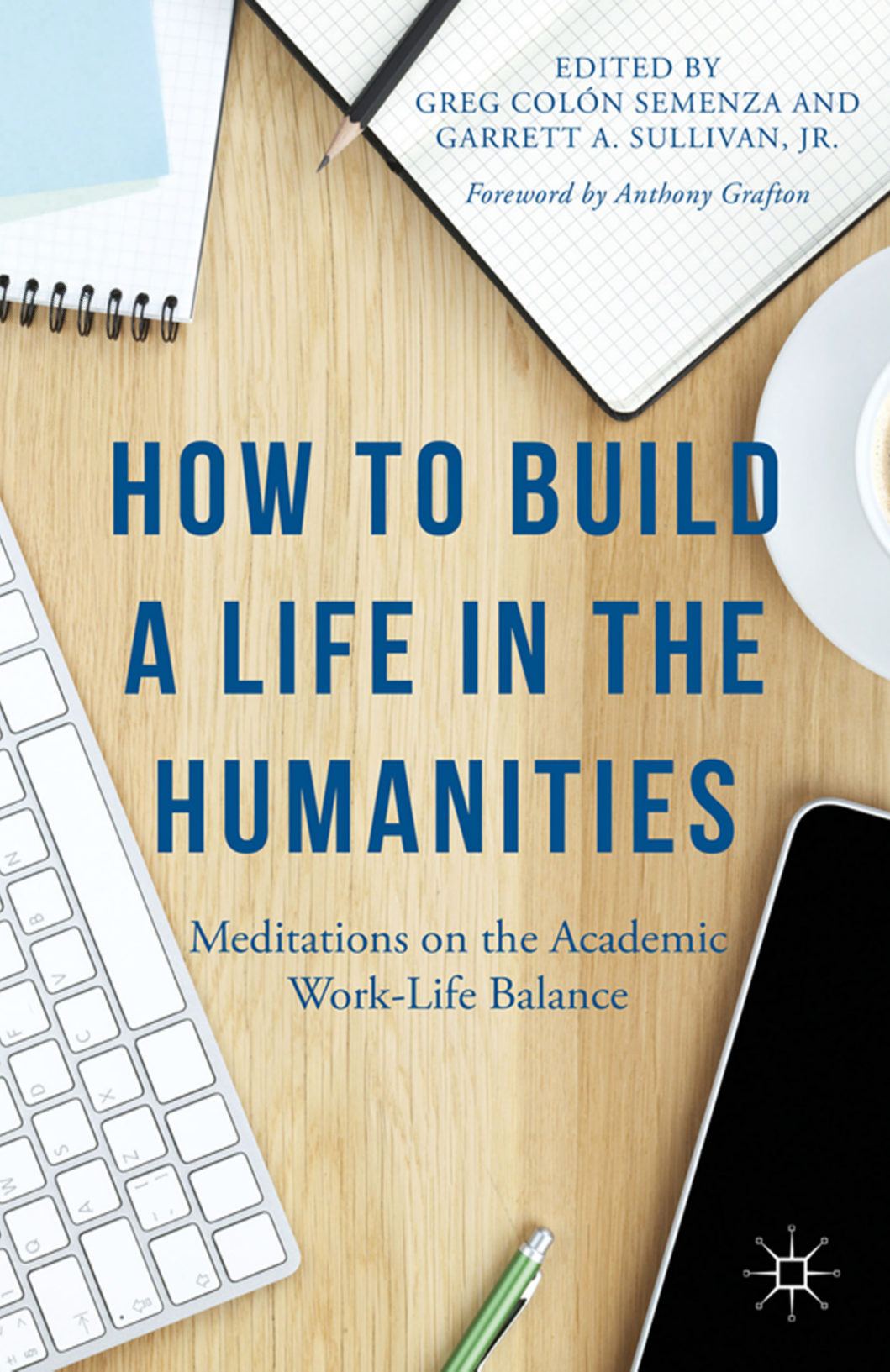
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Foreword by Anthony Grafton
HOW TO BUILD A LIFE IN THE HUMANITIES
Meditations on the Academic Work-Life Balance

How to Build a Life in the Humanities

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How to Build a Life in the Humanities

Meditations on the Academic Work–Life Balance

Edited by

Greg Colón Semenza
and
Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr.

