

Female Narrator: You're listening to Alumni Aloud, a new podcast by graduate center students for graduate center students. In each episode, we talk with a GC graduate about their career and the advice they would give current students. This series is sponsored by the Office of Career Planning and Professional Development at the Graduate Center.

Sara Remedios is the Associate Dean of Students and Director of Academic and Learning Initiatives at Columbia University. She has a PhD in English from the Graduate Center. She is interviewed by Meira Levinson from English.

Meira: Okay, hi, welcome. Thank you so much for being here with us today. Would you like to introduce yourself, Sara, and tell us about your job?

Sara: Sure. Thank you so much for having me. I'm Sara Remedios. I am an alum of the PhD in English program at the Grad Center, and I'm currently an Associate Dean of Students and Director of Academic and Learning Initiatives at Columbia University School of General Studies.

Meira: Great. How did you come to the work that you do now?

Sara: That's a great question. So, as I was finishing the prospectus defense process and looking for just what my next steps were gonna be, I went to an alumni networking event at the Grad Center, and it was a set of round tables with people who are working in academic administration, and I've been thinking for awhile that that was really the career path I wanted to go down, and I actually met my current boss at the table. And I didn't know it at the time, but he'd come with plans to recruit because he was hiring, and he was looking for someone for the job that I ended up starting in about four months later.

Meira: Oh, wow. That's really amazing.

Sara: Yeah, very lucky.

Meira: And you said this was at the Grad Center? I just want to clarify, was that the Career Office event?

Sara: Yeah, it was an event put on by the Career Office. They had just really started putting a lot more of those nontraditional alternative academic events together. I think, if I remember correctly, this was

one of their first, and it was the first event I went to, and I ended up getting a job out of it.

Meira: That's really wonderful. Can you tell us a bit about your academic background before coming to this career event?

Sara: Sure. So, my research has been in modernist literature, British modernism. My dissertation is on the cultural memory of Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf's fiction and essays, and so I came to the Grad Center straight from undergrad, and so not any Masters degree behind me, not any work experience. And I did my coursework, and actually through my fellowship, got in involved in some administrative projects right away. So, I was working for the CUNY Pipeline Program and helping manage that program, helping talented undergraduates apply into doctoral programs, and I also additionally was teaching at Baruch College as an adjunct.

Meira: Wow. Okay, great. So, we'll come back to that, to all your amazing experiences as a graduate student, but let's talk about your job a little bit. Can you tell us what a typical day at the office might be like for you?

Sara: Sure. Mostly there is no typical day at the office. So, my job is a mixed role. I am part academic advisor where I'm managing a cohort of about 200 students who are undergraduates at the School of General Studies getting through their undergraduate coursework. GS is the home for nontraditional students at Columbia, so rather than the traditionally kind of 18-year-old honor student model that a lot of people think of as Columbia, our students are military veterans, community college transfers, performing artists coming from the business world, and they're in exactly the same classroom as their traditionally aged peers at Columbia College, same faculty, same assignments.

And so, my job as an advisor is to help make this very traditional place work for students who are coming with different experiences and with different needs because someone who's working full-time and raising a family trying to manage classes is a very different kind of conversation, so we have pretty robust and hands-on advising support to make sure that there's a resource and a point person to help make that process of navigation easier. So, that's part of what I do. The other part of what I do is I direct our academic support services for students at GS.

So, again, thinking about the path of a nontraditional student, your

needs entering the classroom for the first time, maybe you have been working for the last 20 years and haven't been in a class, or you're coming to Columbia, one of the most rigorous classrooms you can find from Bergen Community College in New Jersey, the way that transition is gonna feel and the kinds of support services that might be useful are gonna look a little different. And so, my job is to help make sure that we are providing the support that's needed.

Anthony Jack who works at Harvard as a sociologist is one of my research heroes, but he said at a conference last year, "Access without support is not opportunity," and our job in the academic support team is to make sure that that support is there, so that we're not just providing access, we're really providing everything that it takes to succeed, not because our students are remedial or broken, but because writing your first paper, if you haven't been in a classroom in 20 years, or satisfying your math requirement if the last time you looked at math was in seventh grade, it's just a different prospect, and so we wanna make sure that we're giving students everything that they deserve.

