Episode 14 - Inside The Ivory Tower - Research and Higher Ed...

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**SPEAKERS**

Sheahan Virgin, Meredith Benjamin, Sarah Purcell, Nicholas Lampietti

**Sarah Purcell** 00:00

I was talking to one of my students in the Burling library a couple of weekends ago. And I said, Oh, it was Friday afternoon. I said, Oh, what are you doing this weekend? She said, Oh, I'm I'm hosting the 90s Harris party and I said, Oh, I used to go to Harris in the 90s. And she, she looked kind of frightened. She said, Oh, well, that's different. Okay, we'll just stop that conversation. That's fine.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:33

It's hard to imagine that once upon a time, professors were students. They lived in dorms, did homework, and in this case, even went to Harris's. On today's episode, Meredith and I talked to professors, Sarah Purcell, whose voice you just heard, and a Sheahan Virgin class of 2008 and 1992, respectively. Both currently teach and conduct research at Grinnell. Professor Purcell in history, and Professor Virgin in political science. In a moment, they share their paths into and through academia, what it means to pursue a career in higher education, and how you too can become a professor. Plus, they offer some pretty exceptional advice to their Grinnell selves. From the center for careers, life and service at Grinnell College. I'm Nicholas Lampietti. Stay with us. Well, thank you so much for being here today with us professors Virgin and Purcell. We're really excited to have you.

**Sarah Purcell** 01:40

Thanks.

**Sheahan Virgin** 01:40

It's great to be here, yeah.

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:41

So I know, Professor Virgin because I'm taking Professor Virgin's class right now public opinion and political behavior. It's wonderful. I'm learning a ton. And I've never had Professor Purcell. But Professor Purcell is a history professor.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 01:57

Yes. And so for everyone that doesn't know you guys, if you could start by each telling us a little bit about yourself and what you do.

**Sarah Purcell** 02:05

Okay, well, I'm Sarah Purcell, and I'm Grinnell class of 1992. I am I guess my official title is the LF Parker professor of history. I have taught at Grinnell for 22 years since the fall of 2000. Before that, I taught for three years at Central Michigan University. And I went to graduate school at Brown University before that. So I went straight from Grinnell and to a graduate program where I got my MA and PhD in US history. And then I became a professor. So and I've been I've been back at Grinnell for a long time now.

**Sheahan Virgin** 02:44

Yeah so, I haven't been at Grinnell for two decades. So I was Grinnell class of 2008. And I was a political science major, and I concentrated in Russian and Eastern European Studies. I am a visiting assistant professor here. So that means I'm on a short term contract. I'm in my second year teaching here at Grinnell, and we'll be doing a third next academic year. And I'm excited about that. And before this, I taught one year at St. Mary's College, which was a small women's liberal arts college in South Bend, Indiana, where Pete Buttigieg was the mayor. And it's right across the street from the University of Notre Dame, I graduated in 2008. As I said, my path into academia was a little more delayed and serpentine. So I worked for a little while in DC as an intern for my congressman. I also worked as a fellow a research fellow for an electoral reform nonprofit called fair vote. That experience led me to think that I would like to go into academia. And then I did my master's degree at the University of Chicago. And then after that, I started my PhD 2013 at Vanderbilt University in the Department of Political Science, got another Master's there and finished my PhD in 2019.

**Meredith Benjamin** 04:04

And now you're here back in Grinnell! Speaking of that, you know, we're hoping you can tell us a little bit about what each of your times were like at Grinnell and what your life was like as students here.

**Sarah Purcell** 04:14

Yeah, I should have mentioned that I was a history major. It's not shocking. But yeah, so I was a history major, and very much so very raw history. And I don't think anyone who knew me back then is too surprised that I'm a history professor now. See, I was also interested I did the mock trial team. It was like the first mock trial team that Grinnell had back then still going strong today. And I also played the viola in the orchestra and chamber music. I did a lot of music related extracurriculars. I was on the history SEPC for three years, did a lot of stuff, do a lot of stuff with the History Department, and I was very, very close to a lot of the professors I guess all of whom are retired now, but many of whom still taught here when I first came back to be a professor, my advisor was kind of a legend in Grinnell College, who was also an alum, named Al Jones. He was class of I think 1950. And he was my tutorial advisor. And so then I also took a lot of history from him. And from Don Smith and Victoria Brown, I would say, that's probably the top three professors that I took most of my history classes from, I also took German language and lots of other things, you know, science and even calculus, stuff like that. So I was, I was very into academics definitely was my main thing but but had a lot of different interests in college. Yeah,

**Sheahan Virgin** 05:50

Sarah, have you found it? Or when you I guess, when you first started here at 1992, did you find it somewhat surreal to suddenly be colleagues with some faculty members who had taught you?

