm fine with the fact that a Ph.D. in 18th Century Gender and Sexuality Studies doesn't actually translate into the entrepreneurship that I do now. I think the hook for me is actually more about interests. One of the things I really encourage Ph.D. 's to think about is not what can I do with my history Ph.D. or my biology Ph.D. but to actually ask yourself, why did I get this? What was I interested in? What brought me to this journey? Really focusing on your interest and your motivators can help you see a connection between what you're doing now as a very broad and general way to other kinds of careers. When you're doing informational interviews and you ask people, what energizes you about the work you do now, if you're clear about what energizes you and motivates you in your academic work, then you're much more likely to be able to see how you can move into something in marketing or UX research or research administration because you're not focused on the specifics or the subject matter expertise or the training of your degree. You're thinking of the degree as one place where you explored your high-level interests.

For me, I like strategic thinking. I like high-level thinking. I like marketing because I really like to think about how we message, how we communicate language, how you can target what you're saying to a specific audience. I think that's really interesting. I like to empower people to be informed and make decisions, which is why I'm an educator. I still see myself as an educator even though I don't actually do a lot of the education now past Beyond Prop. But what I do as an entrepreneur, as a CEO, is I create a space where learning happens in all different kinds of places. I think that's really important. Specifically to the Ph.D. in history, no, but interest I can see how what I do now as an entrepreneur is similar in what motivated me to do a Ph.D. in history. In terms of skills, I don't know how to do sales or marketing or contract negotiation. I do know how to solve problems, ask questions, and find people who can help me do those things. I have great mentors and great advisors that have been really critical to the success of this business.

Rachel:





That totally makes sense. Piggybacking off that point, when you and Jen are looking at the different things that you're doing in your business, how do you decide what things the two of you are going to learn how to do and sort of divide up those tasks? Then how do you decide when you need to bring someone onto your team or find somebody else who's going to do this particular task?

Maren:

A lot of it has to do with limited resources. We're still a bootstrap startup. Some of it is can I learn how to do that? How long will it take me to learn to do that? Is it a better use of time and resources to pay somebody to solve that problem for me? My husband actually has a background in business and tech, so he's able to do a lot of the things that would actually be quite expensive for us to, to have to actually pay somebody to do business advising. If you can bring in your friends and family who love you and support you anyways to help with that, I think that's always the first line of defense and you'll be amazed at how people will help you.

Susan is a good friend and she's involved in Beyond Prof 10 hours a week as a learning specialist because that was something that I knew I wasn't going to be able to do as well as somebody who had a background in the teaching and learning center pedagogy. It really has made the difference in Aurora in terms of how Jen and I did overtime. Again, it has to do a lot with interests. We're both history PhDs, but we were drawn to history for very different reasons. Jen is much more detailed focused and I'm much more high-level overview. I have taken on largely the role of CEO. I have a high-level idea of all of the different pieces of the company, what everybody is doing, the different products, how they work together. I do the sales and the onboarding of customers and Jen does a very defined role developing our programming. Jen likes to talk to people, she likes to network and build relationships. That's a great place because we always need people to come in and do content. It was really building off of her strengths and her ability to pay attention to details because it's a lot of project management. That of course is the center and heart of what we do is offer this programming to people. It was a natural delegation based on very different interests and personalities.

Rachel: It's great that you both have very complementary skill sets that you're able to work together on all these different things. That's really cool.

Maren: it's Important. If you're interested in starting a startup and you're interested in finding a business partner, find somebody that you're not already friends with that you can develop a business relationship with. I like Jen and we get along but we are primarily business partners. Then the second thing is you need to have a clear idea of what your strengths are and be able to match them with someone who is complimentary so that you don't have the clash of the competing founders. So you as founders can work together collaboratively to build an organization.







Rachel: I know you said when you first got started with your business the two of you were kind of coming from different experiences. situations. and so I'm curious if over time if your strategy or your goals for beyond the professoriate have changed?

Speaker 2: [17:42](#) I think that Jen and I had originally seen this as the company that she and I would run together with just the two of us and it would largely focus on serving individuals. the fact that we now have an eLearning specialist, someone who's doing our video editing, that we have a full-time person who is doing marketing, that we now need tech support that we're doing contract negotiations with the universities. This was not really part of our original iteration of the company, but something that we've had to do in order to grow and succeed as an organization. and that's really about expanding our reach and meet as helping as many people as we possibly can and trying to think of the best avenues to do that. and so that's part of what drives the iteration is to think, okay, we're doing this thing and it's working kind of, sort of, but how do we reach more people?

Speaker 2: [18:42](#) How do we expand what we're doing? and really I think we're motivated by, as I said before, limit eliminating suffering as much as possible amongst PhDs. You know, you read that terrifying statistic that 40% of graduate students suffer from anxiety and depression. I would argue that that number increases for early career professionals that are languishing and postdocs in adjunct positions in UN and in uncertainty. That's unacceptable. You know, these are smart, talented, capable people, highly educated, highly motivated. The fact that so many feel like failures and defeat is of, I feel like it's a social problem that is worthy of time and energy and effort and needs a solution. so that really is what drives us to expand and kind of find other ways to reach people and find new avenues, to support PhDs.

Speaker 1: [19:41](#) Yeah. On a related note, I think one of the challenges in shifting from being academia to being in different kinds of career paths is the way that we think about success is often very different. within academia, you know, it's often about publications and promotion and status. For you, within your business and your organization, how do you think about success?