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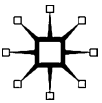

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This book is dedicated to Marti Semenza and
Garry and Lorry Sullivan

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Foreword: Living the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century

Tony Grafton

We have heard the news, and it isn't good. Politicians and pundits, creative destroyers and creative writers all seem to agree: the humanities are on the chopping block, and it's a good thing. Since the 1960s, they point out, humanities enrollments have crashed, and about time. We humanists deserved to lose our students. Our subjects just aren't practical. Pundits agree that college should prepare students for the world of work—while the humanities prepare them for something more, like irresponsible, and impractical, intellectual play. Even our professorial president, Barack Obama, cited a humanistic discipline—art history—when he needed an example of the kind of study that doesn't lead to a job. But our subjects aren't idealistic either. For, in the 1980s and 1990s, we gave up on teaching great texts and urging students to debate about great ideas. Instead of feeding the young bread, the best that has been thought and said, we handed them something worse than a stone: a sausage machine, named Theory, that transformed everything we put into it, from Homer to Walcott and Sappho to Woolf, into a single, uniform, and displeasing product.

No wonder, then, that we're on the way out. We should expect no sympathy, and we get very little. As an editorialist in the *Harvard Crimson* put it when a report about the decline in humanities majors appeared, "Let them eat code." In too many states, attitudes like this flow not only upward from the college paper but also downward from the governor's mansion. Many university administrators make clear, by actions if not by words, that we don't bring in outside money and, therefore, can hardly expect to receive much internal support. A fair

number of them make common cause with the prophets of the massive open online course, who offer to replace the Sage on the Stage with the Vox in the Box, and urge us to replace our own courses with MOOCs, for which we would serve not as expensive professors—why pay ordinary humanists salaries when you can stream the stars?—but as modestly compensated coaches.

It's not just bean counters and MOOC makers who spout this invective. Novelists—many of whom double as creative writing professors—identify us, most of the time, as privileged heterosexual white males (Philip Roth, always original, at least made his professor an African-American male who was passing as white). Whether they depict us as sterile pedants obsessed with research or charismatic lecturers obsessed with teaching, they agree on the nature of our central occupation: persuading students to sleep with us. Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* and Richard Russo's *Straight Man* delight us for many reasons—and not least because their male protagonists somehow manage not to sleep with their beautiful, seductive female students.

All the invective adds up to something truly terrible: a vast and monstrous set of accusations that seems impossible to escape. Many of the assertions that compose it are false. A number of humanists—from the senior literary scholar Michael Bérubé, who has an essay in this volume, to the junior historian Ben Schmidt—have done fine work, correcting the mistakes. They have shown that humanities enrollments shot up in the 1960s, when large numbers of women, who traditionally studied the humanities, entered previously male colleges and universities—and fell off again almost at once, as women found their way to the full range of academic disciplines. They have pointed out that, since the fall, enrollments have recovered, and held steady until the recent crash, which does seem to have frightened students and their families in large numbers into looking for more practical majors. They have noted that enrollments rose, not fell, in the age of theory, and that the normal humanist nowadays is female, not male, and often neither white nor heterosexual. Moreover, they have made clear, again and again, that while humanists don't bring in a lot of grant money, we do a lot of teaching and don't cost very much. In fact, in many colleges and universities, we're cross-subsidizing the natural scientists, whose work costs more than their grants pay and who do less teaching than we do.

But these systematic answers, although necessary, are not sufficient. They don't, and can't, offer the details that bring a world into focus for those living outside of it. Even those who read some of these arguments with understanding still find themselves baffled when they

try to imagine what professors actually do all day, all weekend, and all summer. And there's a good reason for this. We humanists have argued at length, in recent years, with real and imaginary critics. But, we have told far too few stories in the course of these debates: stories about what we actually do all day, about how we work with administrators, colleagues, and teachers. The few exceptions to this rule—such as Bérubé's *What's Liberal about the Liberal Arts?* (2006)—are invaluable. But they also necessarily focus on the disciplines their authors know and the situations they have experienced.

One of the many good qualities of the essays in this book is that, collectively, they offer a panorama of humanists' lives. In them, every major step in the humanist's career, from graduate school to retirement, comes in for imaginative, sympathetic, and precise description. Even if you are not a humanist—especially if you are not a humanist—let me urge you to read this book from end to end. Do it, and you will learn a great deal—much of it the sort of thing that no polemic could teach you. You will see that many humanists in many disciplines write sharp, vivid, and accessible prose, totally devoid of the jargon and containing none of the obfuscation that critics of the academy describe as universal. You will learn that humanists come in many forms—female as well as male, gay as well as straight, with fears, with depression, with disability—and with confidence, with joy, and with health.

