Episode 97: Bryan Alexander

# KL: Katie Linder

# BA: Bryan Alexander

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode ninety-seven.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I am joined by Bryan Alexander, an internationally known futurist, researcher, writer, speaker, consultant, and teacher, working in the field of how technology transforms education. Bryan completed his English language and literature PhD at the University of Michigan in 1997, and taught literature, writing, multimedia, and information technology studies at Centenary College of Louisiana. From 2002 to 2014 Bryan worked with the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE), a non-profit working to help small colleges and universities best integrate digital technologies. In 2013 he launched a business to consult throughout higher education in the United States and abroad. Bryan also speaks widely and publishes frequently, with articles appearing in venues including *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Inside Higher Ed*. He has been interviewed by and featured in MSNBC, US News and World Report, National Public Radio, the Chronicle of Higher Education, the National Association of College and University Business Officers, Pew Research, Campus Technology, and the Connected Learning Alliance. He is currently writing *Transforming the University in the Twenty-First Century: The Next Generation of Higher Education* for Johns Hopkins University Press (forthcoming 2019).  His two most recent books are *Gearing Up For Learning Beyond K-12* and the second edition of *The New Digital Storytelling*.

Thanks for joining me, Bryan.

**BA:** My pleasure.

**KL:** So I am really excited to talk with you about your role as an independent researcher. I think everyone’s pathway is a little different, uh, but you are currently not affiliated with an institution. I’m wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your pathway. What lead you to the position you’re in now?

**BA:** Oh sure. And again, thank you very much for inviting me to be on the podcast. Uh I began – let’s see. I was a professor at a small liberal arts college in Louisiana, and from there I was recruited to work with a non-profit called National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education, or NITLE. And it was a nonprofit that worked with about – up to 300 colleges. Some close to you – schools like Reed or Willamette, and it was a lot of fun – it was very exciting. We helped them work with cutting edge technology, and helped them grapple with how technology could change teaching and learning. So I did that for about a decade - I was for time there the Director of Technology, and that was a lot of fun. It was very exciting. Um but as I was doing it, I began to get request for services from people beyond the schools that we worked with, and I wanted to work with those people and so I slowly started to do that. I realized that I was developing my own practice. And I realized also that when I was talking to people about emerging technologies, I would lose maybe about half an audience. That they would either hear the word technology and say, “Oh god not technology!” and run away screaming, or they would just stop thinking about it - they think technology is why we pay a CIO to think about it for us. So I started calling myself a futurist instead - asking people to think about the future of education. In which case, everybody is interested. Everybody is concerned. And then under that rubric, they can talk about technology without any problem. And so I did – became this kind of fulltime educational futurist. And as NITLE ran into problems, and demand for services grew elsewhere, I just started my own company with my wife and I’ve been doing that ever since.

**KL:** So we are definitely going to dive into this idea of you as a futurist in the next segment, so I am going to put a pin in that for now. Uh, but I would love to hear a little bit more about some of the benefits and drawbacks of being an independent researcher, you know, what are some of the things you’re afforded and maybe some of the constraints that you have?

**BA:** Well one of the benefits is – I wouldn’t say less politics. I would say very different and practical politics. I mean, mean through the organizations that I run – and there’s basically two of us, my wife and I, and who ever we hire to do individual jobs with us. So it really cuts down the political fighting or the bureaucratic struggle that you have to go through at a, let’s say, large research university or corporation. So that’s an advantage. Another advantage is that I have a lot more editorial freedom and independence. So if I’m working with a state university that’s deeply invested in technology x, I might feel incentivized not to say bad things about x or not to investigate y. But here I can look at whatever problem I like to, I can share my views, and I don’t have an editorial supervisor so that’s really exciting. Another – so of course, whenever you’re independent in anything, you get to set your own hours and your own schedule and so on, and unfortunately my boss is rather demanding so I get to work long hours, but these are the hours that I set. These are the hours that I chose. So that’s very satisfying. A drawback – well one drawback is – it’s working without a net. So you don’t have an institution to fall back on, and that plays out in all kinds of things. It means from IT support for laptops, from HR, to taxes; we have to do all of that in house. And so my wife and I have learned a lot of skills – and we outsource some, but even outsourcing is something you have to do on your own. So that’s one downside. Another downside is in a field like education, institutions are essential. People really live or die by their affiliations. So being outside of that network can be a downside – it’s harder to get in the door sometimes. If you’re in a room people will say, “Oh who are you with? I’ with this college. Who are you with?” Well, I’m with myself. That can really stand out like a sore thumb. So that’s a downside. Another advantage, I think, is being small. We have a great deal of flexibility, so we can turn on a dime and pounce on a subject really quickly. And that’s not the case if you’re an institution that tends to have a large radius. Does this make sense?