Meira: That's great.

Sara: Yeah, we really take a whole student approach, which is what happens inside the classroom is influenced by what happens outside the classroom, so we wanna make sure that every resource that is available at a university like this – and there's a lot of resources available – we're putting at your disposal and making sure you know about. And one of the hardest parts of navigating a place like this is just knowing where to look and what you'll get if you look, and so, I think I'm kind of the cruise director in a lot of ways for my students in university studies and with my own advisees of just how do you find what you need.

Meira: So, is much of your day meeting with students? Is it coordinating with other administrators or faculty? Paint us a picture.

Sara: You know, it's really a mix of things. Teaching university studies, I teach one section a week, and then I also am a co-instructor of another section. We have a lot of other programs what I'm not immediately point person on, workshops that we run, so periodically, I'll be doing part of that. And then I supervise, or I'm responsible for a team of seven of us, myself included. And so, just making sure that everyone has what they need and thinking about the way that all of our programs fit together holistically. Mondays

are our team meeting days, I have a lot of one-on-ones on Tuesday, I tend to see most of my students Wednesday and Thursday, and the Friday is a lot of classes, and programming, and events, again.

Meira: Sounds really dynamic.

Sara: Yeah, it's great.

Meira: What do you wish people knew about your field? Or current students who are thinking about it?

Sara: So, I think there's a stigma against – I don't think, I know – there's a stigma against administration, and often it can seem like it's very dry or it's very, like, enforcing the policies strictly and draconianly.

And the way I see it, and the way we talk about it on my team or among my colleagues here, is that the policy is there to help protect the students and make sure that the university can function, but it is and must be adjudicated by human beings who understand the needs of the individual student in front of them to think about the way that the immediate situation works against the intention of the policy, and whether upholding the policy or deviating from the policy better serves that intention in the moment, especially with nontraditional students, especially with the kinds of things that can come up.

And so, I think what I would say is I wish people would – I mean, a lot of people do, but others don't, and I know when I was first starting, I didn't always see it this way, understanding that it's not just about the letter of the law and this strict this is what has to happen, but it's really meant to build a system that can work for everyone, and if you think in term of systems or if you want to make sure that everyone is represented, everyone has access, then it can be a really great place to start doing some work and making some changes.

Meira: Yeah, it sounds like you have made changes and built stuff so it's not only enforcing whatever administrative procedures already exist, but have a chance to kind of create new things to meet certain needs.

Sara: My first year, we started a student advisory board, and two colleagues and I would sit with the students for an hour every other week, and just say, "Hey, tell us where we're failing. Tell us what

you need that we aren't providing. Tell us what is really hard about this place that we might not see."

And so, through that program, we started, for example, our Jumpstart Program, which is a first semester bridge program. It's the week before orientation where we do a crash course in academic skills and classroom skills. So, we teach you how to take notes, and then we have a distinguished faculty member come give their best lecture to personally welcome you to campus and give you a chance to know what to expect before you walk in the room.

Meira: That's great.

Sara: And so, it's been really fun to just be in the position through a ton of support around me, a ton of support from the higher administration here at GS to just go in and make sure that the students are really being heard and getting what we can give them.

Meira: That's great. What do you find most rewarding about your job or enjoy the most? And also, what are some challenges? Two-fold question.

Sara: I think the answer is the same, actually. So, getting to help make sure that my students have someone on their team to navigate that is the most rewarding thing to be able to see someone succeed, and get what they need, and what they deserve. It's also one of the most difficult things to navigate because it makes it hard to keep work-life balance because I don't wanna miss an email at 3:00 on Saturday night, but have that be the time that you were having a panic attack and needed someone to talk to, or the time that you were going to reach out.

And so, I'm getting better at building boundaries because I know that there are other places my students are turning. There are other resources available. But it can be hard. It can just be a little emotionally draining if you know what work there is to be done to want to be doing it all the time.

Meira: Right. And it definitely sounds like it's not a 9:00 to 5:00 job by any stretch of the imagination.

