Christine Kelly is part of a culture change in higher education. As director of careers development at Claremont Graduate U., she helps Ph.D. students navigate the nonacademic job market.

By Vimal Patel | JANUARY 12, 2015  ✔ PREMIUM

In 1991, Christine Kelly received a Ph.D. in communications with a dream of becoming a tenured professor. But after many frustrating years as an adjunct at a liberal-arts college in Ohio, she abandoned her goal, cracking open What Color Is Your Parachute?, a well-worn guide for job seekers, to help her navigate employment possibilities outside of academe.

Today, she wants other Ph.D.’s to avoid the pitfalls she faced—and not to have to rely on a book when rethinking their careers.

Ms. Kelly recently became director of career development at Claremont Graduate University, a position the university created to better prepare graduate students for the job market and to help emphasize that becoming an academic does not need to be the end goal of every doctoral student.

Claremont is one of a growing number of universities that have a full-time administrator solely dedicated to career preparation for graduate students. While Claremont’s post is several years old, other universities have just established such roles. They reflect an acknowledgment by universities that the job market for doctoral students has become more complicated in recent years.

Fewer tenure-track opportunities exist for new Ph.D.’s, and more of them are exploring careers outside the professoriate, whether by choice or not. The most recent federal data
show that, even as universities produce a growing number of Ph.D.’s, a declining percentage of them report having firm commitments for jobs or postdoctoral positions. Of those who reported commitments, only about half were taking academic positions.

As a result, universities have been under pressure in recent years to improve career services for Ph.D. students. Graduate-student leaders often say it is their top priority, and influential disciplinary groups like the Modern Language Association and American Historical Association attribute the job-market woes facing new Ph.D. students to "underutilization," not overproduction.

But the administrators who have taken on these roles face a host of challenges. Unlike with career counselors for undergraduates, in many cases there isn’t an established road map for the post or a campus infrastructure to support it. What’s more, the position means not just helping newly minted Ph.D.’s find jobs, but leading a cultural change at universities, where some faculty members may resist the idea that a doctoral degree should be used for anything but scholarly pursuits.

"The landscape for graduate education has changed," said Jacqueline Looney, senior associate dean for graduate programs at Duke University. "The administrations of graduate schools are recognizing that there needs to be someone with expertise to help students to think about how they could use their Ph.D. skills broadly."

**A Culture Change**

Two years ago, Duke established an assistant-dean-level position for graduate-student professional development, whose responsibilities include organizing panels of alumni to talk about their jobs in industry and government and maintaining a blog that features profiles of graduates and their careers. The staff member is also building an online professional-development planning tool for students.

"There is a lot of excitement and interest about graduate professional development right now," said Melissa Bostrom, who was hired for the job.

The University of Maryland at College Park is in the process of hiring a director for a campuswide effort to prepare Ph.D. students for "multiple career paths." Charles
Caramello, dean of the graduate school, envisions the person both having a Ph.D. and being a career-guidance professional. He says the key goal will be to destigmatize Ph.D. students who want to pursue jobs outside of universities.

"The general assumption was that doctoral candidates wanted to go into the academy, and that these other positions were the doctoral students who didn’t get positions in the academy," Mr. Caramello said. "The big shift has been the recognition that a lot of these people wanted to get jobs in other sectors of the economy. They are not consolation jobs." Some professors are not so sure about that. They want the career target to remain on academe.

"Some faculty members in the humanities and social sciences were adamant that if you’re admitting a student to pursue a Ph.D., they should be pursuing a career in academia," Ms. Looney said. "We had to show our faculty members the numbers. Students are not finding the positions they thought they would after five, six, and seven years of Ph.D. study. They’ve been difficult conversations, and we’re still having those conversations."

Administrators elsewhere have heard similar concerns, but say they emphasize that what makes doctoral students attractive to employers is their rigorous academic training, and they don’t want to change that. And any new career services are not intended to bypass the training students receive in their programs.

While some professors are less than enthusiastic, graduate students applaud the new positions, saying Ph.D. students need a person focused on their needs, rather than talking to a counselor who usually focuses on undergraduates. "We are much more narrowed down in what our options are," said Nicole Scott, a cognitive-science Ph.D. student at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities who is a member of the Council of Graduate Students. "Having a specialized person who understands the stress and mental-health conditions that graduate students face makes a big difference."

‘A New Paradigm’

In some cases, it takes more than one person to oversee career preparation. In 2013 the University of Notre Dame created a Graduate Career Services office. The office has a
director and a pair of career consultants, and it is hiring a third for graduate students in the College of Arts and Letters.

"I don’t think the faculty job market is ever going to come back to the levels it was at pre-2008," said Larry J. Westfall, director of the office. "What we are creating is a new paradigm in how you look at not only graduate education but also graduate career development and graduate career outcomes."

While it’s unclear exactly how many universities have positions dedicated solely to graduate career preparation, interest is growing in such services.

In 1987, a handful of colleges created the Graduate Career Consortium, a group that supports members who provide career-preparation help to Ph.D. and postdoctoral students. About 80 institutions were represented at the group’s annual conference last year, three times as many as in 2008.

It’s a welcome development for Ms. Kelly, of Claremont, who is president of the consortium. She considered working in public relations after being an adjunct but wanted to continue working at a university, so she became a career consultant for graduate students at the University of California at Irvine. She said at Claremont she planned to work with faculty to integrate career planning into academic advising sessions and also to give Ph.D’s frank advice on the academic job market and the possibilities beyond.

"Part of what gets you sucked into doing the adjuncting thing and continuing to do the adjuncting thing," Ms. Kelly said, "is you don’t think you’re qualified to do anything else. You need someone who can coach you through that."