**KL:** Yeah absolutely, and there’s a couple kind of follow up questions I have. I mean – as I think about, you know, what are listeners might be interested in, I think a question that our listeners have for independent researchers, and I certainly have this question too is, do you ever have any issues with publication? If you’re not affiliated with an institution and you’re kind of acting as an independent researcher, does that cause problems with publishing in journals, or getting book contracts, or things like that? Is that something that you’ve encountered or explored in any way?

**BA:** I thought it would be a problem, and it hasn’t been. I’ve been publishing non-stop. I published two books, including a massively revised second edition of my first book, so it’s almost like two and a half. I’m under contract for next book right now with Johns Hopkins University Press, the oldest scholarly press in the country. So I – And I actually turn away a lot of request to do book chapters and articles all the time. So It may just be that that’s not an issue either because I’m a known quantity, or because I’ve worked with publishers, and I’ve really enjoyed that – I contribute. I do a lot of reviews, peer reviews, responses – a lot of responses for publishers. But the other thing is, uh, I believe – just like with any media- any media based industry – The ability to make a case for yourself. That’s really ultimately independent of where your post office is. And you can make a bad case if you’re at a popular institution or you can make a great case if you’re on your own, like I am. So either way it’s – I if I can turn this around, I feel a lot of times when I’m introduced to audiences, or people talk about me, they talk about my writing as something that gives me the authenticity. It gives me the street credit, and that’s something that – In Hollywood, movie makers want to make a very, very short film, 3 to 4 minutes long, as a calling card. It’s a way to get in the door so they can start to work with a Hollywood feature. I think many ways having a book out is kind of the calling card for education

**KL:** Yeah I would absolutely agree with that. And that kind of, you know, turns me to the other set of questions that I think is interesting – based on what you’ve just described, which is kind of the business side of being an independent researcher. And you’ve talked a little bit about kind of having to develop different skills, but I’m wondering, you know, to what degree have you become kind of your own marketing? You know, in terms of getting the word out about the work that you do, has that been challenging or freeing in some ways because you’re not affiliated with an institution?

**BA:** Well it’s funny. This is actually an answer to your previous question as well, uh, I’ve been active with social media since before it was called social media. And when I first went to publications I used the term “Web 2.0”. And so for me that was an exciting, interesting, and rewarding practice to adopt. So I’ve been blogging on multiple platforms, been on Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus, LinkedIn and so forth, as well as other ones like Macedon or AOL. And that is something which makes a lot of sense to me. My academic background is a Doctorate in English, and so I like to think creating stories, writing for audiences is something that I should be at least decently trained in how to do. And so working with social media is a terrific way of doing marketing. I think that’s one of the ways that I’ve connected with publishers. In fact, uh, I’ve gotten – after publishing certain blog post, I’ve gotten offers to turn those blog post into articles, because people read social media – they really respond to it. I mean right now it’s kind of fashionable to attack social media as a giant disaster dumpster fire, and while it’s true – there are bad strata and bad behavior embedded with in social media, there’s also a ton of rewarding and positive activity going on. So I find foregoing the former and emphasizing the latter, really makes a powerful advantage for me right now. It’s not the only one, there are people who don’t use social media. They have to have it explained to them or they just skip it for whatever reason. It could just be unfamiliarity, or it could be a question of time, or it could be distaste. But whatever those are, I have to reach those people through other means. And so I find marketing, I do also through a lot of my work. I publish an article, a book, a chapter – that’s old fashion marketing. Also a major part of my work is being in public. I give a lot of keynotes, a lot of speeches, and a lot of workshops – and so that becomes a sort of chain marketing. You know, if I do a workshop for 50 people from 50 different institutions – If I do a good job, and the people think it’s a good job, then some of them will likely ask me to come to their university or their library later on. I’m an extrovert as well, so I just kind of bat in on this stuff, it makes me happy. That wouldn’t be the case for everyone, but it is a very, very powerful one. Just one for the note about this – to the content I do consulting, which is a lot of my work – most consultants are the opposite. They tend to run dark, they tend to have a very minimal web presence at all, and they tend to not do much in social media. They tend to precede by a – let’s say word of mouth and the kind of chain recognition before. So what I’m doing is unusual, and I really embrace it. I’m really open about my consulting. I talk about the financial challenges or financial rewards, I talk about the processes and how the business unfolds. That may be the way that the 21st century. We’ll see.