Sara: You know, sometimes it is. It really depends on the season. It depends on the moment. Right now is midterm, so I'm probably thinking a little more catastrophically than usual. It's not necessarily you can turn off what you're thinking about at IPM, but

there are moments in the semester where it gets a little quieter. And over the summer, our team will go out and take a long lunch together once a week just to be community, and sitting down, and eating lunch. There are also moments like this week where it's midterms and you might not see as many students, but when you do, you're working through it.

Meira: I'd like to talk a little bit about how you got here and the transition from your goal as a graduate student at the Graduate Center. Did you ever see yourself in academia, pursuing traditional academia paths, or did you always know that something along these lines was your path?

Sara: That's a great question. So, when I started grad school, I vaguely thought that I would go into academia as a professor, but I was 22 years old, and was going to grad school because a professor at my undergrad institution, Joe Lowenstein, told me you would be really good at this. You should go to grad school and do a PhD. And without other serious plans, I was like, "Great. Joe Lowenstein said I should do this. I will go." And I loved it. I loved the research that I was doing. I was really enjoying it, but I realized by probably the end of my second year that I was more interested in the administrative positions.

Through my fellowship, I was a research assistant for the CUNY Pipeline Program my first year, and then because of some staffing changes in the Education Opportunity Office and some restructuring, I ended up kind of taking over the program my second year. I worked with Rebecca Mlynarczyk to really rebuild and run together, and she was so generous in letting me really be a partner as we rebuilt, and so I realized at the end of that year I had put down my research every day to work with students to build this program, and I often left with more energy than I had started when I came out of those events, and that seemed significant that I found something that I really enjoyed doing and found meaningful.

And so, I loved what I was doing when I was teaching, I loved being in the classroom, I hate grading, and the kinds of administrative roles that I've moved into with the advising and academic support, I get to do everything I love about teaching, but without 30 papers to go home to every night instead, and so it's really been kind of the best of both worlds.

And it's allowed me to be a little more selective about what I look at because instead of going on the market and move to Wisconsin

if that's where the job is this year, I can focus on New York, and my husband works in finance, so New York is it for him, and so not that that was my primary motivator, but it was nice to know that I wasn't going to be subject to the whims of the market and the year that I was applying.

Meira: And you mentioned the teaching and the mentoring of students, so it sounds like you get a number of varied opportunities to do that in your current job, like working one-on-one and you mentioned workshops, but also courses, right?

Sara: Yeah, so I teach the first semester student success course. I'm one of four of us who are teaching it this year. But I also, when I did my hiring interview it was my final round with the dean of this school, and he said, "When you finish your PhD, come back and talk to me, and we'll go hook you up at the English department." And three years later, I finished over the summer, and teaching next year is definitely on the table, so it's been really great that I get to be back in the academic classroom, too, but with just the one course a year instead of the really heavy teaching loads that I can balance everything that I'm doing.

Meira: That's great. So, it sounds like you knew pretty early on that this was something that you loved doing and a potential path. When did that solidify? Was it in your second year or was it a little bit further on because you continued down the path of the PhD?

Sara: You know, I think at the end of the second year, which was my first year helping run Pipeline, I had a good sense. The end of the third year where I was running Pipeline again, I had a better sense. And then I was going through the dissertation process, the prospectus, the oral exam, and I just realized I liked what I was doing, I was interested in the research, but orals was not this magical, give yourself to the research moment for me. It was force yourself to do the work, and I was writing this list. I was the person responsible for my own research, and I couldn't force myself to be engaged with it all the time.

But with this other stuff that I was doing, I was always engaged with it. And so, I think by the time I finished the oral exam, I had a really good sense of what I wanted to do. I wanted research to be a part of it, I wanted the academic stuff that I loved to stay part of it, but that it might not be a tenure track, research teaching position for me.

Meira: And was it a hard decision for you? It sounds like you were really energized by the Pipeline work and knowing that that was what you wanted to do, but was it really that easy of a mind shift as a graduate student?

