

‘Graduate Education in the Humanities’

A Response to
Marc Baer

William Pannacker

I am grateful for Professor Baer’s response to my essay and pleased to find several points of intersection in our positions, but I think we also disagree strongly on some fundamental issues.

First, we agree that students should be concerned about accumulating substantial debt in their training for academic positions. No doubt, the elimination of loan subsidies for graduate students as of 2012 has compounded that concern. With so many graduates facing uncertain employment prospects and accumulating so much nondischargeable, compounding debt, some economists are speculating about the existence of a trillion-dollar student-loan bubble that will have serious consequences for higher education and the economy as a whole.¹

Professor Baer is right to advise prospective graduate students to look for programs that will allow them to “break even,” presumably because they have been offered a fellowship that provides a tuition waiver and a stipend. There may be some programs where that is a realistic prospect, but stipends, in most cases, have not kept pace with inflation or the high cost of living in major cities. Even with a fellowship, most graduate students need to borrow money and spend a great deal of time teaching lower-level courses—far more than is required to learn the skills needed to hit the ground running as an assistant professor. One result of that is the increasing time it takes to earn a graduate degree; the average in my field, English, is close to a decade. With programs that take so long to complete, opportunity costs are significant, including the foregone income of those years and the impact that can have on one’s retirement savings, as well as the accumulation of relevant experience that will be needed to find a stable

position outside of academe. Most college graduates establish themselves in careers in their twenties, generally before they have dependents. The graduates of doctoral programs often have to negotiate an entry-level labor market at a more advanced stage of life with an even larger amount of debt. Placement in a top-ranked graduate program is not a guarantee of a position in academe; as I noted in the last essay, Yale only places about half of its graduates.

We seem to agree that professors should be honest with their students, but I do not think we should be “brutally honest”; I would never tell a student not to go to graduate school because I think he or she is “mediocre.” Undergraduate accomplishments and test scores can be reflections of privilege as much as indicators of ability, and the path to tenure depends, most of all, on the kind of persistence that is hard to sustain without a strong sense of calling. Since, as Professor Baer says, “I am not God,” I simply encourage students to learn as much as possible about the vocations they are considering—the positive and the negative. If one decides to apply to a graduate program, I will do everything I can to support that decision, including helping him or her develop toward becoming an excellent candidate. In one case, that has meant meeting with a student for more than seven years after she graduated from my department.

I think Professor Baer has a right to be proud of the Pew Society at Hope College; I have advised some of its members. I think the Emerging Scholars Network and the Lilly Fellows also make positive contributions to the process of vocational discernment, and I agree that the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is a marvelous antidote to the isolation and anomie experienced by so many graduate students. I fully support organizations that seek to cultivate students of different backgrounds—including Christians of all kinds—to ensure the diversity of higher education. I would not want to see a disproportionate decline in the percentage of Christian graduate students any more than I would want to see a disproportionate decline in the participation of African-Americans. It is unclear to me why Professor Baer seems to think that my position on graduate education would affect Christian students more than others.

One reason that so many humanities students want to go to graduate school is that they have not had as much experience outside of academe. For that reason, I think we need to work harder to help our students see how they can match their passions to the world’s needs, to paraphrase the theologian Frederick Buechner. Professor Baer responds to my concern about professors lacking enough recent professional experience to give students good advice about nonacademic careers by listing the former careers of several members of his department. He does not address the importance of ongoing engagement with a profession about which one is giving advice. He does not say anything about the attitudes of such professors

toward careers that they have left nor does he respond to the issue of “survivorship bias,” the tendency to make overly optimistic projections about career paths on the basis of one’s own successful choices. In general, I think students are better advised by professionals in the career services office, informational interviews, and internships—and on that last point we clearly agree.