**Sarah Purcell** 06:03

Not too bad? I think it helped that I had been a professor elsewhere first, since I taught for three years at Central Michigan University. And so it was nice that I had a little bit of an identity as a professor already. Before before coming back in some ways, it was nice because I was able to make social connections with a lot of other faculty and staff on campus who I had some prior engagement with. And like I said, I don't think any of the of my then colleagues was too surprised that I had become a historian, because that's kind of I don't know, I was I was very, it was fairly evident that I was I was very interested in that. And now, you know, the job market, even back then was not so direct, that you could be sure you would be able to succeed is that what about you? You probably, you know, you definitely have colleagues now who you were a student of?

**Sheahan Virgin** 06:54

Yeah, so only I mean, it has been 12 years since I graduated. Well, actually, probably longer now. 14 years since I graduated. Yeah, only only two members of the political science department who were instructors that I had are still here. That's Professor Wayne Moyer and Professor Barb Trish, I have found it somewhat surreal, but also really nice. I mean, as as wonderful as Wayne and Barb were as professors, they are just as wonderful as colleagues.

**Sarah Purcell** 07:21

I took a class from Wayne also has a long, long time of service. So

**Meredith Benjamin** 07:22

I've taken a class from him as well!

**Sarah Purcell** 07:30

He transcends all the generations of Grinellians, many generations. So yeah, and actually I was I should have mentioned that I was on the Rosenfield Program Committee when Wayne Moyer was the director of the Rosenfield Program. And then after that, when I was on the faculty, I for nine years directed the Rosenfield program. So again, sort of following in those things that we did so and now Barb is the, Barb Trish, she's the director of the Rosenfield program. So I definitely, sometimes those co curricular activities are about as important as the classes, you know. So that's, that's great. I know what you mean. It's definitely it. There are some moments there are once in a while, specific places on campus where it's a little bit you're sort of reminded of a student experience or something. But mostly, it's great to be able to teach the students right at the institution that you love and to have that connection to other future Grinnell alums. It's it's kind of a delight on a regular basis, even though there are some surreal touches, I will admit that.

**Sheahan Virgin** 08:29

Yeah, when I when I started here, one of the first things I did was I just kind of walked around campus to not only see how it had changed over the decades, but just to kind of it was almost like a spiritual experience coming back to where you'd been a student and kind of having some however vague memories about oh, yeah, you know, I was there at one point. And so I haven't I haven't yet described my student experience. So I think, I think a really important kind of detail to kind of frame or at least the way I read kind of retro actively frame my experiences. You know, I was I was first gen. And so I didn't really know a whole lot about the college application process. And so the way I got to Grinnell was it mentally relatively accidental, I just kind of it was it was kind of put on my radar by a guidance counselor and I only applied to like four colleges and universities, came and visited, of course at Grinnell and liked it, especially since I'm also from a small Midwestern town. Once I got here, I was also very studious and mainly focused on my academics and so kind of hearing all the things that Sarah did when she was a student has put me to shame I wasn't too integrated and involved in part because I just didn't maybe know all the opportunities that were out there. The one thing that I did do extracurricular wise in a formal capacity was I wrote for the Scarlet and Black, our school newspaper and I in particular wrote a column like an editorial opinion column about American politics. I remember writing about the 2008 Democratic primary and the Bush administration and that kind of stuff, don't go back and in the archives and find those columns, but so that was mainly something I did. I also held a number of campus jobs as part of work study, my first campus job was actually being a projectionist for the theater at Harris. Then I worked in the library. And eventually I found my way once they built the JRC to working in the new dining hall, the fully campus wide dining hall, I actually really liked working at the dining hall, I thought it was a was a great job. Yeah, that's, that's what I did. I also played tennis, not as a member of the team, but I would play with guys that were on the tennis team, since they were my friends. I never understood how they or others could balance formal membership in athletics with with academic study, because I don't think I could have

**Nicholas Lampietti** 10:58

sort of jumping, jumping, I guess, back and forward, I'm wondering if you could talk about your individual research interests. So I'm not going to put the words in my mouth, I'll just say blanket sort of politics and then American history. But tell us about where those sorts of passions came from, and how they have developed over time and sort of where you are now, then, in your in your research.