**KL:** Well that is fascinating. I’m also really curious, Bryan, because you’ve recently started a Patreon Account to help fund your research – can you describe a little bit about your decision to do that? What was involved? I mean some people might not even know what Patreon is, so maybe we should start with that first.

**BA:** Sure. Patreon is a crowd funding site, and there are a lot of different ones right now. Perhaps the most famous is Kickstarter, where different people can pitch in in order to help a creative project through fruition. The project can be anything from an album, to a game, to a sculpture. And individual contributors get results are rewards based on how much they contribute. So that might mean that they end up in the credits of something, that they get a special greeting from the creator – that kind of thing. You readers – uh your listeners might also recognize Indiegogo, which often helps support similar projects. Or GoFundMe, which is for individual causes and is now a burdening source for healthcare financing in the U.S. Patreon is similar but a little different. Patreon is a subscription service. So where a lot of the other ones are one time donations you give to support a project, uh Patreon is, like the name applies, you’re patronizing and supporting somebody in their work over time. So people will contribute as little as one dollar a month to keep a creator creating. And a creator is various. They can be musicians, they can be artist, and they can be poets. Or in my case. I make a lot of media about the future of education. So I blog, I do weekly video conferences, I do a monthly report – just this morning I published my most recent issue of it. Uh I’m starting to make a podcast series, and so on. So I thought that Patreon would be an experiment, we’ll see if there’s enough interest to support this work. So I set up a Patreon account, and I set up a series of rewards – so if you contribute x dollars, you get certain benefits, and it’s been okay so far! The patrons are very generous people. They’re very generous with their thinking as well as their financial support, so we often have discussions about how different topics debriefing from business models to content strategy, and it’s really very, very rewarding listening to them and learning from them, which I really appreciate. The total amount is where I would like it to be yet, so I am going to do a series of fundraisers to boost it, but it helps supplement my business income. As overall as a net whole, it’s very good. I’m very grateful of the patreon supporters.

**KL:** Well we will definitely link to that in the show notes so people can take a look, especially if they’re not familiar with the platform to begin with. But I’m curious too, Bryan, I mean when I think about Patreon, and I’ve definitely considered it for certain projects that I’ve worked on, or Kickstarter, or something like that, there is that risk of putting yourself out there and telling people like, “Hey, I’m doing this thing and I’m asking people for their support, and I’m asking you to kind of put money on the table to support this thing” you know, that’s kind of a hump for a lot of people to get over. I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what lead you to take this step, because creating a Patreon account is – it’s an investment of your time and resources to make sure that people know about it. It’s a different kind of marketing as well.

