# Natalie Berkman

Literary scholar and higher-education administrator in France

Natalie Berkman is an American literary scholar and higher-education administrator who lives and works in France. Trained in mathematics, creative writing and French literature at Johns Hopkins, she completed a Princeton doctorate in 2018 on the mathematical practices of the Oulipo literary collective. Her subsequent employment has included academic leadership at SAE Institute Paris, instructional design at ESSEC Business School, and a national academic role at Quest Education Group. By 2026 she was directing academic operations and research at ISIPCA, the Versailles school that trains people for the perfume, cosmetics and flavour industries. She is also president of the Association of Princeton Graduate Alumni. [1]; [2]; [3].

Her professional responsibility is to organize education: curricula, teachers, academic processes and research priorities. Calling her a perfumer would misidentify both her training and her work. The school’s French governance page gives her title as Directrice des opérations académiques et de la Recherche; Princeton uses “provost.” She serves within an executive committee headed by general director Nicolas Salado. This is a career in the institutions that enable specialist practice, alongside a continuing scholarly life of her own. [4]; [5].

[External image / 外部圖片] Portrait of Natalie Berkman
Natalie Berkman in the photograph accompanying the biographical page. Princeton University GradFUTURES; photographer not stated · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

## Buffalo, Baltimore, and discovering what she wanted to study

Berkman identifies Buffalo, New York, as her original home. Her undergraduate years took her to Baltimore, where she combined three subjects that universities generally organize separately: mathematics, creative writing and French literature. The combination was not frictionless. In a 2017 essay she recalled arguing with the registrar about whether a triple major was possible even after completing most of the coursework and obtaining the required signatures. The episode matters less as a story of heroic interdisciplinarity than as an ordinary administrative obstacle: an intellectually coherent set of interests did not fit neatly into the institution’s categories. [6].

She had chosen Hopkins partly for its strengths in mathematics and writing and partly for music; she played flute seriously. French became consequential through experience rather

than school marks. A family visit to Paris exposed the distance between succeeding in classroom French and speaking it with actual people. A French teaching assistant introduced her to Oulipo, whose authors included writers she had already encountered in creative-writing courses. Study in Paris and conversations with advisers eventually made French doctoral study seem a better home for these interests than either mathematics graduate school or an MFA. [7].

Her student journalism supplies a contemporary record of this cultural life. In March 2008 she covered a Peabody recital for the Hopkins News-Letter, interviewing students combining music with chemistry, engineering, anthropology and other fields. She paid attention to rehearsal, travel between campuses and workloads, as well as performances. In October 2009 she again encouraged Hopkins students to attend Peabody concerts, describing individual instrumental passages and the student audience's response. These are modest early publications, but they show her already writing about the labour, institutional arrangements and listening that make artistic life possible. [8]; [9].

Those reviews also complicate a retrospective picture in which a future experimental-literature scholar must always have enjoyed experimental art. Reviewing an organ, voice, percussion and saxophone concert in April 2008, Berkman frankly preferred recognizable melodies and older repertoire. She nevertheless reported a listener's enthusiasm for the same music. The article documents a young listener's taste at a particular moment; it is not evidence of her present aesthetics. It leaves room for an actual person to learn and change, rather than treating every youthful preference as the seed of her later career. [10].

## Princeton: research, teaching, and a life outside the dissertation

Berkman began Princeton graduate study in 2011. She later described arriving at twenty-one, spending a first summer in Avignon and enjoying its theatre festival. During her second year, her father developed advanced melanoma and died while she was preparing for examinations and teaching. In her own account, this bereavement changed the priority she assigned to a future academic job relative to the rest of life. [11]; [12].

The departmental dissertation register dates The OuLiPo's Mathematical Project (1960–2014) to May 2018 and identifies David Bellos as her adviser. Bellos's work as a translator of Georges Perec made him an unusually suitable reader for a dissertation requiring both literary and mathematical understanding. Other committee members needed more mathematical orientation. Berkman described beginning a prospectus presentation with a simple proof about sums of consecutive integers, then connecting its abstraction to formal literary practices. Her problem was pedagogical as well as scholarly: how to make the reasoning accessible without assuming either mathematical expertise or incapacity. [13]; [14].