**Sarah Purcell** 11:21

I mean, I guess I can start because mine is we can kind of go chronologically, but went to graduate school to study the American Revolution and post revolutionary America kind of called the early republic, the 1790s 1820s period, which was something I got interested in actually at Grinnell, with Al Jones, who I mentioned was my tutorial advisor, I had the chance to do what was the precursor of the MAP program, I was one of the first students who had that kind of independent research opportunity. They had a college had a grant from the Joyce Foundation at that point. And it had spent a summer working on political history with Professor Jones, it was more modern Iowa political history. But he was he also taught a research seminar on the American Revolution and the early republic. And I also did a lot of political history with on British political history with Professor Smith at Grinnell. So both of those informed my desires of field to study in graduate school, I did study that in graduate school very happily, I wrote my dissertation on memory of the Revolutionary War and the way it influenced national identity that actually became my first book in 2002. And then also, even starting before I came back to Grinnell, I also started teaching 19th century US history and the Civil War. And I got more and more interested through my teaching, actually, in researching the Civil War period, and I found more connections between the 1790s and the 1860s, through the beginning of the 20th century. And so I've done more research on the civil war since then, and actually just published a book on actually memory of the Civil War and how it influenced national identity. So there's a lot of resonances in the kind of methodologies that I've used looking at print culture, and you know, the the way I work as a historian, but I think that I have, in part because I have taught at Grinnell, which has, you know, we have to cover a lot of ground in, we get to develop new interests as faculty members, because there aren't so many specialists in any one thing in our relatively smaller departments. And so I've gotten to branch out and cover for a US historian quite a long time period primarily I've focused on the memory of warfare, but lots of other things too, along the way you kind of in a longer career, you have the opportunity to do smaller research projects. I'm also involved in digital humanities. And that's also something I came to primarily through teaching. So both the teaching and research really go hand in hand,

**Sheahan Virgin** 13:48

hearing Sarah talk about her research really reminds me how there's always been a part of me that wishes I was a historian. I just think it's so fascinating. And it's interesting, you know, when I teach intro to political science here, which is probably become my favorite class to teach. One thing that you usually do in an intro is you kind of trace the quickly trace the history of the discipline. And, you know, political science is really a hybrid field, there is an element of Political Science, where we started out being essentially political history. And then in about the 1950s, we have what's called the behavioral revolution, where informed by sociology, political science really starts trying to look at the minds of actual people living in democracy and what they think and do in terms of behavior, which does sound really familiar to you, Meredith, in that your public opinion political behavior with me and then in about the 1980s political sciences revolutionized, again, the institutional revolution in which it adopts a lot of the methodologies of economics. You know, I think a good political scientist also knows the history and the culture or tries to of the of the cases that they study. So in terms of what i i research, I'm primarily a scholar of American politics. Although I do teach here and have some interest in comparative politics, so I'm mainly a scholar of what I would call election institutions, which is why people who study election institutions tend to look comparatively because that's where the variation is. But within the United States, we also have variation among the the 50 US states, in terms of the electoral rules that they apply to kind of structure their democratic game. And in particular, I'm interested in studying the motivations for why people might want to reform those electoral rules in terms of, you know, you might think of Electoral College reform, or voter ID laws, or rank choice voting that's taking off in Maine, and I think Alaska as well. So these types of things and you know, it's interesting that Sarah mentioned, political elites is something that she kind of has studied the discourse, of course, institutions are created mainly by political elites. But sometimes the mass public that is regular Americans are part of the dialogue as well, especially if it if the electoral change is put before voters and maybe in type of referenda or an initiative, but in terms of public opinion polls, right. And so we often think that elites will reform electoral rules, to seek partisan advantage, right, what's good for my political party, and that has kind of dominated the study of electoral rules. And, and I increasingly try to add nuance to that picture by asking, Well, what are their motivations, especially in survey research, with average Americans might matter as well. So I haven't written a book, but I have published two articles in political science journals, one of them last year, each of which was a chapter in my in my dissertation, and I hope to work on another article this summer, once I'm finished doing my responsibilities as a teacher.