**BA:** Well, there’s a bigger risk behind this and I’ll come to that at the end. It is a risk. There’s always the risk of embarrassment. Failure. You put out a shingle and say, “Hi! Contribute to me!” and nobody does – you feel like an idiot. You can see this on other crowd funding sites as well. Kickstarter has a target goal that you have to reach, and if you don’t reach it the project doesn’t come off. And it’s kind of sad seeing someone say, “Okay, I need $20,000 to do this” and they only got $400 or something [Mhm Mhm]. I’ve seen some writers who have had Kickstarters fail, and they get so heartbroken about it. It’s like publishing – or pitching something to a publisher and getting rejected, or throwing a party and nobody comes. It’s uh – it’s definitely a risk. But it makes sense for me, in part because I’m a futurist. I want to try out the future before it hits everyone else. And I wasn’t the first adopter of Patreon, but I was fairly early, and wanted to see what I could learn from it and to try it out – and I learned a great deal. For example, the social benefits of interacting with the Patreons, that wasn’t something that I heard from a lot of users, and so that was a nice surprise discovery. So we’ll see how it goes, but I think that’s worth it. In my case it was definitely worth it. And I think from a lot of creators, if you’re making something, you’re usually going to take a risk. You’re usually going to have to read that poem out loud at a slam, or you’re going to have to hang that photo up at a gallery for people to react to it. So I think Patreon is one way of doing it. The bigger risk though – and this is, I’m not changing the subject here at all – the bigger risk is macroeconomic tendencies. The model of something like Kickstarter, the model of something like Patreon is you have the web-scale of that activity. So it’s not just ten people that you know around you or the 200 people that you work with in your city, it’s deceivably up to half the human race – it’s anyone that has access to the internet to contribute. So the idea is if you get a few people to contribute a dollar a piece, that’s not a lot, but once you get it scaled at the web enables, wow, that could be enough to live on. Well that’s true for very few people in the Patreon system. That’s the idea. That’s the kind of scale thinking we get on let’s say [*indiscernible*] or behind social media. Now the problem with this, the macroeconomics, is that we are moving in the United States but also in a bunch of other countries, towards escalating income inequality. That is the wages, the compensation that the bottom 50% to 80% of the population has more or less been stagnant since the 1970’s and 80’s, but the very top 1% has seen their income shoot off into the stratosphere. And I mean, everyone knows this is a major policy issue in all kinds of ways. It shows up in the support of creative work, because it gives you an interesting idea. Do you beat the bushes for as many different patrons as possible? Everyone who can chips in as much. Or do you 15, 16, 17 century style, and find one or two very, very wealthy families to support you? This has been talked about in the museum world for example, where people have been arguing about whether or not crowd funding is worth the time of these museum administrators. Maybe they should focus their energy on finding some billionaire, you know, find Zuckerberg, or [*indiscernible*], or Tim Cook. Once you have one of those classic patrons, then you’re good to go. What we do now is kind of going against the current. Income inequality – wealth inequality really dictates that I should be looking for a sponsor in the 1% of the 1%, and that might work out. That might happen. But Patreon is – there’s different politics and different economics behind it. I’m sorry to go on about social media, but it’s fascinating to see how this one media finance platform plugs into some of the biggest drivers change in the world that we know today.

**KL:** I am completely fascinated by that. I’m glad you took it in that direction, Bryan. We’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’ll hear a little bit more about Bryan’s work on the future of education. Back in a moment.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** So Bryan, in our first segment you talked a little bit about yourself as a futurist, and I want to dive a little bit more deeply into that. First of all, what do you mean when you call yourself a futurist?

**BA:** It’s interesting this is in some ways a definitional problem. Some say a futurist is those whose job it is to protect the future. And within the futurist community, people often disagree with that. They say, the idea of a futurist is to help people think more effectively - more intelligibly about the future, so that our job is to give people a better sense of the possible futures that lay ahead for whoever the person is. You have futurist working all over the place from the military, to food, to science, and publishing. And my field is higher education with an emphasis on technology, and so my job is to work with colleges, museums, libraries, universities, big governments and national governing associations, individuals – and help them think of things more creatively, sometimes more richly about where this whole sector could go - and it’s a very, very hard task. For one thing humans are – we have a hard time thinking about the future. We really do tend to assume that the future will be like today, just possibly more expensive, and so it takes some time to break out of that. Especially if it’s in a domain that you know well, that can really make it hard to see a different future, because you’re so emerged in making it work. You might be so buried in the trenches of getting everything together that it’s hard to get passed that. So we do a lot of research into the present into recent history, and we use a whole variety of well-tuned methodologies to try to create different visions of where things could be heading next.

**KL:** So I’m curious for people who may not be familiar with this idea of being a futurist, what is the relationship between the work that you do in this area and strategic planning? Which is something that I think a lot of our listeners would be familiar with and it feels very concrete. Is there a relationship between those two things? Or are they very different in terms of what a futurist might look to do?