Speaker 2: [20:07](#) business gets a bad rap in academia for being profit-driven. But the fact of the matter is if I don't have revenue, which is different from profit coming in, then my organization ceases to exist. I have to be able to pay talents, pay for my platforms, pay to advertise pay to travel, to go to conferences to do marketing. if I don't have that revenue coming in, then I don't have a successful or viable business. as horrible, I guess as it sometimes seems, you know, that's why businesses often focus on that line because it is the way in which you succeed as an organization. How much revenue do you have coming in? Are you growing? It's not so much about profit, but if I grow, then I can pay for my talent better.





Speaker 2: [21:01](#) I can do more interesting things. I can pay myself, which would be awesome. Yes, I can innovate, I can invest in my platforms, I can do more interesting things. revenue has to be on the table. then in terms of like, of what we're trying to achieve you know, success for us is about it. I keep saying expanding our reach, we want to have as many PhDs know about our resources as possible. How do we do that? Is that number increasing? because that's really important too. Again, the revenue, but also the mission of the organization. Beyond profit is a business that we are what's called a public benefit corporation, which means that our mandate is actually to serve the public, not to serve shareholders. One of the things then that is important for us measuring the success as a business is are we delivering on the mission?

Speaker 2: [21:55](#) Are we empowering PhDs to leverage their education? so that's the other way that we're measuring that success. How many PhDs are we? Are we reaching, are we helping people? Are Our community members succeeding? Are people coming out of Aurora feeling empowered? Those are more difficult things to measure. But those are important to the success of the organization. For Ph.D. students who are thinking that they may want to start their own business, what advice would you give them? First of all, you need to do proof of concept. don't start a business without testing the waters. I think that our evolution as a company has shown that, you know, we started as an online conference that we did once a year. It was a very low-cost investment in both time and resources, but there was a proof of concept in that people showed up and we got more people every year and people enjoyed it and we heard positive things.

Speaker 2: [22:53](#) so that, you know, that's kind of a side hustle. If you're interested in doing this, think about starting as a side hustle and seeing if the idea that you have has legs. The other thing that I wish I had done, which I didn't do is I would suggest going into a startup and working either in an internship or low paid position cause those are always available in startups just to get a sense of what the culture is to learn the language. You know, when people are saying, well let's put that in a parking lot. you know, at the end of a meeting and you're like, wait, what's a parking lot? Like there's just some lingo and language that people are using that you'll find useful in your organization. I find that the transition to being in charge of a company is much bigger than I had imagined.

Speaker 2: [23:41](#) I would've had a better foundation if I had spent even six months just in a startup, really understanding that world that would be, it's kind of the second advice. then the third is just know that most startups don't make money for three to five years so that you will probably need some other kind of revenue in order to actually succeed. that can be angel investors. That can be savings. That can be other kinds of employment. That can be, in my case, a spouse who wants the company to succeed, is able to pay bills, and is happy to not go on vacations or buy new cars. you have to, you have to just plan for that. then that's not, there were other benchmarks in the success of the business in the first three to five years.





Speaker 2: [24:36](#) and to know whether it's viable or not, other than are you making a profit. to know that that profit piece will often be, especially if you're doing a business solo, entrepreneurship can be a little bit different. But still, it takes a long time to establish relationships, to get your clients, to be able to understand what your work is in the marketplace, be able to build people correctly and understand all of those different things. so just give yourself time and explore it in ways that are not financially devastating to you and the people that account for you.

Speaker 1: [25:12](#) That's really helpful. so just to conclude our conversation, what have you found most rewarding about the space that you're in and doing this work for beyond the professoriate?

Speaker 2: [25:24](#) Yeah, I mean, helping our community members. I was hosting this event for our conference. It was a career spotlight. The woman's name is Nikki Kellogg. She does UX research and she did the most fantastic presentation for us. She loves her job. She's helping people, she's engaged. She gets to choose where she lives. She pays her bills, she's well-paid, she is happy. because she's all of those things, this spotlight that she did for us, this, that seminar, literally changed lives. You could see it in the conversation that was happening in our zoom chat as people were inspired by Nikki's story but also just inspired to explore this entire different career that they had never really imagined. UX Research and really understanding how many opportunities there were for people with their interests and their skills to make them move into that space.

Speaker 2: [26:25](#) so I as the host, I mean you feel great. Nikki loves her life, would be a great event and I'm inspiring people to take their education and move it into areas where they will feel better about themselves, where they'll be able to make a difference, where there'll be, where they will be well paid, and where there's your career advancement and for so many PhDs. Those are things of that. I think when we're in the adjunct POSTDOC, hell, we don't think that that's possible. For me, that's the most inspiring thing about the work we do is to find these PhDs that are living the life of the mind, that are engaged and hopeful and like their lives. are making great decisions and have career advancement and connect them with PhDs who really need to hear that story and understand that there is hope and opportunity for them. It's going to be difficult. It's going to be a slog. You're going to have to start over or you might have to take entry-level positions, but at the end of the day, the life that you actually want is possible even if it's not as a tenure track professor or especially not as a tenure track professor if that's a bad fit for you.

Speaker 1: [27:33](#) Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today and we look forward to seeing you at BU very soon.

Speaker 2: [27:51](#) Yes. Thank you so much, Rachel.





Thanks for tuning in to this week's episode of Vitamin Ph.D., Pathways to Entrepreneurship featuring Maren Wood. To get the latest episodes of Vitamin PhD, be sure to follow us on Spotify or Apple Podcasts, and you can also connect with us on Twitter at BUvitaminPhD. Learn more about our team and send us your feedback by visiting our website, [bu.edu/vitaminphd](https://bu.edu/vitaminphd). See you next time!