**Meredith Benjamin** 16:47

Well that's a fabulous segway. Because the next thing we wanted to ask you guys about was teaching and what makes being a college professor exciting and interesting and rewarding.

**Sarah Purcell** 16:59

Yeah, well, I mean, I just think teaching is, it's, it's just fantastic. I mean, it's so one of the pluses the the real plus of the liberal arts college, I think, is the class size and the number of students that you get to have because it's so valuable to get to know your students, personally, you know, to have a lot of time to talk to one another. And even if it feels rushed, sometimes during the semester, there's still definitely a relationship with each class as a whole, maybe not quite every single student, but a lot of the students you get to know individually. And there's just so much excitement to get to dig into questions that you really care about, not just things having to do with the past, but how for me how the past can inform our decisions about the present, and help us to contextualize matters in the present. And to really like think about what students are interested in on an individual level and be able to help them frame questions and get the methods to answer those questions. To me, it's just like an amazing opportunity, really, to have a conversation with a lot of different different kinds of people, but to work towards the goal of enlarging knowledge, really, for lack of a better phrase, a lot of the intellectual community at a school like Grinnell, and certainly for me at Grinnell is in the classroom, and you explore the issues that you're interested in by rolling them over with students, and it makes you a better historian. To me, it's there just isn't anything better. Really.

**Sheahan Virgin** 18:30

Yeah, I, I think I'll answer this question with a prelude. It's easy, I think, you know, for college students at Grinnell. Now, this is really probably unless they transfer their only experience. And you may not know what kind of the great other alternative is, which is being a student at or in our case, teaching at a large state school or maybe a private university. That is that is quite large. Right. And so, you know, when I was at Vanderbilt, a large private university, you know, Intro to American politics routinely would have 50 to 60 students in it, right, which is more than a professor who especially has very heavy research obligations, can handle and so what those universities do is they they utilize an intermediary, a teaching assistant, it's that person's job to grade your papers, usually grade your exams, especially, maybe it'll hold discussion sections or review sessions. You know, students can email the professor directly, but usually they email the teaching assistant, who then consults with the professor. And so the ability of the professors there to really get to know their students individually is really constrained. Grinnell doesn't really need to utilize the teaching assistant model that intermediary and because we have smaller class sizes by design, my intro class last semester, you know, I had 26 and 29 students in my two sections and those were over enrolled. That was a lot of students to have for intro. Usually we aim for something and closer to 20. And that really does allow for that individual interaction and just getting to know each other, you know, teaching is great, it's wonderful to see light bulbs go off in students minds and to have them have passion for the things that that you're helping them learn and explore. But it's also just really nice to get to know students as individuals, right, as people that are part of your shared community. I love that aspect of the job. I in particular love having students a second time because by then you know each other really well they're, you know, likely in your 200 or 300. level course, they tend to get my my jokes, my humor a little bit better. And they know what to expect for my courses. And that's been some of my, my favorite experiences so far. And in the short time that I've that I've been here.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 20:45

Let's talk about sort of the flip side. So when you're not in the classroom, you are doing research. And I'm wondering if you could sort of walk us through what that looks like knowing that you're both doing sort of research in different disciplines. And then maybe how you balance that with your teaching commitments?