**BA:** There are a lot of relationships between those two fields. In fact the profession of futurism really developed out of helping corporations and governments do strategic planning in the 1960’s and 70’s. So you have a lot of think pieces that came out of that period as a result, trying to give federal offices, state governments, and major corporations a better way forward so that they could plan. So I mean it’s not for entertainment, although it’s really exciting and fun stuff at times, but the idea is to be able to inform strategic planning. So we had to take a look at where things could change as they unhinge on someone who’s planning. So, for example, if you’re looking at a university, trying to think about, say, the immediate environment of the city, of the country; how is that likely to change? And there are ways that we can study this – everything from meteorology, to economics, to demographics. Thinking about the population, the people they work with, again this brings us back to demographics, but also to institutional change. Who might be coming through the door as a student, as a faculty member, as an administrator? And then we help them see that over time, and there are a whole lot of ways to do this, but I’ve worked with numerous libraries, associations, and governments trying to help them with their planning process. Think of a futurist’s work as kind of a strategic intelligence, where you’re looking ahead and trying to give people a better sense when they try to project themselves forward.

**KL:** So there are so many different areas of this kind of futurist work that you could probably go into. What turned you to researching and exploring the future of higher education?

**BA:** Well as a faculty member as an English professor, I was fascinated by, among other things, new digital technologies. So for me this was the late 1990’s. I was getting very excited about the web, I was getting very excited about the potential mobile devices, getting really interested in the questions of information literacy. And all of those questions fascinated me – and they took me out of my comfort zone in a lot of ways. In fact, one year I ended up doing bibliographic instructions for one library even though I wasn’t a trained librarian. I ended up having to learn a great deal about everything from meta data standards, to the history of information literacy – so that was exciting! It can be breathtaking to be that far out of intellectual [*indiscernible*], but at the same time I had all of the intellectual tools that I could bring to bear. So for example, I had a lot of training in history, and history really helps you understand copyrights, and copyright is crucial for the development of information and technology. I also had a lot of training in critical theory, which really lets you apprehend social questions – questions of power and politics. So that was very, very fascinating to me. Then again to recap something that I said in the first part, working with an academic audience – and this by the way is another great thing about being independent – If you’re part of an institution, people will see you through that lens. So, if you’re a librarian, people will automatically assume that you’re working in the librarian world, and it makes it harder for you to speak to say, enrollment management or to students. You know, you’re a librarian first and foremost. Well, I’m independent, so the joke is I can offend everyone equally, but I get to work across all these different sectors, which is really, really helpful. So I can take a look at them and try to get a sense of where they might go, but when I mention the future – the future is kind of like talking about food. Everyone has an opinion. Everyone has an interest. They really want to see where it could go. And they’re also curious. People have absolute dogmatic statements about the future. They really want to talk about it – they want to toss ideas around, and they’re receptive to new information. So when I shifted from being a faculty member to working at this nonprofit that focused on liberal arts colleges, talking about the future was a really powerful way of broadening my audience and improving interactions – getting people thinking about it. And then it also let me involve all of these different tools that come from the futurist profession. You know, scenario development, trends analysis, environmental scanning, even prediction margins. So all of that, it really just came together very effectively. And especially in higher education, ever since 2008 in particular, we’re running scared. There’s a lot of anxiety about the future and where to go. There’s concern in everything from the many, many different problems that the digital world can cause, to questions of demographics, to the business model for higher education, to state funding, and on, and on. There’s a lot of anxiety about where the future can go, and there are few clear pictures of where it can go. So I get to help in those fields. So there’s a need and I can meet it, which is really, really important. But the other thing is, is that on top of this I have such a love for education. Education has meant so much to me my entire life – from being a child on up. So in a sense I get to give back. I get to work in the field that had helped nurture me, and I get to contribute to it. So I think that is very virtually a circle.

**KL:** So I can see very clearly all the different kinds of rewarding elements of the work that you’re doing in education and in the future of education, but I can imagine there are also some really challenging things about trying to forecast and see what is going to be happening in the future. Can you talk a little bit about that? What are some of the challenges of researching the future – of being a futurist?