Princeton also gave her work beyond solitary research. She was a Writing Center fellow, a resident graduate student in Wilson College and a PIIRS graduate fellow. Later professional

biographies record her presidency of her department’s Graduate Liaison Committee and participation in the Modern Language Association’s career-development proseminar. These roles involved students, committees, writing and institutional service; they belonged to the doctoral years themselves, not to a set of competencies she discovered only after graduating. [15]; [16].

## What the Oulipo research actually involved

Oulipo abbreviates Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, usually translated as Workshop of Potential Literature. Founded in 1960, the group investigates writing through formal constraints and mathematical structures. A constraint might regulate which letters can appear, how words are replaced or how sections can be combined. Berkman’s research asks what the mathematics contributes to composition and reading, and how particular techniques emerged historically. [17]; [18]; [19].

The resulting monograph, OuLiPo and the Mathematics of Literature, appeared with Peter Lang in 2022, in the Modern French Identities series. Its chapters move through set theory, algebra, combinatorics, algorithms and geometry, followed by an annex on the related painting workshop OuPeinPo. The publisher describes a method combining the group’s first thirty years of meeting minutes with the history of mathematics, close reading, study of textual genesis and digital experiments. Her 2019 Peter Lang Young Scholars award was for the book proposal; calling it simply a dissertation prize loses that publishing-stage distinction. [20].

The acknowledgments locate this work within a network of assistance. Alongside Bellos, Berkman names Christy Wampole and Arielle Saiber; technical adviser Cliff Wulfman; historian of mathematics Michael Barany; and archival collaborators Hélène Campaignolle-Catel and Camille Bloomfield. Oulipians including Michèle Audin, Paul Fournel and Olivier Salon supplied discussions and archive access. OuPeinPo artists contributed constrained illustrations. The book thus depended on literary mentorship, technical support, archival access and living practitioners, as well as on her individual argument. [21].

One research environment was Princeton’s Center for Digital Humanities. Its Digital Oulipo project lists Berkman as project director, Wulfman as technical lead, and sponsorship in 2016–17. The project developed three interactive demonstrations: combinatorial sonnets, a branching narrative and a procedure for replacing nouns. These were experimental ways of investigating the texts. The institutional credit matters: a literary doctoral student learning programming worked with a specialist who could help translate between conceptual questions and implementation. [22].

Queneau’s Cent mille milliards de poèmes illustrates the mechanics. Ten sonnets each supply fourteen interchangeable lines, with corresponding lines constrained to preserve rhyme and grammatical compatibility. Choosing one of ten possibilities at each position yields $10^{14}$ possible poems. In her November 2015 development note, Berkman objected to

digital versions that replaced the printed book’s manipulation of individual strips with a single random-poem button. She wanted the reader’s handling of lines to remain meaningful. She also described the tedium of debugging: the conceptual design of an edition and the apparently minor work of making it function were inseparable parts of the investigation. [23].

Her April 2016 account follows the next learning step. Having worked through Learn Python the Hard Way, she programmed Queneau’s Un conte à votre façon, a story organized by choices. An initial version could move through the narrative but did not integrate its diagram convincingly. With Wulfman’s guidance, she rebuilt it around nodes and edges and used Graphviz to display a reader’s route. Coding became a way to inspect narrative structure: a diagram could expose paths that the reader had taken, refused or never seen. This was a small program, with identifiable tools and revisions, rather than a vague adoption of “digital innovation.” [24].

Her 2017 Digital Humanities Quarterly article is unusually useful because it records limitations. The sonnet generator produced poems from numerical keys based on a birthday, location or computer identifier, but she judged its reader participation unsatisfactory. For the noun-substitution experiment, she used English to avoid complications of French gender, then explored natural-language processing and dictionaries assembled from authors’ vocabulary. The scholarly gain lay partly in encountering what automation concealed or made awkward. She did not claim that every functioning digital edition was an adequate interpretation, or that programming superseded close reading. [25].

The work also circulated in French-language scholarship. Her 2021 Études littéraires article, “L’Oulipo et la géométrie : l’étrange utilité de la table des matières,” compares Italo Calvino’s Le città invisibili and Michèle Audin’s Mai quai Conti. Its published abstract describes geometric arrangements used to address material that resists their order. This extends her inquiry beyond one-off algorithmic tricks to the relationship between large literary forms and the subjects they contain. The abstract supports that characterization; the full article was not accessible in this research session. [26].