**Sarah Purcell** 21:02

Well, the first thing I'll say is that there's not always such a separation between the two. I mean, you've already heard me say that, I informed the research topic of my latest book from courses I was teaching. But also, if you work long term at Grinnell, you have the opportunity as a faculty member to mentor students in research. And if you're interested in that, you can do quite a bit of that either in the Mentored Advanced projects or Mellon Mays program or you know, many other opportunities. And that's something I've really enjoyed a lot and has provided maybe even more intense teaching than the classroom teaching, getting to know students one on one, but it also has created an intellectual community and has helped me move my research agenda along. So for instance, as a historian, a lot of what I do to research in my kind of research is just spend literally years reading newspaper articles from the 19th century. And you might need to go to an archive to do that some of the time some of its digitized. You know, for my latest book, I read 1000s and 1000s, and 1000s of newspaper articles and took various kinds of notes and categorize them and just worked with a tremendous amount of primary sources. Well, it was helpful that in many summers, I would have a group of two to four MAP students who were also doing projects related to the Civil War. And were working in similar kinds of methodologies and who I could talk to about sources and we could discuss, really almost as peers how to how to do that research. And so just to keep in mind that I think it's another way that teaching and research energize each other at Grinnell, but um, for, for historians, it involves just a ton of reading a lot of writing, putting together primary and secondary sources, there's some empirical work, you know, some of that data that was mentioned before that political scientists are interested in. Sometimes historians use that too, I have done some of that working on, for example, the maps in my latest book, The actual maps, cartographic maps involved collecting a lot of of data and using various computer programs to make that work. But even those maps, the maps in the book are co authored with a student. So a student who was a Mentored Advanced Project Map student, made the maps in my along with me, so we work together, so So there are opportunities for collaboration, even though history has traditionally been more of a kind of single more isolated sort of researcher role, I think, both through teaching, but also increasingly outside of that is, is more part of a collaborative research enterprise. And I always, all historians also work with librarians and archivists constantly.

**Sheahan Virgin** 23:46

Yeah, so there's a pretty strong bias nowadays in the way political scientists talk to graduate students. For it to be very statistics heavy, whereby you are using quantitative numeric data, whether you've collected it through a survey, through some sort of lab experiment, or obtained it kind of as nature has given it to us, you know, what we call observational data that you then use, you know, computer programs, statistical software, to analyze that data and try and find the, the causal patterns, right, and so, you know, if you were to be a graduate student in political science, that is, most likely what your experience would be there, there is a subfield of, of political science called political theory, which is probably most akin if you had to kind of simplify it to philosophy and and those individuals will still be trained in statistics but they may not need to use it if if at all that much in their in their research. So what I do in my own research, political science is also very collaborative nowadays. I, you know, oddly enough, haven't been collaborative. I've been a solitary researcher, which has both its pros and its cons, you you obtain data on a research question that you might have. And and then you analyze that data. And we'll write a paper and or a book manuscript about it. So I, personally use the survey methodology in my own research. So I will write survey questions, I will purchase a sample of respondents and then ask them these questions, right, usually using a computer format, and then get the data, clean it and analyze it. And it's pretty exciting. But you really want to make sure that you don't mess up your survey instrument that you don't miss program at or write a really bad question, because you get one crack at these respondents can be pretty expensive to purchase a good sample, and your data is only going to be as good as your as your instrument was. So that's what I've done in both of my papers. And the other two papers that are published that I have going boy hearing about archive work, man, it just it gets that again, that historian that's latent within me really kind of

**Sarah Purcell** 26:02

It's interesting, because I think that we're both interested in similar some similar questions about political participation and elections and all sorts of you know, American politics, but I just study a period before surveys were a thing. And before opinion surveys were really possible. And so it's sort of like searching for answers to the same questions, but you have to assemble a lot of little crumbs left behind.

**Meredith Benjamin** 26:28

So you have this body of work, right? You've been working on it, you've been analyzing data, or you've been studying sources, you've written a lot about it. How do you move that into the publication process?

**Sheahan Virgin** 26:42

I guess I'll start, it can really depend on whether you're trying to write a book or whether you're trying to write a journal article. So I would think most disciplines, especially in the social sciences, utilize both both processes. I only have experience writing journal journal articles. And so journal articles are almost always what we call peer reviewed. And so you'll write a paper, you know, what we call a man who has a draft manuscript, and you will submit it to a journal within your discipline, or maybe there's an Interdisciplinary Journal that you like, and then the editor of that journal will find other members of the discipline to serve as anonymous reviewers. And so the double blind peer review process refers to the reviewers not knowing who the author is, and the author, not knowing who the reviewers are. Single blind would be the reviewers know who the author is, but the author doesn't know who the reviewers are. And the idea of this, you know, the problem is it can get into gatekeeping, which can have issues related to various biases that that trouble our society. But it's also important to have your work assessed by individuals, who are fellow experts in the field, who can help find mistakes and your theorizing, who can help find mistakes in your, in your methodology, who can help find mistakes in in your writing. And so, if the reviewers don't like your paper, they will reject it. Usually, what they'll do is they will provide you with what's called a revise and resubmit, where you make changes per the reviewers, suggestions and requests, and then you you then resubmit the paper to the same journal, it's then reread by those reviewers, and they either decide whether the journal will accept it for publication, or reject it. And that whole process can take writing the paper can take months if maybe even a year or more, right, depending on how quickly you work or how, how big your ambitions are, how, you know, in terms of data collection, and then the review process can take anywhere from I'd say, three months to a year as well. And so there really is a bottleneck to the to the journal academic journal process.