As his essay turns toward objections, Professor Baer states that he is “sensitive to the tyranny of the present clouding our discernment about the future.” The problems I have presented in higher education, though, are not a recent phenomenon, and they are not transient. They have been escalating, with brief fluctuations, since the early 1970s, and there are no indications that the conditions of academic employment will make more than incremental and isolated improvements. We have to be wary about fostering an understanding of academe based on a time when resources were more plentiful. The past can be tyrannical, too, and—barring some tremendous change in public policy comparable to the “Sputnik moment”—we are going to have to find new ways to sustain our callings in an era of diminished opportunity in higher education. That does not mean acquiescence to the prevailing trends. On the contrary, I want to urge greater solidarity among tenured faculty, contingent workers, graduate students, undergraduates, parents, and administrators who share our concerns.

I have been observing and writing about these trends almost monthly for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* since 1998. The claims I made in the last essay about academe’s exploitation of contingent workers have been affirmed many times by the leadership of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the American Association of University Professors, the American Historical Association, the Coalition on Contingent Academic Labor, the Modern Language Association, and the New Faculty Majority Foundation, among many other organizations. Professor Baer suggests that I am overly pessimistic and that readers should “beware of jeremiads,” dismissing the evidence I have presented without any evidence to support his position. He attempts to present a more positive outlook for graduate education by citing an article by Audrey Williams June from the *Chronicle* that, in his words, “reveal that sixty-nine percent of job openings in 2010–2011 were tenured or tenure-track positions.” What Professor Baer does not mention is that the same article reports that in 2010–2011 there were about 1,000 new PhD recipients in history, “roughly 400 more than the number of available jobs.”²² The author of the article also states, “Increases in openings are too modest to make a dent in the backlog of people with Ph.D.’s looking to land a tenured or tenure-track job.” Professor Baer also does not mention that the article indicates that the 69 percent figure he cites is down from 75 percent the previous year: It is actually bad news, not good news as he seems

to think. While there may be a few subfields in which there is modest growth, it is only relative to a larger profession that offers few opportunities in relation to the number of degree holders. Moreover, such information about demand in subfields is not likely to be helpful for graduate students whose degrees take so long to complete; they will search for their first jobs in a different market, one that might be flooded with candidates who were advised to study Middle Eastern history eight years earlier.

Such discrepancies between the long-term data and the way in which short-term relative improvements are selectively communicated—or simply misrepresented—to students reinforce the need for more transparency and accountability in graduate education. One step in that direction is the recommendation from the American Historical Association that “departments publish information regarding graduate placement” because “accurate information is invaluable to prospective students deciding whether or not to enter the historical profession.”³ However, almost no one who is part of the national conversation on this recommendation believes that individual departments will comply; in most cases, it is not in their interests to do so. I find that unfortunate because I would like to recommend programs that can provide good outcomes on such measures as tenure-track placements, nonacademic placements, time-to-degree, average teaching responsibilities, and the average amount of debt at graduation.

Professor Baer seems to agree that the reliance on adjuncts is a problem, and that one reason for their increasing numbers is that colleges and universities have had to manage with fewer taxpayer-provided resources. However, he dismisses “the notion of an exploitative system,” finding it “too Manichean.” He then caricatures my position, suggesting that I paint administrators as Dickensian villains whereas he sees them as the “victims.” While I agree that many mid-level administrators, especially department chairs, are placed in difficult situations, I do think that higher-level administrators have, as a group, made decisions that have resulted in significant damage to academic programs that is not entirely explained by state and federal cutbacks. The shift away from full-time teaching is not simply a matter of economic survival because even institutions with large endowments often do not have more equitable labor practices than underfunded state institutions. Even as we have seen the decline of tenured faculty, we have seen a notable rise in expenditures on athletic facilities, student amenities, and growth in the number of administrators whose salaries have risen much faster than anyone else’s (with the exception of high-profile athletic coaches). The working conditions of the faculty are the result of managerial practices that have moved the governance of higher education from the faculty to administration (and, often, through that administration, to wealthy and powerful leaders of the

business community who may not understand, for example, what it means to be a nonprofit, liberal-arts college). Such a scenario does not require mustache-twirling villains. It is a systemic problem, and the people involved can be quite banal; they simply go on making small compromises in order to preserve little privileges.