**BA:** One of them is the pure scope and complexity of it. When we think about education we often think about it very narrowly. We think about, say, a region in the United States; a state. Maybe a nation. We often think about our educational [*indiscernible*]. So people in community colleges tend to stick with the community college world, people that research one university tend to research universities and so on. And then beyond that takes a lot more time, a lot more research. They have to really – I taught in a liberal arts tradition, so having that kind of interdisciplinary background has really helped, but I have to be able to, on a given day, look into macroeconomics. I have to as well look into population demographics. I look at federal policy, I look at state policy, and then technology. I have to be familiar with the difference between virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality. We’ll talk about metadata standards, and then at an individual institution, I can take really careful attention to the nuanced differences between two different public universities in the same state system – the micro politics, their tradition, their heritage. So it’s a – one of the challenges is the sheer scope and complexity of the thing, it’s very, very deep. And you’ll find that if you look at a lot of people’s writing or thinking about the future of education, they often take a really particular slice. So they’ll focus on technology but nothing that shapes technology, or they’ll look at one particular type of higher education but not the rest. Then especially – it’s almost impossible to look at this from a global basis. To look not just at the United States in higher education, but to include higher education industry worldwide. I mean it’s really evolving, it’s a unified market in economic terms, which is fascinating. And we’re seeing a lot more in the way of population transfer – although that’s starting to change with Brexit and Trump. But this is – you know, very few people are able to think about say, the difference in higher education in Japan, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, Europe, Mexico, and the United States. And that’s the really, really big challenge. Um another challenge is – I think in part, dealing with gloom. There are so many problems. There’s so many negative drivers. There’s so many ways that things can go wrong. Ultimately this can take a mental toll on you. I mean – when you think of education, we think nurturing, we think about growth, development, inspiration, creativity, people following their passion - developing themselves into powerful human beings. This is all awesome, and there’s no other sector like it in the world. But, now we have to think about colleges closing because they are. We have to think about tenured faculty being fired or laid off, because that’s happening. We have to think about the possibility that we may have passed the peak of higher education, or at least in the U.S. that it might shrink. We have to think about huge shifts in curricular. I mean, homeland security and security studies for example are just booming like mad; the humanities are suffering. These are not – these can add up over time, and that can be challenging for a practitioner as well as for an audience. So I like to joke that – my ethnic heritage is Russian – so I’m especially predisposed to melancholy. But I have to keep returning to the creative part, I have to keep reminding people that it’s not all about fear. That there’s still so much potential – such positive potential in higher education. And so – and that can be a challenge to keep looking ahead. To keep looking ahead, looking at the brightness, even when things are very dark.

**KL:** In the midst of all of these challenges, Bryan, what are some of your favorite things about your work as a futurist?

**BA:** When you’re in the classroom you get this unique experience of seeing lightbulbs go on over people’s heads. Right? When you’re talking about something and people go, “Oh I see!” That’s just an undeniable pleasure of teaching. And I get this when I work in the futurist world, people start connecting things. And some of it can be daunting – I ask an audience, For example, to – an academic audience, if everyone can raise their hands if they’re still paying off student debt, and you see a forest of arms go up. And the people whose arms aren’t going up, look up and their mouths are open, or their shocked, or dismayed. That’s knowledge. That’s a flash of insight – illumination right then. When I show people digital storytelling, which is just one of the great benefits of the digital world, The way that anybody can access the tools, make a story about themselves or something else – that’s just so breathtaking to see happen. I really – that’s – that moment of education, and information, and enlightenment; that’s a special thing. And the second thing is, it’s never dull. The problems are so rich, so complex, because it’s all changing. So many moving parts, so many new developments, that it’s just endlessly fascinating. Those are two things. If I say more I might sound too happy, and you’ll have to distrust my feelings about being a melancholy person.

**KL:** Bryan, this has been a fascinating journey into independent research and also the work of futurist in higher education. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show, and share about your work and your insights!

**BA:** My pleasure.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor’s guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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# Bonus Clip #1:

**KL:** In this first bonus clip for Episode 97 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Bryan Alexander discusses his work as an alternative academic – take a listen.

Bryan, you’ve described your work as an independent researcher, but you also fall into this kind of slight broader category of alternative academic, or ‘alt ac’. Um and this is a growing field of people who may have Ph.Ds. but are not pursuing a tenure track role. I’m wondering if you can talk about your identity as an alternative academic and what you’ve seen as that group is growing over time.