Soon, you will see that humanists are not the scarecrow figures of academic fiction or the scary ones of political polemic. They can be fearful—fearful, in many cases, that they do not deserve the jobs they hold, the rewards and privileges of which they deeply appreciate. They can be depressed—depressed, in many cases, because of the peculiar series of stages into which humanists' careers fall, which impose stress and isolation on many. They can be nervous—nervous, in many cases, because they know they can't do everything and they very much want to choose the activities that will be most valuable to their colleagues and their departments. Humanists, in other words, are often their own sharpest critics, and when they discuss the need for downtime and leisure activities, they often do so because they almost burned themselves out before realizing that work cannot and should not cannibalize life.

Above all, however, you will realize that humanists—whatever discipline they practice and whatever sort of institution they teach at—have core values in common. If they do research—and many do—it's because they are deeply committed to their subjects and believe that pursuing them energetically and intelligently is an activity of high intellectual worth. Further, when they teach—and they almost all do

that—they feel loyalty and affection for their students, and a strong desire to help them by giving them the fullest set of skills they know how to provide. The humanists represented in this volume take pride in their practices as lecturers, seminar leaders, and readers of work. The grades and comments they dish out are designed not to discourage their students but to inspire them—and provoke them—into doing better.

But replying to the outside world—although vital—is not enough. We have other constituencies as well—from the alumni and parents who want to believe that they have not put their children into the hands of crazed pedants and vile lechers to the students for whom we are responsible. And their questions—although by no means all of them are hostile—are harder to answer than the criticisms of those who have written us off. Consider, for example, a graduate student in a humanities field who wants to know what it's like to have a baby while still working on her dissertation—and has only male advisers to consult. Or a more advanced graduate student, who has passed general exams and written all or most of a dissertation, and has been offered a position at a community college—although he himself has never studied or taught except at private, selective institutions. Or an undergraduate, who has done superb work in courses, written a dazzling capstone paper, and wants to know if he or she might possibly be able to make a career in the humanities—and what that might be like, especially for someone who has a diagnosed partial disability.

Humanists—real humanists, not the scarecrows imagined by the polemicists—want to be helpful to their advisees. Late in the afternoon, when a student comes into the office, his or her face eloquently expressing a need to lay out a problem or a possibility for a reliable adult, we rapidly change our plans, sit back down in our cut-rate office chairs, listen, and offer the most sensible and accurate advice we can. But our ability to carry out that vital task is limited, in every case. Those of us who have studied and taught only in private research universities—my own case—can't give very realistic advice on what it would be like to work at a community college or a small liberal arts college (students of mine do both). Those of us who have never served as chairs can't give realistic counsel about what doing that entails—or about what possibilities it offers. Moreover, those of us who were young in a different world can't give realistic advice about what it's like to make a career and a life now—to say nothing of the next decade or two.

No single person or book can carry out all of these tasks. But this book can and will do an enormous amount of good. Its articles have the feel and the texture of lived experience accurately conveyed.

In some cases, they will confirm justified fears. In others, however, they will bring reassurance. They show that colleagues—and administrators—are often understanding, generous, and can be supportive. They show that what can be ordeals, like being considered for tenure, can turn into comprehensible, even constructive, tests of ability and accomplishment. Full-time, tenure-track positions at research universities have become so rare that students treat the prospect of getting them as a bitter joke. From these essays, they will take away one final lesson: that jobs of many kinds and at many levels can prove immensely rewarding—so much so that those who hold them can't imagine giving them up to move. It turns out that even what looks like an abyss looming at the end of the academic road—retirement—can actually offer new possibilities for learning and teaching.

Few informed humanists are broadly optimistic about the state of their disciplines or that of the university. The rise of corporate management strategies—strategies that seem to come from corporations of a very old vintage, rather than from Google or a contemporary advertising agency—threatens freedom of speech. So, more surprisingly, can an articulate and fierce public, easily offended by what seems to a professor common sense or straightforward history. Some members of the ordinary public greet our efforts to craft exhibitions and other forms of accessible programming with warm enthusiasm. Others wage concerted campaigns against individual professors whom they have identified as enemies, pursuing their targets with all the energy and ferocity, worthy of a better cause, that writing at a distance seems to inspire. Meanwhile, the replacement of tenure-track jobs with contingent positions moves on apace, and with it the erosion of traditional campus cultures and relationships.