Independent reception offers a check on the author’s and publisher’s accounts. Reviewing the monograph for H-France in January 2023, Warren Motte treats its attention to mathematics as a substantial contribution to Oulipo studies. He also questions a definition of mathematics broad enough to include nearly any act of abstraction: if its boundaries become too loose, the specificity of the explanation weakens. That is a relevant reservation about the book’s argument, not a reason to dismiss its archival and textual work. It helps identify what is at stake in her scholarship: demonstrating precise mathematical relationships, rather than attaching the word “mathematical” to literary pattern in general. [27].

## Choosing Paris, and taking responsibility at SAE

Berkman’s move into administration grew alongside an academic job search. In her 2021 interview, she described consulting for Crimson Education on admissions essays and teaching and consulting for the Chinese education-technology company ViaX while still a doctoral student. She also sought career advice from Amy Pszczolkowski at Princeton Career Services and joined the first University Administrative Fellowship cohort. During research in Paris she met her future husband. Long-distance life made geography a practical condition of employment. In her final year she considered academic and nonacademic positions, received postdoctoral offers, and chose a Paris job. The opening advertised “Academic Coordinator”; the responsibility turned out to be much greater. [28].

A contemporary April 2020 Princeton event identifies her as SAE Paris’s Directrice pédagogique and records continuing consulting work for ViaX and Crimson. SAE is a creative-media school; this placed her among people teaching professional production rather than within a French-literature department. Her work history therefore includes both an institutional post and outside education work. Public sources do not establish her salaries, consulting fees, book earnings or household finances. Employment titles and clients identify the activities through which she earned a living without supplying a reliable income estimate. [29].

The pandemic made the operational character of this job visible. On 19 March 2020, she published advice sent to SAE teachers, first in French and then English. She asked instructors to make course sequence explicit, rehearse the video-conferencing software, use smaller discussion groups and prepare their workspace before class. A moderator would help with technical trouble; Canvas could support exercises and contact beyond the live session. This is a record of emergency teaching support, not evidence that moving online was painless or that every practical production skill could be taught remotely. Her prior online teaching informed a response to a sudden institutional problem. [30].

Her bilingual communication is part of the work, not merely a résumé accomplishment. The same guidance had to be legible to teachers and students in a French campus belonging to an international educational organization. Organizing a class, explaining its order, anticipating technical failure and maintaining participation are concrete administrative acts. They also resemble questions she had previously asked as a teacher and writer: what must a newcomer know, which sequence helps, and what does an interface hide? This continuity is an interpretation of her documented practices, not a claim that an Oulipo dissertation automatically qualified her to manage a school.

At SAE, Berkman found herself second to the campus manager, responsible for the academic side of the institution. She recalled being overwhelmed, giving herself a year to see whether the work suited her, and resolving its major problems within that period. The claims about improvement are retrospective self-assessment, but the responsibility was real and larger than the advertised title suggested. [31].

## ESSEC: designing learning with a team

By August 2023, Princeton's report on her alumni residency identifies her as an instructional design manager at ESSEC Business School, leading instructional designers and production professionals. Instructional design means developing the materials, activities, assessment and delivery arrangements through which someone learns; it need not mean being the person who possesses the subject expertise or delivers every lesson. Berkman described enjoying adult teaching and helping others teach through materials, classroom technology and asynchronous courses. Her role placed pedagogical judgment within a production team. [32].

An October 2023 article she wrote for ESSEC's pedagogy lab gives a detailed example. For MoodleMoot Global in Barcelona, her team presented small private online courses serving approximately 6,000 students annually. Nadia Kelmouss, Erwan Thomas and Marion Marx appear as named collaborators. Course landing pages standardized orientation, outcomes, assessment and frequently asked questions. Genially allowed either sequential or freer navigation; Canva introduced modules and time expectations; H5P interactive books structured activities and progress. The approach separated formative work, intended to support learning, from summative assessment such as examinations, peer review or simulations. [33].