**BA:** It’s a fascinating development for a lot of reasons, and personally it wasn’t something that I anticipated doing when I was in graduate school – I was really keenly focused on a full time prof job, and I loved being a full time prof it was great. The alt ac job just wasn’t there, it wasn’t on the radar - and now that I am in the alt ac world, I love it! I mean, this is a fascinating world. So this is a good example, I should say first, of how thinking about the future is tricky, because this wasn’t a category that we took seriously. I mean, there have been independent scholars for a long time. There have been, for more than a century – we have had people with Ph.Ds. and other terminal degrees who have gone on to work in other fields from business to espionage. But now it’s become a kind of – some might call not an industry, but a defined job path, and that’s very interesting. So it’s a good case of how we have to be open to possibilities for the future and not just repeat our current categories. I think the other thing is though, in the American setting, this is the case of lemons becoming lemonade, because we have this problem of transforming our labor market from full time tenure track faculty to adjunctfication – and this is actually much of larger changes in the post-industrial workforce. Where we’ve gone from the kind of one person, one job, one career, one employer for life to the gain economy with multiple jobs, multiple careers. Um which I’ve heard in Australia refer to as the American economy. So it’s interesting that we’ve gone from having the majority of faculty being tenure track, to the majority being adjunct. You know, part-time mostly, with very few benefits, and so on. Um so one of the conditions, one of the drivers of this has been that research for one university keep producing PhD student’s way beyond the capacity of the market to employ them. It’s kind of an open scandal, even Doonesbury makes fun of it – uh satirizes it as a human tragedy. So what we’ve done with that problem, and this is where identification comes from, is now that we’ve peeled away from that idea of alt ac positions, where someone could instead of becoming a full time biologist, become an education technologist, or they end up working for a nonprofit, or for a government, or for a company. And in part, I saw a recent survey with alt ac positions, and easily half of them are closely tied to technology – digital humanity specialist for example, or social designer. And I know a lot of faculty really appreciate working with people who have that kind of background – it gives them a sense of common ground and makes them feel that the people they are working with are really committed to the academic enterprise. So that’s a curious benefit that we’ve created – and part of it is you look at fields that have emerged like the digital humanities, where the old model of fay faculty members by themselves, doesn’t work so well for that field. You need to have collaborative teams in order to do that work. That’s something the sciences have always done, but for the humanities that way is pretty scarce. So it’s really interesting to see this development happen. I’m guessing it’s likely to keep going because people keep going to grad school, grad schools keeping turning out PhDs, and I’m not seeing any trends anywhere in the U.S. that is a sudden movement toward returning to tenure, I mean no one is doing that. It’s really expensive, and there are very few institutions that do so. As an alt ac person, I love this life, you know? I’m really grateful for it.

**KL:** You know, it’s interesting I just read a statistic in the last couple of days that in general in the economy in the U.S., about 35% of people are free lancing and that they – I guess the expectation is that’s to increase about 10% by 2020. So this seems to be an overall trend, not just a trend in higher education of just being a little bit more entrepreneurial, or starting to think about your career less as kind of a traditional multiyear tenure track role, but starting to kind of move around a little bit between positions, between institutions. I’m wondering, what are your thoughts on that in terms of how it’s connected to these larger different economies?

**BA:** Well partly, as I mentioned before, it’s a transformation in our labor market, as a whole, way beyond higher education. So I like to joke that I call this the Mad Men principal, where if you look at the show taking place in the 60’s, you see these expectation of uh – what the Japanese would later call “salary man position”. You know, you get to work for one employer for decades, and decades, and that’s your expectation. We moved away from that in part because we moved away from the industrial economy. We still make stuff, the U.S. still does lots of manufactory, but we used to employ very few people in doing it. We make stuff by outsourcing or automating it. In the 1990’s, the idea was that we were going to move away from the manufactory economy to a creative economy or a digital economy, and that came true half way. Our creative economy, in Richard Florida’s terms “our digital economy”, it is a large part of our economy. What didn’t come true is that doesn’t employ many people. The Apple employees are a couple of tens to thousands of people in the U.S. Very, Very small. When Kodak collapsed and gave up – in their one plant in Rochester they employed like 40,000 people. That same week Instagram, one of their great competitors, employed a couple hundred. So what instead happened was we moved from a manufacturing economy to a service economy, so all of the big – all of the fields that are growing are everything from retail, to home healthcare aide as well. The whole healthcare sector is just an enormous chunk of our economy right now, and that’s just going to keep growing. Nothing’s holding that back. Uh it’s for bad reasons like our terrible cost structure and bad insurance policies, and it’s for good reasons – Americans are living longer, generally speaking, better than before. Which means that we tend to consume a lot more healthcare as we get older statistically. So we’ve got this transformation from manufacturing to service, among many other things, this is one of the many reasons why we have job security. Unions tend to be settled on – in the private sector – tend to be settled on manufacturing sectors; automotive for example or railroads. But we have very little immunization in the service sectors, and so service jobs tend to have what unions fought for, they tend to back what unions fought for. They tend not to have job security, they tend to have less compensation, lower benefits and so on. And so that’s a huge part of what’s driving this kind of precarious labor market. The second is the rapid development of information technology, where we’re able to – companies, friends at all scales are able to arrange for a kind of Lego style workforce. So having someone employed full time used to make a lot of sense in the 1950’s, but now we have such great level of information, command of control, such great data analytics, that it’s much easier for us to swap workers around, move them back and forth. And they have some major advantages for businesses on the bottom line – for workers, not so much. Cathy O'Neil in her recent book, *Weapons of Math Destruction*, by the way my candidate for best title of anything in the 21st century, points out that we now have crazy work schedules. Where people are plugged into bizarre hours in part just to maximize profits based on the new data that companies have. Having part-time work slows from that, and then being able to juggle multiple part-time jobs that overlap, stems from that as well. So you should expect to see academic adjuncts who are also driving for Uber, or have left their house on Airbnb, or they moonlight as a lab tech somewhere else. That’s many ways where our economy is right now, and that – for individual workers this can be exciting. There are benefits for go-getters who want to work long hours. People who want stimulation of multiple demands and multiple careers, that’s very exciting. It’s also enormously stressful, and the compensation tends to be lower –benefits tend to be lower, and we’ve seen from the adjunct world this can lead to a really precarious existence.