The authors of these essays are far too canny, and have seen far too much, to give way to optimism. What they display instead might be called an earned confidence: confidence that most humanists, whatever the difficulties they face, can leap the hurdles, negotiate the hard passages, and gain the perspective and experience to be good teachers and colleagues. Confidence also that many humanists find, and more will find, the elusive balance between care of their selves and their children and care of their students, colleagues, and books: they can, in short, live a version of the lives that most people want. This is a book I wish I could have read when I was much younger. Because nothing like it existed then—and nothing like it exists now—I'll be very happy to recommend it to my students and colleagues, as well as to administrators, trustees, and general readers.

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Acknowledgments

We first met when one of us was a graduate student and the other a newly minted assistant professor. By the time we both had tenure-line appointments, we'd already enjoyed multiple conversations about the vagaries and complexities of academic life. One key question that continuously emerged, whether directly or indirectly, had to do with how on earth today's academics—from graduate students to adjuncts to professors of all ranks—are supposed to build a good life *and* a good career. Is it even possible to balance the demands of a serious academic position and a life fully lived? In the years that followed, we continued to discuss these and other issues, sometimes with several of the contributors to this volume. *How to Build a Life in the Humanities* is a product of this dialogue as well as its extension into print. Our hope is that it will engender new conversations and contribute to already existing ones among its readers—and, just maybe, help some of those readers to answer that question for themselves.

We are grateful, first of all, to our contributors for the fine work they have done. Each of them has taught us a great deal about our peculiar profession, and has responded with intelligence, good humor, and grace to every editorial request. We feel lucky to have had the chance to work with them on this volume. Tony Grafton has not only been kind enough to write us a foreword but also to do it in record time; his generosity and professionalism are truly exemplary. Brigitte Shull is an ideal editor, one to return to again and again. It's a privilege to work with her and others at Palgrave Macmillan, including Ryan Jenkins. The press's readers have also offered useful advice that's made this a better volume. Bob Hasenfratz and Mark Morrisson, our department heads, have been most supportive.

We would additionally like to thank our students. Because this book focuses on the complexities and challenges of academic life, it doesn't have much to say about its pleasures. Indeed, to stress those pleasures might seem ethically questionable—might we help lure unsuspecting undergraduates into the academy at a time of diminished opportunity and resource scarcity? Yet, if we don't acknowledge

our students, we slight the positive contributions they make to our lives every day. They justify our faith in the value and power of a humanities education, and we feel lucky and privileged to work with them.

Additionally, Garrett would like to thank his mother Cathy and his sisters Tracy, Amy, and Sheila for their unwavering support. Non-academics all, they have always encouraged him in, and occasionally mocked him for, his bizarre choice of career. His partner, Marie, *does* know the madness of which he speaks; he is forever grateful to her for building her academic life in conjunction with his. He happily dedicates this volume to Garry and Lorry, his father and stepmother, for their exuberant enthusiasm for projects such as this one.

Greg is especially grateful to Simon and Brendan for their willingness to confirm—through a restorative year of lively conversation—the need for this book; here's to Mt. Washington, guys. His sons, Benjamin and Alexander, have taught him more about life than he'd managed to learn in his previous 30+ years on this Earth, and Cristina—poor thing—who's lived with him through so many of those years, is his witness. He's thankful for all the support they provide. Additional thanks to his father, Greg, to Geri Semenza, and to his brother, Matt. In dedicating a volume with the word "life" in its title to his mother, Marti, he's had to suppress every cheesy, punning instinct in his body. Hopefully, "thanks" will do the trick.

Introduction

Greg Colón Semenza and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr.

This volume is the by-product of an ongoing conversation between its editors. It attempts to answer a question that preoccupies us both: How do you build a life in the humanities? The book is both a companion to and the logical outgrowth of Greg's earlier work, *Graduate Study for the 21st Century: How to Build an Academic Career in the Humanities.* And yet, the questions of constructing a *career* and a *life* are distinct, if inevitably interwoven. It's one thing to say that scholars should work many hours each week, for example, but how are they to do so while trying to raise children, maintain a home, deal with personal crises, or manage the daily stresses of the office? Just as the practical advice in *Graduate Study* is grounded in the conviction that there's nothing commonsensical about the professional activities of a humanities scholar, this volume approaches the difficulties of managing life as an academic as peculiar and in need of serious discussion. Moreover, while various forms of professional advice are readily available and widely disseminated, the issue of building an academic life remains comparatively underexplored. Graduate students and new junior faculty are amply oriented to their institutions, but not to the possible lives they might construct for themselves within the academy. This book is designed to provide such an orientation. As life-building is less an event than an ongoing process, the volume has much to offer present and future academics of all ranks and positions.