The article also reflects the immediate pressure of generative AI. It described a then-current browser extension able to answer Moodle quizzes through GPT-4 and explained why the team preferred another activity format in that setting. That is evidence of a particular 2023 design response, not a durable guarantee against cheating. The example joins pedagogical theory, platform choices, assessment and colleagues' production labour. Its positive reception is reported by the team; the article does not provide an independent controlled evaluation of improved learning outcomes. [34].

The move also required learning tools beyond those used for literary research. In a July 2024 interview with the commercial instructional-design training provider IDOL, Berkman said its training introduced her to Articulate Rise and Storyline, Genially, Canva and Vyond. She revised her portfolio and professional presentation. This account is promotional in setting, but its specificity is useful: classroom experience and a doctorate did not eliminate the need to learn an industry's software, conventions and portfolio expectations. [35].

## Quest: academic operations across specialist campuses

By the same July 2024 interview, Berkman had recently joined Quest Education Group. She described applying spontaneously during its expansion, proposing a broader strategy role and obtaining a position created around that proposal. The group included Gaming Campus's business, art and technology schools and Guardia's cybersecurity schools, operating in Lyon, Paris and Bordeaux. A Princeton biography identifies her as national academic director, a member of the senior executive team reporting to the CEO and cofounder, with responsibility for academic operations and consistent quality across sites. This is a different scale from an individual online course or a single specialist campus. [36];

[37].

Her French departure post, written after approximately a year at Quest, names the work more concretely: renewal of Qualiopi certification, RNCP strategy and submissions, changing assessment practices, and developing employability modules for gaming and cybersecurity students. She thanks national pedagogical directors Karen Faucon-Lo Pinto, Emilie Ah-Nième, Delphine Carlier and Nicolas Sabben, as well as local colleagues and cofounders. These are collaborations across an organization, not projects authored solely by Berkman. Qualiopi concerns training-provider quality certification; RNCP is France's national register of professional qualifications. Their appearance in her account explains why curriculum leadership included documentary and accreditation work alongside teaching design. [38]; [39]; [40].

The dated July 2024 interview and the later departure account establish Quest as a former role. An undated Princeton biography still presenting it as her current job should not override ISIPCA's 2026 governance page. This chronology matters because career profiles can otherwise turn a series of actual jobs into contradictory simultaneous positions. The accessible record establishes the sequence more securely than every precise employment start and end month.

## ISIPCA: learning a new industry while organizing its education

Berkman's first-year reflection at ISIPCA places her arrival around 2025. It reports hiring more than ten staff across two academic teams, reorganizing academic operations around perfume, cosmetics and flavours, modularizing programs with subject specialists and preparing a research roadmap and budget. She also describes taking the school's own perfume summer course. These are her reported achievements and learning activities, not independently audited outcomes. They make the distinction between administrator and perfumer especially clear: she is responsible for organizing a specialist school while continuing to acquire knowledge of the disciplines it teaches. [41].

The institution she joined has a history and governance of its own. Founded by Jean-Jacques Guerlain, ISIPCA combines scientific, technical and commercial preparation for fragrance-related industries. It belongs, with La Fabrique, to the École Supérieure de Production de la Mode et du Luxe within the Paris Île-de-France Chamber of Commerce's educational organization. Its executive committee includes academic, commercial and other responsibilities. Berkman's position is therefore supported and constrained by a larger organization, a board, executive colleagues and established disciplinary expertise. [42].

The laboratories help a nonspecialist understand what has to be scheduled, supported and taught. Cosmetics students formulate products and examine properties such as pH, viscosity and stability. Perfume teaching includes both fine fragrance and scents for functional products. Flavour laboratories address food applications. Analytical facilities use

chromatography and other instruments; sensory work requires trained human evaluation and a shared descriptive vocabulary. These are school capabilities, not inventions attributable to Berkman. Their variety helps explain why an academic operations director must coordinate with subject experts rather than impose a single generic teaching format. [43].

Education here also depends on companies as workplaces. Alternance combines school study with employment in a host organization, and students receive pay under their employment arrangements. In April 2026 the school reported 109 recruitment interviews involving 39 candidates and six industry houses: Givaudan, MANE, IFF, Takasago, Firmenich and SOZIO. Preparation included CVs, interview practice and professional profiles. These figures describe a reported event, not eventual placements or Berkman's personal results. They nevertheless show an important practical condition of the curriculum: access to employers helps students obtain the work experience around which training is organized. [44]; [45].