Of course, nearly all of the issues I have discussed above could be rendered moot by Professor Baer's final criticism: that the decision to go to graduate school must come from God, not "from knowledge" as I have claimed. He states, "True calling, real calling, is based on wisdom more than it is based on knowledge." I do not understand the theology behind this assertion, because I believe that wisdom is more likely to come from knowledge than from ignorance. How can one be called to a profession that one knows little or nothing about? Who among us has not known a college student who felt "called" to become a doctor but suddenly learns that his calling lies somewhere else while taking organic chemistry? If graduate students in the humanities researched their decisions more carefully—and had better information on which to base those decisions—then they might find the wisdom to follow a different vocational path.

As I was contemplating my response to Professor Baer's claim that my position is focused on self-interest (*homo economicus*) rather than cooperative action (*homo reciprocans*), I stumbled upon the reflections of an anonymous humanities PhD who writes a blog called Low End Theory. One of the author's posts strikes me as a compelling articulation of the dilemma faced by those of us who speak of calling and graduate school at the same time:

What makes the relationship between loving, learning, and working so complicated has something to do with the ways in which learning and loving are both kinds of work that only rarely find compensation (this is why the term "labor of love" is in this context both redundant and obfuscatory) because of our training to recognize them as non-work, pre-work. (And there is a gender politics at work here, no doubt.) We ask students to work and at the same time tell them that they are not yet workers; we take for granted the work that it takes to love in a deep way. To bring the discussion round to the example I opened with, yes, I loved my work because I felt, finally, like I was really doing what I came to the academy to do. It is that sense of purpose, that sense that you are doing what you were called to do, that you're doing socially important or necessary labor—labor that, you are supposed to imagine, might not get done in your absence—that makes teaching work so exploitable.... What makes it exploitable is that the conditions that bring you to work are shaped by an ethic that teaches you to imagine and relate to work as something you were called to do, to relate to work, again, as if (not because) it were a calling from God.⁴

There is a long history of objecting to the application of Christian ethics to social justice by saying that “man shall not live by bread alone” (cf. Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3). Professor Baer claims that the economic hardship faced by many graduate students is “a good thing for their development as human beings,” but one must wonder about the consequences of such a position for any vision of a more equal society. Who is to say that someone else’s suffering is good for them? I am troubled, too, by the claim that, while graduate school may be unpleasant, Professor Baer guesses “that the first year of law school and most of medical school and then residency are far worse.” The logic of that claim seems to be that we may ignore lesser evils as long as we suspect there are larger ones; that strikes me as a slippery slope toward ethical passivity.

As Christians, I think we must examine our own entanglement in an academic labor system that is experienced as exploitative by a substantial number of graduate students and contingent workers. That kind of self-examination is part of the ongoing work of mentoring students. I believe we should work harder to expand the vocational field of vision, so that graduate school does not seem like the only place in which humanities students can fulfill their callings; we should demand more transparency about graduate education and contingent employment; and we should organize ourselves to work together for positive changes because we care about the humanities, higher education, and our students. Some of us believe we are called to do that not just because we are professors but also because it is a principled expression of our Christian faith.

Notes

1. See, for example, Malcolm Harris, “Bad Education,” *n+1*, April 25, 2011, available at <http://nplusonemag.com/bad-education>.
2. Audrey Williams June, “Job Market Looks Brighter for Some Ph.D.’s,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 8, 2012, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Job-Market-Looks-Brighter-for/130240/>. Another article, by Brenda Medina, published on the same day in the *Chronicle* notes, as the title indicates, “It’s a Buyer’s Market for Colleges Hiring Junior Faculty,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 8, 2012, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Its-a-Buyers-Market-for/130249/>.
3. “Best Practices on Transparency in Placement Records,” *American Historical Association*, September 7, 2012, available at <http://www.historians.org/governance/pd/transparency.cfm>.
4. “A Love Letter to Radical Graduate Students, Present, Former, Future: Part One,” *Low End Theory*, March 12, 2012, available at <http://www.lowendtheory.org/post/19214802546/a-love-letter-to-radical-graduate-students-present>.