This book, then, performs a detailed and wide-ranging examination of how academics negotiate their humanity in an increasingly bureaucratic academy and manage the personal challenges of working in an extraordinarily complex and competitive profession. The impact on our daily lives of twenty-first-century academic realities—increasing corporatization and administrative oversight, dwindling

state support, decreasing employment opportunities for PhDs, and so forth—is too infrequently discussed in professional forums and publications, and almost never in spaces dedicated exclusively to the topic. Graduate students and younger faculty members especially, but also experienced academics navigating the murky waters of the mid-career phase, are often forced to deal with their personal ordeals alone, although such ordeals tend to be quite common. One of this book's foundational premises, therefore, is that collective meditation on the personal side of academic life is both an ethical and practical obligation of those humanists who are in a position to share their experiences with others.

Of course, no two academic lives are the same. For that reason, we have assembled contributors from a range of different institutions (community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and research universities) as well as institutional positions (graduate students, adjunct professors, and tenure-line faculty of all ranks) and asked them to write first-person essays in full confidence that their own experiences and reflections will resonate with a broad academic audience. (They certainly have with us; we've learned a lot.) Consequently, these essays don't tell you how it's done as much as they provide raw materials for your own DIY life-building project.

Such projects aren't undertaken in a vacuum, and one challenge we all face is negotiating the relationship between our lives in the humanities and in the outside world. Most of us have had awkward conversations at family reunions or holiday parties about our jobs. Some of us have been foolhardy enough to try to explain "what we are working on"; others have fallen back on partial and misleading truths. In both cases, we've often been greeted with blank stares or longing glances at the liquor cabinet. If building an academic life is a challenge for us, its workings are, to many of our interlocutors, a mystery they don't care to solve.

Moreover, what we do tends to be undervalued as well as imperfectly understood. In January 2013, *Forbes Magazine* published an article by Susan Adams identifying that year's "Least Stressful Jobs." Alone at the top of the list stands the university professor. As Adams puts it,

> University professors have a lot less stress than most of us. Unless they teach summer school, they are off between May and September and they enjoy long breaks during the school year, including a month over Christmas and New Year's and another chunk of time in the spring. Even when school is in session they don't spend too many hours in the

> classroom. For tenure-track professors, there is some pressure to publish books and articles, but deadlines are few.[1]

Adams's laughable caricature of professorial life provoked enough of a response to inspire her (to her credit) to add an addendum:

> Since writing the above piece I have received more than 150 comments, many of them outraged, from professors who say their jobs are terribly stressful. While I characterize their lives as full of unrestricted time, few deadlines and frequent, extended breaks, the commenters insist that most professors work upwards of 60 hours a week preparing lectures, correcting papers and doing research for required publications in journals and books. Most everyone says they never take the summer off, barely get a single day's break for Christmas or New Year's and work almost every night into the wee hours.

The comments to Adams's essay nicely articulate some of the stresses attendant upon academic life. For instance, "Anthroprof" notes both that professors are only on nine-month contracts—one reason for their relatively low salaries—and that "summers actually present a break from committee work and classroom time to engage in other responsibilities necessary for me to KEEP MY JOB." As Mary Leech points out, "We may spend few hours in the classroom, but for every hour in the classroom, at least two to four hours are spent in preparation. Tests, papers, labs, and homework are all graded outside of the classroom, and add many hours of work." Ian Durham asserts that "a very small sub-sample of university professors have cushy jobs. The rest of us are overworked and often underpaid." And David Perry (in a comment highlighted in Adams's addendum) observes, "I love my job. It's definitely deeply rewarding. But the stresses are intense and the workload never ending."

If the *Forbes* article misrepresents the lot of the professor, it does so at a moment when the "University Professor" resembles an endangered species. Indeed, those of us with tenure-track jobs are aware that most graduate students, postdocs, visiting assistant professors, or adjunct faculty members would eagerly embrace our stresses. Our cultural moment is marked by a relatively long time to degree for humanities PhD students; a dearth of tenure-track and full-time professorial jobs; relatively low salaries for those lucky enough to hold permanent positions and an absence of salaried jobs for everyone else; and, increasingly, a lack of public and institutional support for what we do, not to mention the types of skills we teach. This is a tough time to be building a life in the humanities. Moreover, even those of

us fortunate enough to secure permanent employment are shadowed by the sense that we are not only overtaxed but also culturally marginalized. In proclaiming our stresses, we are also seeking legitimation. At the same time, we think that David Perry got it right: we love our jobs, and we feel profoundly lucky to have them, but they are stressful as all get out. We build our lives around them, but they make it hard to live.