Sara: You know, I think I went back and forth a little bit. The hardest part for me was coming out about it, and just admitting that that was what I was interested in doing and wanting to do. I don't wanna overstate it, but there's sometimes a little bit of the divide between the faculty side and the administrator side. And Jane Marcus was supervising my dissertation at the time, and when I started applying for this job, going to Jane and saying, "I'm out. You're doing all of this investment with me in research, and I want to continue the project, but also, I've decided not to go tenure track," was a little bit scary.

And it was the last conversation I got to have in person with her, and she was so gracious. She was like, "That's amazing because you're gonna still be able to teach. You're still gonna be able to be involved and do the research, but we need people who wanna change the system to be part of the system." And if you know the stuff that Jane researched and wrote about, she was not a system person, but it was just such a generous way of seeing it that it really kind of took some of the pressure off. And everyone in the English program at the Grad Center really was so supportive once I started saying, "I think this is what I'm doing."

But yeah, I think that the hardest part was just saying it out loud, that after all of this work, I don't actually think research is what I'm gonna wanna do forever.

Meira: That's really good to hear that you had a warm reception for that because I don't think you're alone. There are many students at the Grad Center who are thinking about these other paths, and would you have any words of encouragement to them about – because I think you're very right about that kind of stigma that can exist, especially with one's advisor.

Sara: Yeah, I mean, I would say own it. And I would say if you're making the choice, you know why you're making it, and you know what's best for you. And so, what I found really valuable was articulating it almost as a value proposition of I love the work that I'm doing, I love the research, and I love the academy, and there's a lot of different ways to be involved in the academy. And I wanna make sure that it's working for everyone, I wanna make sure that

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access issues are taken seriously administratively, and moving into a dean of students kind of role or an advisor kind of role is a way that I can be really hands-on about that, and it's a different way of serving students.

And I'm not putting down my research; I'm just probably not picking it up quite as often. But I'm doing it on purpose. I'm not doing it because I don't think I can get a job in the market, and I'd love if we can partner together, but the more that we're talking together and the more that we see each other as all colleagues that are part of making this kind of place work, the better for everyone.

Meira: Was it a big adjustment for you from as a graduate student to your current job?

Sara: Yes. The hardest part – this is probably terrible, but it was 16°F, 17°F out most of the winter the first year that I was here, and I had previously had the option to stay indoors and not leave the apartment, just drill down on the research, and so that was an adjustment of just leaving the house in 17°F weather.

Meira: For sure, coming to an office for many of us, right?

Sara: But I think it was difficult in just stamina, and being in the workplace, and running all day between meetings. It was also really positive as a change from grad school because grad school can be isolating. You're sitting, doing your work by yourself most of the time. If you have one class in a day, it's a big day sometimes, and so especially orals and dissertation writing is very solo, and so having people to engage with, having just more structure, I did almost all of the work on my dissertation once I had a full-time job because I had structure around when I was gonna be able to get writing done, whereas the whole year that I was just dissertating on my own, there was not a lot of dissertating.

Meira: The year before you started your job?

Sara: Before I started full-time. Having breaks, having different kinds of things to think about, and different projects to work on ended up being really reinvigorating for the research that I was doing because I could come back to it with a different perspective.

Meira: That's a fascinating perspective to hear about because you were actually completing your dissertation. I forgot to ask you about that before, but you were completing that in your first year of the job?

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Sara: Yeah. When I started, I had one chapter written, and I had about half of my introduction, and so I wrote three and a half, four and a half...whatever chapters while I was here. And some of it, my first year, I had a little bit of a lighter workload, so I was writing a lot at lunch or in the evening before I came home, and then the last two chapters and revisions were written literally on two weeks' worth of vacation. So, I took a week's vacation in February as my dissertation week, and I finished the draft, and then I took another week over the summer, and I finished the revisions, and I got it done.

And I was working in between then, but it was just seven days locked in my apartment, nothing but. And it was unlike when I had nothing but time. These were the only seven days I knew I had, so it made a really big difference. And I also told all of my students before I left what I was gonna do, so every time I started to run out of energy, I would get another email popup that said, "Done is better than perfect. You tell me all the time, just write it down."