**Sarah Purcell** 28:55

Yeah, writing a book is fairly similar, although it's longer and there takes more time and more. You know, each chapter is a journal article or two, depending on the kind of book but you know, history kind of strides between humanities and social science. So but yeah, I mean, involves a peer review process, which is very similar. That's for academic, what are sometimes called monographs, academic books, historians often write also books aimed more at a public audience. Maybe with less scholarly apparatus with fewer footnotes. That's a different process that usually involves, you know, having a literary agent or reacting to a particular call. I've written a few books that are referenced books or books that are more more classified closer to a biography kind of more for the educational market. I've also co-authored a textbook, which is a whole other process. So there are different kinds of books and they all have kind of their own processes. Most of the ones that academics tend to do are peer reviewed, that they go through that review process that Professor Virgin was describing, but sometimes they're not and I think Increasingly, I mean, many of us are interested in presenting our work to the public, as well. So for instance, I mean, I write pieces for the Washington Post kind of opinion pieces, they have a whole column called made by history, which is where historians try to help contextualize current events using history. And so that's a very different process, it's much faster, the writing has to be sort of sharper and more simplified, and you work quickly back and forth with the editors. So it still gets a lot of review, but not exactly the same kind of scholarly review. So there's a lot of different kinds of writing that that we can do with our work. But I think you have to take the proper amount of time to formulate the ideas and sort of what you call the theorizing. And then also, you know, working with the sources or the data, and then you can think about kind of how to disseminate it in our jobs as professors especially initially, we're rewarded more highly by the institutions, we work for these gatekeeper type of pieces, articles, and books that are peer reviewed, and are in an academic mode. But I think increasingly, even at earlier points in people's careers as researchers, there also are valuable rewards for public facing projects, digital projects of various kinds, or writing for newspapers or other kinds of media outlets. So it just depends. And you kind of have to triangulate between the audience that you as a researcher want to reach and then also what the institutions that you are serving, how they sort of envisioned scholarship as a whole. So there's, there's a lot that goes into it. But the first thing you have to do is have a decent idea that you can support. And then you can kind of worry over how to which format to put it in and to whom you pitch it.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 31:43

I think that's, that's the perfect sort of lays the perfect groundwork. For in our final couple of questions, um really now gearing them towards students and really Grinnell students who are interested in pursuing a career in academia. How does someone get a job as a professor? And then maybe in that vein, what are some of the other alternative paths through academia, some of the other things people should have in their minds?