**KL:** Well thank you, Bryan for sharing some of your thoughts on this alt ac space and the role that you’ve taken on.

**BA:** My pleasure.

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# Bonus Clip #2:

**KL:** In this second bonus clip for Episode 97 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Bryan Alexander shares about how he deals with loneliness in his work as an independent researcher – take a listen.

Bryan, I’m curious as an independent researcher, as someone who is focusing on the future, if your work ever gets a little bit lonely?

**BA:** I was afraid that would happen. I mean, I’m a very extroverted, very social person, and so I always like to socialize with people that I work with, and I used to really enjoy as a grad student, as a professor, working at a nonprofit, the chance to just walk up and down the hallway and learn from somebody else who was doing something, and benefit from that. And I was worried that I would be by myself – it would be me, a laptop, and a wall most of the time. And the opposite of it happened. So much of this work is built on a network of social connections – so many colleagues, so many friends. Some that I’ve never met, in a 21st century way, who I really, really rely on – who are tremendous supporters. So I’m thinking about my Patreon supporters, but also I do my monthly future trends and technology of education reports and every couple of day’s readers send me suggestions, thoughts, feedback. Um and that’s – it’s a distributed community. It’s a network that I kind of can always count on. When I get to work with people face to face or via video, the social connection is there. It’s almost like this almost ghostly invisible college that I’m now part of, that I get to work with – and I find that image of future coming to rest of the present. And with that I feel grateful that I can live the futurist world. But also, and this is a real surprise pleasure for me, is I get to work with my wife more than I ever had before. As an English professor, I could read to her; which she puts up with, but there’s not a lot of connection beyond that. But she does so much work to make sure this business run. She has become a tax Jedi. She’s become an HR guru. And she does this all just brilliantly and elegantly, and without any fanfare So I – it’s a kind of, it’s a pleasant surprise. It’s one that’s almost in an earlier stage in American history, where it’s a family business now. And so that I find a really sweet pleasure and surprise. Does that make sense?

**KL:** It does make sense, yeah. That’s very interesting, and it’s a way of thinking about your professional networks in a different way.

**BA:** It really is. This is one of the reasons why social media is so powerful. I don’t mean the formal structure of let’s say, Facebook ( ), or just a part of it, but also the ability to – through Twitter, through podcasts, through blogging, to be able to assemble a network of people that you can really work with. And I use the metaphor, the invisible college, because it really feels like it. Like I have this virtual, but very real tangible organization that I’m with – and the older I get the more special and precious that becomes to me.

**KL:** Thanks so much for sharing a little bit more about your professional network!

**BA:** Oh, I’m happy to. Thank you for letting me do it!

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 97 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Bryan Alexander sharing about how he deals with loneliness in his work as an independent researcher – thanks for listening!

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