The school's collaborations extend beyond an employment pipeline. In July 2026 it described MOKU, a brand developed over two years by seventy students from ISIPCA, La Fabrique and GOBELINS Paris, combining fragrance and cosmetics with fashion and visual creation. The account credits teachers, industry supporters, Brigitte Gotti, Nicolas Salado and three student directors—Laurinne Mendez, Guillaume Petit and Pauline Jegousse. It does not identify Berkman as the project's creator. As institutional context, however, MOKU shows the kinds of cross-school professional simulation operating around her academic role. [46].

Research is an explicit part of her remit. CY Transfer's announcement of a September 2026 presentation names her as director of academic operations and research, presenting ISIPCA's scientific platform to potential partners. The announced subjects include analytical, extraction and sensory facilities and collaboration with companies on research and development. The announcement establishes an outward-facing research responsibility; it does not by itself prove that the event occurred or that any commercial collaboration resulted. [47].

Her 2026 Princeton profile says that she began at ISIPCA by examining the school's needs and forming short-, medium- and long-term plans. She interprets this work through habits cultivated in literary study: context, competing narratives and careful analysis before action. ISIPCA subsequently republished the Princeton recognition in French. The two articles are not independent evaluations of her management. They are evidence of how she and her institutions describe the relationship between her humanities education and current work. [48]; [49].

## Remaining a scholar, mentoring others, and making a home

The move to France did not end Berkman's research or her connection to Princeton.

During a three-day alumni residency in August 2023, she held individual meetings with graduate students and presented on publishing outside a tenure-track appointment. She emphasized that speaking with doctorate holders in other careers had helped her imagine possibilities unavailable in incomplete departmental placement records. She also said her own opportunities had come through unsolicited applications to job advertisements, while acknowledging that employers recognized the value of her Princeton degree. Her account therefore combines initiative with an institutional credential that carried weight abroad. [50].

Princeton’s 2024 Clio Hall Award recognized her contribution to graduate-student professional development: mentoring, speaking and participation in the alumni-in-residence program. It was recognition for this institutional service, rather than a claim that a specialist professional association had evaluated her school management. By August 2026 she welcomed incoming students as APGA president; the Graduate School’s orientation report confirms the role. Alumni leadership has become another part of her practice, connecting current doctoral students to people working in universities, companies, government and other settings. [51]; [52].

Her public argument about doctoral work is specific. In a professional post she objects to describing doctoral abilities as if they must become something else before an employer can use them: researchers already manage projects, teach, organize committees and communicate complex material. Yet her own additional software training also shows that experience does not remove the need for new learning. The useful claim is that substantial capacities already exist and can be articulated in another workplace—not that every doctorate provides all the expertise needed for every job. [53]; [54].

Her life in France is also a family and ordinary working life. In a reflection seven years after graduation, she acknowledged feeling failure when she left the expected academic path despite receiving offers. Looking back, she described teaching in several French institutions, publishing, starting a family and buying an apartment in Paris. This is her evaluation of a life she chose, not evidence that all doctoral graduates would find the same opportunities or prefer the same outcome. Geography, partnership, employment and scholarship appear together rather than as separable career variables. [55].

Another public post records a dinner cruise on the Seine with colleague Helen Pattio Combe, a benefit of belonging to the larger chamber-of-commerce organization. Berkman contrasts that evening’s pleasure with the routine of commuting, work, meals and sleep, and recalls how unlikely such a life would have seemed while growing up. It is a small, concrete detail: she inhabits the city that once exposed the limits of her spoken French, and the institution she manages is also a workplace with colleagues and occasional social occasions. [56].

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Research current to 3 October 2026. Links connect to primary documents, interviews, contemporary student writing, institutional records and a scholarly review. Undated or dynamically updated biographies are read against dated records; personal recollections and employer claims are identified as such. No private beliefs, income figures or unverified

management outcomes have been inferred.

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1. Princeton, 20 August 2026↩
2. GradFUTURES professional biography↩
3. ISIPCA governance↩
4. ISIPCA governance↩
5. Princeton, 2026↩
6. Berkman, “Math in the Humanities?”, 2017↩
7. Conversation with Hellen Wainaina, recorded 2023↩
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9. “Students show off prowess at Peabody Symphony,” 2009↩
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