**Sarah Purcell** 32:09

Yeah. So I think one thing that's very important is to be asking that question of any graduate program you're interested in from the beginning, and even when you're sussing out graduate advisors, or people you want to study with the probably the most important thing, the first thing people think about his what field what discipline you want to study. But I think equally important today is to find out, how does that graduate program approach the question of how you get a job, and what kind of many graduate programs 2025 years ago, didn't even have that much instruction, and how to teach, let alone how to get a job. outside academia, nowadays, many more of them do. Many of the professional organizations I know political science, and history both have lots of projects working to help graduate students, but there are lots of calls for our disciplines to even do more. So I think it behooves people to, you have to think about yourself. But you also have to look for the institutional support, and maybe even choose your graduate school with it in mind that some graduate schools offer a lot more job placement job training. So for a historian that might look like for instance, doing a lot with the digital humanities, or getting fluency in statistics, even though that's not necessarily required for every kind of historical scholarship, or learning a lot about teaching or doing cross disciplinary work, doing History and Sociology, or history and American Studies or other kinds of things, for people who might work in tech fields as a content specialist, for instance, or I even know historians who work as data scientists, that sort of thing. And so those are jobs where it helps to have a lot of graduate education. But there are there's a skills piece to that, right. If you're going to work as a data scientist, you also need to learn a lot about data and, and how to approach it and and statistics and computer platforms and programming and things like that, which you might or might not pay much attention to as as a history graduate student. So I think or if you want to work in museums, for instance, you know, there's another set of skills. So it's not that you have to train in all of those things. But you should, like I said, have a plan B and a C, and kind of think about the skills piece alongside thinking about the content and the discipline, and then also really evaluating the schools that you're choosing and asking other people's opinion, you know, not just you as a Grinnell undergraduate, what does that graduate school offer but ask your professors ask other graduate students in that program? What kinds of workshops training, cross disciplinary work are they allowed to do? Because I think really graduate education, I can the preparation to be an academic can actually prepare you similarly to liberal arts degree for Many, many, many different kinds of jobs, almost any kind of job, it teaches you how to think and have focus and depth in a way that you can't get a lot of other ways to have the luxury to really focus on a subject matter and a methodology in great depth. But you have to have the creativity to then figure out how to apply that to those jobs and how to make yourself an attractive candidate for those kinds of jobs. Maybe simultaneously with also trying to get an academic job, which in most fields has a very established pathway that is not hard to figure out because the graduate schools are well schooled. That's what they've done for 60-70 years, they know how to put people through that process. So they will teach you something about that process, though, even there, that competition piece comes into play. So I think just being kind of entrepreneurial about your own skills, and your own applicability to different ways of thinking about the world as you also pursue academia is a really good idea.

**Meredith Benjamin** 35:57

Professor Virgin do you have anything to add?

**Sheahan Virgin** 36:00

Yeah, I would say that if you're considering going into graduate school, in particular, to do a PhD, you should recognize that there are costs as well as benefits, obviously. And one of those costs is that it takes a long time. So in political science, PhDs tend to take between five and seven years, with the average being six, you may or may not have funding to live in terms of your budget, while you're a graduate student, or you might have for some of those years and not for all, I would encourage students that want to do a PhD to make sure they're enrolling in a PhD program that gives you full tuition remission. And that gives you a stipend, whether it's tied to being a teaching assistant, or a research assistant to a professor, because otherwise, you're going to find yourself, it's going to be a struggle to live comfortably. So that's how long it tends to take, you want to make sure that you're funded and that you know how you're getting your funding. And then you shouldn't just decide to go into a PhD program, because you don't know what else to do, or because you like being a student, or that you've admired your professors or that you you think it might be neat to have that job in the future. Graduate school is harder if you're trying to spend some of that time finding yourself and I say this from experience. So having an idea about what you want to narrowly hone in on doesn't have to be a specific research question yet. But like, what within the field you want to study, not only will that help you target advisors, and thus potential universities to apply to, but it will also help you understand what potential methodologies you might want to start learning. Right. And here's here's a secret that we don't often share with our with our students at the undergrad level is a lot of the methodologies that you learn in graduate school are now available to you as Grinnell students right? things that I did not learn while I was at Grinnellian, and was learning in grad school are things that students in my classroom, already are learning, or know maybe even know better than I do. And that is wonderful. It's a wonderful opportunity for students to utilize, I think, if you want to be a PhD student, you should sit down with one of your professors in your major, assuming that that is kind of also what you'll end up doing your PhD and in terms of discipline. And you should ask them, What are the methods that I should be learning? And and are there classes here that I could take to kind of start getting exposed to that type of thinking for us, you know, you're either and that is in political science, you're either going to probably need to learn Stata, or R that is to statistical software to analyze data. And guess what, there are plenty of Grinnellians on campus who already either know or learning how to use those softwares. And then the final thing I'll say is the job market for academics is tough. And we said we would return to this, you don't often have a whole lot of choice over over where you're going to end up. It's kind of, you know, it's really it's pretty random, what universities and colleges will end up having an opening, whether they're in an area that you want to live, if they have an opening, whether it is in your in your subfield or your specialization within your discipline, right. And so you need to be pretty open about landing spots.