Meira: That must be the most rewarding thing.

Sara: With smiley faces. They started parroting back to me all the things that I said to them, and I knew I could not walk back into work without having finished because there were gonna be 200 students staring me down. And I make them do it, so I owed it to them to do it too.

Meira: Can you tell us a little bit more about the process of getting this job and starting this job as a graduate student? You mentioned briefly before how you got this position through the career event, but tell us a little bit more about what that was like when you went to the event. Were you anticipating meeting someone who would then be in essence interviewing you?

Sara: So, the way that that event worked, they gave you the list of people who were coming. It was people who were working in nontraditional academic administration kinds of paths, and they gave you the list of who was coming, and then you wrote down in order of priority who you wanted to meet while you were there. And so, the first table I sat with was Tom Hartford, who's our Dean of Students here who is a Grad Center English alum, and I had marked him as No. 1 on my list.

And the first thing he said when we were all sitting down was, "So,

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who wants to go into administration versus who is just thinking about it because you're not confident about a job?" And he also asked, "Who's already doing some of the work?" And it turned out I was the only person at the table of eight or nine students who was already doing some of the work. And so, we had a really great conversation. I didn't go in thinking I was looking for a job. I went in thinking I'd love to hear from someone who's done this, how they did it, and what their steps were.

And I followed up the next morning with an email thanking him for the time, and he wrote back and said, "Of course. Why don't we grab lunch? Let me help you." And so, we had lunch, and about 10 minutes in, he said, "You know, we're gonna be posting a job soon. Think about applying." And it wasn't like I got hired in the meeting or at that lunch, but I wouldn't have known about the job and I wouldn't have applied for it without that opportunity, so it really helped open the door that I met someone.

I don't think I would've applied on my own because the requirement was five years of experience in the field, and I looked at what I'd done as a grad student, and would've thought it didn't count, and I said that. And he said, "Well, no. You've been doing program management, you've been teaching, you've been researching, that is the five years' experience we're looking for." And so, that was really helpful to me because I'd been thinking from a student perspective, and Columbia, apparently, wasn't seeing it that way when they looked at my resume, which was really nice to understand.

Meira: Right. That's really a crucial thing to understand, and would you have any kind of follow up, any advice, for current students who also might be kind of looking at not thinking of their student experience or work as professional experience at work?

Sara: I would say it definitely is. If you are adjuncting, if you are a teaching fellow, you are in the classroom, you are in the trenches, and so you understand how that works. And the teaching to advising path is actually pretty wonderful because you're already doing a lot of advising, especially somewhere like CUNY where the students are coming to open hours and all of the things come out.

And so, I'd definitely rethink how you're looking at your own experience, and I would connect with alums, with people at networking events, with the Career Office, but just have a second

perspective and a second set of eyes because just like with research and writing, we are often our own worst critics, and we're much more likely to dismiss the things that we're doing, and especially if the things are not necessarily monetarily valued. The work I was doing with CUNY was not salaried work, so I wouldn't have thought to list it as experience, but in terms of the opportunities I was able to get, it was amazing. It really prepared me for what I'm doing now.

And so, I guess the other thing is to rethink what you choose to get involved in because as much as I do not want to endorse the exploitation of grad students and the adjunctification, if there are opportunities that are going to work for you and that are going to open doors, they mean something on the resume.

Meira: And can you speak to any of those things – and you mentioned your Pipeline experience and adjuncting experience – were there any other Graduate Center specific resources or experiences that you either availed yourself of, or which you had availed yourself of more, that you would point any current students towards?

Sara: That is a great question. The faculty mentors. My faculty mentors were really, really helpful in thinking about how to prepare. Again, I was surprised. I was worried coming out as wanting to do administration, but there was a ton of support in the department, and a lot of it translates, so even the workshops that are built for those who are going on the teaching path, it was still really helpful to hear that as perspective for thinking about an administrative route because the never say this word on your CV is the never say this word on your CV, whether it's administrative or teaching. And so, it was really nice to be able to think about framing and pitching in that way.

