

# Trained for Nothing



Why do we still structure doctoral training around tenure-track positions in universities? The PhD can lead to so many other places.

BY JOSEPH HEATHCOTT



---

*Joseph Heathcott is assistant professor of American studies and a graduate faculty member in the Department of American Studies at Saint Louis University. He is currently a fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies.*

**D**reams deferred and hopes dashed make for heart-wrenching personal narratives, as we see weekly in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. No other trade publication reveals such pathos in the industry it watches. Stories abound of tenure cases capriciously and unfairly decided, budgets shredded owing to fiscal austerity, departments rent by raging canon wars, and burdens borne unequally by faculty members. Few topics, however, elicit as much anxiety as the crisis in the academic job market.

Week after week, graduate students, adjunct instructors, and recently hired tenure-track professors recount harrowing stories of applicants who go in search of tenure-track jobs only to find themselves locked into a series of low-wage temporary positions. I have been moved many times

It will take sustained pressure from multiple stakeholders to redress employment grievances in today's university.

Still, just and equitable employment policies will mitigate only half of the problem. The number of positions available in higher education might rise slightly, but the number of applicants will remain high. A fundamental problem will remain: departments continue to run doctoral programs on an outdated guild model in which professors and matriculants tacitly agree that the only worthy outcome for the apprentice is to land a journeyman position in academia, eventually becoming a tenured master. No amount of restructuring can address this problem. It is time we re-evaluate our system of doctoral training to exorcise the guild model once and for all.

I am not suggesting that we replace the guild model with a bland careerism that reduces graduate education to an

## The time for witness is past; it is now time to act. The tenacity of the job crisis means that it is time to rethink the nature of graduate training in America.

by the witness of the talented men and women who spill their guts to the paper of record for higher education. Yet the time for witness is past; it is now time to act. The tenacity of the job crisis means that it is time to rethink the nature of graduate training in America.

### Dimensions of the Crisis

The numerical mismatch between seekers and jobs in academe is now well known, and it cannot be explained through anecdotes about behavior. For most applicants to any given tenure-track position, rejection has little to do with biography; it is rarely the result of inadequacy, poor preparation, personal defects, or wearing a bow tie to your interview (which I was warned against doing by well-meaning advisers).

Rather, the job crisis is a structural problem, produced by the introduction of scarcity through real, identifiable, and thus reversible policy decisions. The contour and durability of the crisis are shaped by state legislative priorities, tanking endowments, declining endowment payout rates, and blockbuster investments in campus plant that divert funds from classroom instruction. Within these parameters, university and college administrators seek to balance budgets on the backs of a growing casual labor pool. With high levels of PhD production and a shrinking number of tenure lines in American universities, academe has settled in for a long period of struggle over the terms of intellectual labor.

exercise in job training. Graduate programs must not aim to produce workers alone; they must also help shape students into balanced, well-adjusted colleagues capable of living good lives. A sense of passionate vocation once called all of us to be historians or anthropologists or theologians. It is around this sense of vocation that we should reorient graduate education. After all, there are many places to practice our disciplines—many potential vocations—and the academy is not necessarily the best. We need to root out the assumptions embedded within the guild system that make the tenure-track academic job the central trajectory of doctoral training.

### Purpose of the PhD

Dismantling the guild system requires that we unravel the underlying correspondence between the PhD and the professoriate. Obviously, the doctorate is the gateway degree to a career in academia, but it is also a gateway to other possibilities.<sup>1</sup> Why, then, do we structure doctoral training so closely around the increasingly ephemeral reward of a tenure-track position in a university or college? On balance, little in the way of ordinary PhD training prepares graduate students to become professors. The PhD qualifies us to do original research, but it does not necessarily prepare us to teach. It qualifies us to undertake large and complex projects, but not necessarily to become university faculty members. It qualifies us to develop conceptual frameworks and

to contribute original work to our disciplines, but not necessarily to be good mentors, collaborators, and colleagues. It is a necessary but insufficient condition for the reproduction of the professoriate.