**Sarah Purcell** 39:30

I would encourage anyone who's interested in going into higher education to definitely pursue graduate school, but to try to think of a number of careers that you could do, um, you you should, I would encourage anyone to try to be a professor to put a lot of effort into that, but also to know what your next plan is and your co plan, whether it's think tanks or writing or working in business or the private sector. Graduate school can also address lots of those. So I've think everyone needs to have a plan A, B, C, D, if you're going to go into academia and I would also encourage anyone to read the Chronicle of Higher Education, which we have, you can get a subscription to through your Grinnell email if you look on the library website, and Inside Higher Education, which has more or less of a paywall, which is more like an online journal of higher ed, and they're just a peruse that you will see a lot it's very eye opening about the whole sector of higher education.

**Meredith Benjamin** 40:27

That's really good advice. Both of you guys. Thank you for the practicalities, are always I think the piece that people our age, like, don't understand and can't comprehend.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 40:39

So I'd like for our final two questions to jump back in time, or have you jump back in time and address Sarah and Sheahan, of when you were at Grinnell now sort of think about what would you like to have known\what advice would you give yourself?

**Sheahan Virgin** 40:57

I'm not trying to be glib in my answer. But I would actually tell my self from 14 years ago, I would say, be sure that you have fun, because it's easy when you're in college to think that this period of your life, and which is a relatively fun period will kind of last forever, and it doesn't. And college is just a really unique and special opportunity that you should cherish. It's easy to get lost in the academics and in the service that you're doing to stress about papers and that type of thing. And those things are important. I mean, as a professor, I'm I clearly think your papers are important. And I might even have to grade them. But you should also make sure that you're finding friends and going to events and having a good time as well.

**Sarah Purcell** 41:42

Yeah, I think I would have to tell my Grinnell self now 30 years ago, so a long time ago, just to keep building all those relationships with people. That's really what matters. And we do that oftentimes as Grinnellians, but it really is something to cherish. You know, I'm still friends with a lot of people from 30 years ago, and that also can help you in in the future to just think about your relationships to other people. And to really cultivate those and make that really important and kind of the center of your life rather than I don't know, something more faceless, or focusing less on the grind, and more on the people I think is really important.

**Meredith Benjamin** 42:20

Well, so our final question for you guys. We're really curious, where do you see your work going? Where do you see your research going? Or your teaching going? Is there anything that you're really looking forward to in the future?

**Sarah Purcell** 42:35

it's been a it's a little tough right now, I have to admit, because I was talking all about the, the intensity of going to all those archives, and I haven't been able to go to them lately, because of COVID. I am looking forward to getting over my imagination being stifled by the pandemic someday. But yeah, I'm starting a new project, which kind of brings together the some of the themes I'm interested in and is looking at the Bunker Hill Monument, which is a revolutionary war monument through time up until today, looking at controversies around that monument. And as a way to kind of comment on monuments in general think just for me more teaching at Grinnell, I'll be here for the next 20 years to you know, I can aspire to be like Professor Moyer, who has affected multiple generations. So I think that's that I'll do I'll be here if you need me, I think.

**Sheahan Virgin** 43:23

well, I probably won't be here if you need me, in that I am a short term hire. So, you know, the answer is I really don't know what my future holds. That's both frightening, but also exciting. I, my immediate future will be looking for a more permanent position. Some things I am thinking about is no matter where I end up, there are other courses that I would like to design, I'd love to teach the presidency, the US presidency, and maybe even a comparative class on on executives as well. And then in terms of my my research, like I said, I have two papers that I'm still working on. I'd like to get those moving this summer a little more and hopefully get them submitted to to journals.

**Meredith Benjamin** 44:06

Well, exciting things ahead. Exciting things ahead for you guys. And hopefully for us

**Sarah Purcell** 44:12

and you all too. Yeah.

**Meredith Benjamin** 44:14

Yeah.

**Sarah Purcell** 44:16

So good.

**Meredith Benjamin** 44:16

Well thank you guys so much.

**Sarah Purcell** 44:18

Thank you

**Meredith Benjamin** 44:19

for making time to speak with us today.

**Sarah Purcell** 44:21

I look forward to hopefully seeing you more in person next year. So thanks a lot.

**Sheahan Virgin** 44:26

Yeah, I appreciate you as well.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 44:27

This episode was produced by Nicholas Lampietti. Our executive producer is Katie Kriegel. For more information, send us an email at going forth@grinnell.edu Find us on Instagram at going forth podcast and on Twitter at going forth pod