Meira: Okay, that's great. Is there anything you would suggest that students do to supplement? Any kind of formal education while they're at the Graduate Center? Through your fellowship, you had the experience with working with and running Pipeline. Would you suggest any internships, or outside opportunities, or anything that students should be thinking about?

Sara: I mean, I think it really depends what you're interested in and what you wanna do. The role that I'm in, if I was hiring for the role that I started in here at Columbia, I'd look for someone who had writing center or tutoring background, even if it's private tutoring. That kind of one-on-one teaching is still really, really meaningful

for the kind of work that we do here, and so that'd be great to see on a resume.

Writing experience, editing experience, working in a professional environment, those kinds of skills of just knowing how to navigate a place like this, not just on the teaching side, but being physically there every day, I think, is helpful to see, so I think it's less about what it is specifically you'll get involved in, from my perspective, and more about what you can say about what you got out of it. Did you learn a transferrable skill? Did you build relationships and start to have a different sense of how an office environment might work, and how you might start changing structures and start building things out?

If you have that kind of startup experience, that's amazing. And I don't care what your startup experience is in because if you're coming to a place where you're looking to start things, it's gonna translate.

Meira: Or project management. I'm thinking about what other transferable skills might – especially for any graduate students not in English or not in Humanities perhaps, how [inaudible] [00:30:41]?

Sara: Project management. I know people with publishing backgrounds. Fine arts experience has been relevant here; we have a fine artist on staff. But yeah, I think definitely project management, scheduling details, office administration, those are skills that are invaluable, and you can't be too good at running your office or at keep on top of your email and your appointments. And so, those kinds of opportunities, I think absolutely. Project management and office administrative assistant, but who knows how an office works and who knows how a higher education office works, that is someone who's gonna be able to really pull their weight on a team at any level.

Meira: Interpersonal skills, lots of sound, and communications, and like a huge part of that.

Sara: Yeah, absolutely. The other way that I use my PhD is writing my emails to my students, writing the marketing materials. Having a degree in writing has been very helpful in trying to set a tone and a culture because I can think about the language and the message that we're sending at a different kind of level.

Meira: Is there anything that you know now that you wish you had known

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as a graduate student?

Sara: Hmm...

Meira: Pretty broad.

Sara: I tried to take really seriously always what I was doing, but I don't think I always saw myself as having as much agency in the doing of it. So, I loved the work that I was doing, I loved supporting my students, and I thought about the work, and I thought about what the students needed, and what I was adding to my resume was always kind of secondary or after the fact, and so I was seeing myself as a student doing the work.

And I wish that I had been thinking earlier on as building a career path, and I got really lucky that the work I'd been doing kind of dovetailed perfectly with what I wanted to do long-term, but I wasn't self-conscious about it. I was reflective afterwards, and it probably would've been useful to be a little more self-conscious.

Which it's gonna happen the way it happens, and I think if you go in trying to be really professionalizing, it might not hit the right note with the people you're working with, but I wish mostly just that I'd been taking notes for myself or reflecting at the end of the work I was doing more about the skills that I was developing rather than just focusing on doing the work, getting it done, working with students, and then coming back a couple years later to say, "Okay, what's the anecdote that I can bring into an interview?"

Meira: Great. I think that's about it. Is there anything else that you'd like to add or talk about that we haven't had a chance to talk about?

Sara: I would just say good luck to anyone who's thinking about this. I think it can be a really rewarding and really fun field to get into. It's kind of just to the left of the faculty position in, especially, academic support, and if it's something you're thinking about, I'd give it a shot. Try to get involved, try to do an internship, see what it feels like, and make an informed decision.

Meira: Great. Thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your experiences.

Sara: Thank you for having me.

Meira: Our pleasure. Take care.

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Sara: Thanks.

Female Narrator: Another thank you to Sara for taking the time to talk with us on Alumni Allowed. If you'd be interested in attending one of our career events, like Sara mentioned, visit our website at [cuny.is/careerplan](http://cuny.is/careerplan) or follow us on Twitter, @CareerPlanGC, to see a calendar of our programming for the semester and the latest updates. We hope to see you there next time. Thanks for listening.

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