Hello, everyone. My name is Rachel Arteaga, and I currently serve as Assistant Director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington. I completed the PhD in English with a focus on American Literature at UW in 2016 and, instead of going on the academic job market, I moved into a leadership role in higher education administration. The Simpson Center is a research-focused unit that supports the scholarship of faculty and doctoral students at UW through grants, fellowships, and events such as lectures and conferences. There are more than 250 humanities centers and institutes in colleges and universities around the world—so for those of you in the audience considering career possibilities for yourselves and on behalf of your students, I recommend considering them as potential employers. You can find a full list on the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes website.

In my remarks today, I’ll briefly describe the path I took to my current position, offer a few pieces of advice that have served me well over these past years of professional growth, and make a passionate argument for the importance of the kind of work that academic administrators do in higher education—work that I would describe as building and sustaining essential intellectual and institutional infrastructure. I’m going to begin by foregrounding my responses to the thoughtful discussion prompts that were circulated by our roundtable chair:
First, my very best advice for job seekers is to develop substantive relationships with people whose work you find interesting. When I say “work,” I am speaking broadly about the kind of convictions, professional commitments, and intellectual inquiries that any given person demonstrates. The goal is to become one of these interesting and worthwhile people, not to merely get a job. Unemployment rates are extremely low for PhDs in the United States. Getting a job is very much within reach, so think creatively beyond that metric and plan to go where your contributions will be most deeply felt and valued, where you can serve the constituencies you care about, and where you will be surrounded by people you respect.

**Action item for English PhDs:** Do an informational interview once per month.

If you’re specifically interested in working in higher education in an administrative role, find a way to get your hands on budgets. In graduate school, I served on a budget committee in the UW student government for a year. It was very instructive and it gave me a foundation for my current responsibilities.

**Action item for English PhDs:** Take a class, get an internship, serve on a conference planning or departmental or student committee, and be in charge of the spreadsheets—at the very least, look at them until you have developed a working understanding of them.

When I have served on hiring committees within my organization, I have looked for high levels of professionalism, the capacity and willingness to learn, a sensibility about working within academic hierarchies and institutional structures, proven work ethic, and vision. For professional staff positions in communications, events, and grants, portfolios
are impressive. They are not often required. All that is generally requested from applicants is a letter of interest and a CV or résumé. But if you advance to the interview stage, having a polished set of proven materials—writing samples, event specs and marketing copy, testimonials and recommendations—can be a powerful asset.

☞ **Action item for English PhDs:** start building a professional portfolio in an area of interest outside of your academic scholarship. Find out if your institution has shared web hosting that you can use without cost while you are a student, and consider other options for building a more permanent online presence. As with anything else, take time to collect examples you admire before you start designing. I’m emphasizing the distinction between your scholarship and this other set of commitments and interests—but, in the best case, these will all be powerfully integrated into a coherent narrative. I don’t recommend trying to have a shadow professional life, but rather to pursue many possibilities simultaneously.

✔ Regardless of the kind of career you decide to pursue, you’ll have to contend with entrenched perceptions of the kind of work that it entails. I am sure that our faculty panelists can confirm that they have not been treated with resounding respect at all times, in all places, and by all people over the course of their careers. Yes, there are stereotypes: administrators are not often regarded as the essential personnel of higher education, and, worse still, they are often held in contempt. If you choose to pursue administrative positions, prepare yourself for this. Also prepare to remind yourself often of the aspects of the humanities and the education sector that brought you to your PhD program in the first place so that you can stay focused on the substance and stakes of the work. And,
perceptions aside, prepare to come to terms with the real limitations that will be imposed upon your work in these roles. There are—rightly—professional responsibilities that reside *only* with faculty. The faster you relinquish your attachments to these responsibilities and the prestige they confer, the faster you will develop your own sense of vision, ambition, and integrity as an administrator.

**Action item for English PhDs:** Collect and analyze job descriptions of roles in higher education administration. What skills would the work require you to possess? What would you have to give up to pursue this kind of career? What would you gain by it? If you were to take one of these positions, what could you contribute to the mission of the institution, and to the humanities more broadly?

My own story is short: during the last year of my dissertation work, I took a part-time job as an administrator on a grant program at the Simpson Center. At the end of that year, there was a full-time staff position vacancy for the Assistant Directorship, and I was appointed into it on a part-time, interim basis. For the first academic year after my dissertation defense, I divided my time between continuing to manage the grant and picking up many of the responsibilities of the higher-level role. As anyone who has held an interim or temporary position can tell you, it is essentially a year-long interview. The end result of that process was that I was hired into the Assistant Director position full-time—and so I stayed at my degree-granting institution, and I stayed in the Pacific Northwest, the region in which I have family and community ties. I started a family and my son somehow landed a coveted spot in the daycare on my campus. When he gets sick, which he frequently does as a one-and-a-half year old toddler, I can pick him up, take him home, and clock my sick time. The work stays on my desk until the next day, and I pick it up
with renewed energy when I return. The fact that my current position allows me to care for my child and be fully present in his life while also working in the humanities at a national level is as important to my story as the path that led me here. This kind of path is impossible to chart in advance. But it can be prepared for, sought out, and substantiated over time. By which I mean, of course, that there is expertise in this kind of work, and if you take it on, it will be your task to develop that expertise and leverage it in the service of others and the mission of your institution.

If we take as our premise, as I do, that the humanities are the rightful inheritance of every person, then we have ask ourselves what it would take to ensure that every person can have meaningful encounters with the humanities. This kind of expansive, publicly- and democratically-oriented vision for the meaning and value of our work requires serious investments in infrastructure and in research dissemination. One of those investments is our time. And what is a job if not a span of purchased time? I spend my time sustaining, supporting, strengthening, and, in the most exciting moments of my work, creating new possibilities for the humanities to flourish at the University of Washington, in its local and regional communities, and beyond. I am lucky, honored, and privileged to do this work. And I am far, far from alone in it. I have found incredible networks of people who care about scholarship, teaching, and advocacy in the humanities. A few places to look, beyond MLA: HASTAC, CHCI, the National Humanities Alliance—especially its annual conference, the state humanities councils, and projects supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. There are more, but that list gives you a strong start.

Deep and substantive relationships are the essential infrastructure of the humanities. Whatever job you take, make that your core commitment.