If we want to dismantle the guild system, we are going to have to recast the purpose of the PhD, broadening its scope as a degree. Doing so will require graduate educators to embed doctoral training within a much broader range of professional possibilities. To do this, we need to rethink our role along two lines: first, as intellectual mentors and colleagues to our students and, second, as professional mentors willing to do the work needed to introduce our students to multiple possibilities and to help them succeed in whatever fields they pursue. These tasks may take many of us outside the mentoring roles to which we are accustomed, but the futures of our students make it worth the effort.

### Active Mentoring

The core purpose of graduate education is to train graduate students to master disciplines, conceptual frameworks, and research skills. Graduate seminars help in this training, but a vital graduate curriculum also includes constant, active men-

## We need to rethink graduate training not by tacking on a few alternatives at the end of the curriculum, but by changing the basis of graduate student formation.

toring of graduate students. Unfortunately, we have mistaken master-apprentice relationships for mentoring. Molding a graduate student in our own image through a period of indentured servitude does not constitute mentoring. Although our primary task is to model intellectual rigor and commitment, mentorship also includes the work that we do to nurture aspirations, accentuate native talents, impart skills, build confidence, and direct energies without crushing a set of goals that may be different from our own.

Within the past few years, many administrators and graduate educators have mobilized to incorporate training, programming, and support for the pursuit of so-called alternative careers into graduate education. This well-intentioned approach only reinforces the sanctity of the tenure-track job. After years of training students to behave and think like professors, the idea that we can shove them into "alternative careers" looks like shutting the barn door after the stampede. We need to rethink graduate training not by tacking on a few alternatives at the end of the curriculum, but by changing the basis of graduate student formation.

### New Way to Educate

Rethinking graduate education will require a substantial commitment of time and resources and trial and error. In the November–December 2002 issue of *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, Jody Nyquist, former director of the "Re-Envisioning the PhD" project of the Pew

Charitable Trusts, warns that doctoral training must remain a pursuit tailored to individual interests, needs, and passions. Nevertheless, she concludes that responsible doctoral training should convey a small but powerful set of core competencies: disciplinary knowledge; vocational knowledge; ethical conduct and professional responsibility; communicative ability; pedagogic skills, broadly construed; and an understanding of the value of diversity.<sup>3</sup>

Departments and programs, particularly in the often-understaffed humanities, cannot accomplish these goals on their own. Students, faculty, directors of graduate studies, chairs, deans of colleges and graduate schools, vice presidents of research, and offices of university presidents must work together to strengthen and broaden the PhD. Schools must pool resources to create teaching centers, career and vocation offices, professional development workshops, ethics panels, multidisciplinary conferences, retreats, internships, externships, and other opportunities. Doctoral education is, after all, a self-organizing system—no one is in charge, but many have a stake in the outcome.

Departments, however, have a central role in one crucial arena: the culture of graduate education. The most limiting

aspect of doctoral training, the guild model, is embedded in departmental culture—from the organization of the curriculum and exam structure to the ways in which faculty conduct seminars and approach mentoring relationships. The guild model cannot be undone through institutional fiat; it must be challenged at the level of the department, where we have the most leverage to make changes.

Graduate educators should orient incoming students extensively, describing each stage in the program, relating the components of mastery at each stage, and discussing the criteria for overall success. Faculty members also should explain to graduate students the procedures used to make important decisions about admissions, funding, curriculum, advising, and the allocation of resources. Graduate programs should establish a coordinated, uniform dispersal of information, bolstered by clear feedback channels and opportunities for dialogue on process.

Graduate educators should demystify the academy as well, introducing graduate students to the system of university governance and explaining to them how the institution handles issues of finance, policy, and development—in other words, they should teach graduate students how their workplace functions. Faculty members should also lay bare their own work lives, including distribution of efforts among research, teaching, and service; the meaning of research, teaching, and service; and structures of internal and external reward. Departments could offer an extensive orientation

session, a weekend retreat, a series of in-service workshops, or a course or cluster of courses on these important professional concerns.

The debates in higher education over the nature and purpose of graduate education should be part of the curriculum. Exposing graduate students to opinions, ideas, and positions on doctoral education socializes them into the profession and their discipline. We should train graduate students to recognize the many and varied stakeholders in higher education, not to produce cynics, but rather to make the mechanics of the institutions transparent. Shielding graduate students from this information disempowers them and cheats us out of valuable future allies. It also puts our students at a disadvantage as they move out into the world, take jobs, and forge professional lives.