Only over the past 25 years or so has the academic work–life balance become a topic academics are willing to discuss openly. For instance, several book-length studies have addressed the challenges of academe for highly specific populations—a strategy our book also employs in the section on *Diverse Lives*. Examples include *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory* by Michelle M. Tokarczyk and Elizabeth A. Fay (1993); *Lesbians in Academia: Degrees of Freedom* by Beth Mintz and Esther D. Rothblum (1997); *Ms. Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia* by Emily Toth (1997); and *Professor Mommy: Finding Work-Family Balance in Academia* by Rachel Connelly and Kristen Ghodsee (2011). By far, the most impressive forum for the discussion of specific issues related to academic life, however, is the blogosphere. A number of online journals, including *Vitae*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *Grad Hacker*, as well as several well-known periodicals such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Slate,* now regularly publish columns by a growing group of dedicated bloggers and columnists—many of whom have contributed to this volume—who focus specifically on academic work–life issues. This expanding body of literature has gone a long way toward providing the sort of forum for academics that we feel is badly needed. If there's any problem with the blogs and articles, it's simply that there are so many of them, authored by so many excellent people, and appearing in so many different venues. One of our main goals for this collection, therefore, has been to provide in a single, compact volume a range of views on a variety of the most important academic work-life topics.

We have organized this book's chapters into four sections: *Professional Life*, *Personal Life*, *Diverse Lives*, and *Life Off the Tenure Track*. The first section focuses on different kinds of postsecondary institutions and the most important professional activities that faculty perform within them. Section two concerns key issues for, and challenges to, maintaining a healthy work–life balance, while the third section centers upon the experiences of academics who don't conform to the stereotype of the tweedy, white, heterosexual male academic from a privileged background. Most of the contributors to these first

three sections hold tenure-line appointments. Section four, however, centers upon those (sometimes former) humanities scholars who have built their lives off of the tenure track.

Of course, the boundaries between our section topics are porous, and that is appropriate for a profession in which it can be difficult to separate work from the rest of one's life. This porousness means that individual essays often speak to and resonate with one another in what we hope are illuminating ways. All of the essays in the volume are grounded in authorial experience. They offer not an encyclopedic overview of a given topic, but a single writer's close engagement with a subject of significance to her or him. Most of the essays have a practical dimension: they provide glimpses of the inner workings of different types of institutions; advice for managing specific problems; or fresh perspectives on practices we all engage in every day. Taken together, the essays offer a full picture of academic life—treated here as singular rather than plural only for rhetorical convenience—in all its personal and institutional complexity. At the same time, that picture is far from comprehensive; a single book could not possibly account for the full range of experiences and viewpoints of those in the academy today. For example, the chapter on "Disability" is co-written by two deaf scholars; they share their experiences of what it is like to work in the academy with a disability, but in no way do they claim to represent the experiences of all disabled persons. Moreover, in putting this volume together, we were keenly aware that, in a single volume, there were topics or issues worthy of examination that we were not going to be able to cover. The editors hope our readers will understand this volume to be inaugurating or extending conversations about academic life in the humanities rather than offering the final word.

As mentioned earlier, we believe that our book will be of keen interest to individual professors, graduate students, and undergraduates contemplating a life in the academy. We also designed it with introductory graduate research methods and/or professional development seminars in mind. An awful burden is placed on instructors for such courses to pretend they can somehow cover all aspects of the academic life—an impossible task. *How to Build an Academic Life* is intended to help by marshalling the aid of some two dozen teachers who bring their unique perspectives on a wide range of issues related to working and living as academics. Whether you're lucky enough to be enrolled in such a seminar or you're taking up this book on your own, you'll surely be tempted to skip directly to those chapters you assume will be most relevant. This is fine, of course, although we

think you'll benefit from reading the essays in the order in which they're presented and especially from delving into those essays that might seem least relevant to your own interests. Knowing something about the lives and experiences of our fellow workers can help us to understand better the multifaceted professional world we're all a part of, making us more informed, more involved, and, hopefully, more empathetic colleagues. In other words, it can make the humanities a little bit more humane.

NOTE

1. Adams, S. "The Least Stressful Jobs of 2013," *Forbes Magazine*, January 3, 2013, accessed August 1, 2014, http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/01/03/the-least-stressful-jobs-of-2013/.