We should also be ready to scrutinize the received traditions of graduate education. For example, it is time to rethink the tired system of qualifying exams—the seemingly unbreakable heritage of guild hazing that we put our graduate students through merely because we had to go through it. Qualification exercises should evaluate students in the skills and knowledge sets most closely associated with their discipline and the profession.

Unfortunately, nearly all exam processes place students in unnatural arrangements, demanding that they model skills (short-term bursts of test taking, for example) that they will never need in professional life. Instead, exams could be in the form of writing projects that are essential to student development, such as an extensive literature review or an original evidentiary argument suitable for publication in a refereed journal. Rather than sit for six hours regurgitating answers to preselected test questions, students could be involved in generating theoretical, methodological, and evidentiary problems that they pursue over the course of a semester or year.

### Different Models

Most important, however, faculty should expose graduate students to as many models as possible of satisfying vocations and professional lives. This exposure begins in the university itself. In the best of worlds, a student's adviser will serve as a model of the ethical scholar and an engaged citizen of the academy and the profession. Most students, however, will need to see many versions of the academic life, from other professors to administrators, librarians, center directors, and clinical faculty.

Moreover, exposure to professional models must go well beyond the academy. Graduate students benefit tremendously from contact with museum curators, archivists, consultants, journalists, editors, publishers, agency directors, high school teachers, community college administrators, cultural resources specialists, and other professionals. This contact can come in the form of classroom visits, special workshops, lecture series, or courses. Whether students are bound for the tenure track or for paths beyond the academy, they will grow substantially from interaction with people who have taken their graduate degrees in a variety of directions.

The formation of graduate students must, however, remain an intellectual endeavor first and foremost; it cannot

be equated with job training. The PhD is a research degree, a marker of significant intellectual accomplishment, and a mode of knowledge production. Yet it does us little good as graduate educators to pretend that the PhD is divorced from the realities of professions, institutions, and stakeholders. We should embrace vocation as a core value of our enterprise and nurture the passions, aspirations, and hard-nosed skills of students. This goal can be accomplished without displacing the intellectual ground of graduate education and can in fact become part of it.

As a graduate teacher in a Jesuit university, I embrace the mission to educate “the whole person.” The guild model is incompatible with this mission. Treating graduate students as whole persons means seeing them as much more than just future tenure-track faculty. Graduate students who are disempowered, anxious, nervous, and sick with worry often reflect divided, disarticulated, poorly conceived and run programs that treat students as itinerant, one-dimensional characters.

Our efforts to clarify purposes and processes should provide a fuller context for the development of each student's aspirations, grounding the student more thoroughly in the business of his or her own education. Ultimately, when students enter job markets, this broader training will serve them well. Although we cannot guarantee any student a job, we can organize graduate training to better prepare students for the challenges that they will face. Most important, we can restructure the system of graduate education around a richer set of possibilities, with a fuller integration of both disciplinary knowledge and vocational agility.

For much of the twentieth century, the guild model provided a comforting buffer against the dramatic transformations of higher education. But PhD programs in the humanities can no longer function as apprenticeships and remain ethical. The professions have grown far too complex for our hidebound models of training. We must retain what works well in the PhD—the rigorous development of knowledge and research—and jettison what no longer works. ☞

### Notes

1. I highly recommend the following resources about alternative careers, but with a major caveat—they clearly, if unintentionally, reinforce the auxiliary status of jobs outside of the professoriate—“Sellout: A Resource for PhDs Considering Careers Beyond the University,” <http://www.ironstring.com/sellout>; Margaret Newhouse, *Outside the Ivory Tower: A Guide for Academics Considering Alternative Careers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Maggie Debelius and Susan Basalla, *So What Are You Going to Do With That? A Guide for MAs and PhDs Seeking Careers Outside the Academy* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001).

2. Jody Nyquist, a former associate dean at the University of Washington, directed the “Re-Envisioning the PhD” project until her retirement in 2003. The project examined the state of graduate education in America and presented best practices. Much of the material produced by the project is available at <http://www.grad.washington.edu/envision/>. Other national initiatives include the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation's “Responsive PhD”; “Preparing Future Faculty,” an initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts and the National Science Foundation; and the Carnegie Foundation's “Initiative on the Doctorate.”