

‘Graduate Education in the Humanities’

A Surreponse to
William Pannacker

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Let us review where we stand: Professor Pannacker and I agree that there is a serious problem, existing as it has for a generation. There are more students who enter PhD programs in the humanities than there are tenure-track teaching positions in higher education waiting for them when they finish their degree. He and I differ, though, on some of the causes and consequences of the problem, and we disagree significantly on how to comprehend the problem.

My chief concern with Professor Pannacker’s response to my response to his initial segment is that, once again, we approach the problem from very different perspectives—as if we were communicating in two different languages and thus speaking past each other. His understanding of the problem is, as I suggested in my response, characterized by *homo economicus* (but with a nod to calling), while mine begins with calling (with a nod to economics).

Consider for example this statement in his response: “With programs that take so long to complete, opportunity costs are significant.” He then gives an example: “the foregone income of those years, and the impact that can have on one’s retirement savings.”¹ Now, I am considerably closer to retirement than is my esteemed colleague, so I think frequently about these matters, but if you had asked me all those years ago when I entered graduate school whether I had sufficiently considered the impact of this decision on my future golden years I would have been taken aback. Then there is this statement, close to the beginning of his response, where he makes the odd rhetorical move of addressing “the existence of a trillion-dollar student-loan bubble,” which of course is a very important concern but is overwhelmingly a problem of students borrowing

money to do an undergraduate degree—as one learns in the first line of the essay he cites. As for-profit schools account for nearly half of all defaults in student loans, Pannapacker’s inclusion of the student-loan bubble is a distraction.

We have other disagreements as well. While I am hesitant to continue in this negative mode, readers will be helped in their own thinking by our very divergent approaches to the problem.

Professor Pannapacker and I have a different outlook on the value of holding a teaching assistantship while trying to complete the PhD. As he put it, graduate students “spend a great deal of time teaching lower-level courses—far more than is required to learn the skills to hit the ground running as an assistant professor.” The problem with this statement is that at most colleges and universities these are the very courses that most assistant professors spend most of their time teaching. Professor Pannapacker is regarded as a very fine teacher, and perhaps he did not need “a great deal of time . . . to hit the ground running.” I certainly did. Most of my pedagogical experiments as a grad school teaching assistant were unsuccessful, and it took me several tries before I could effectively teach a text such as *The Communist Manifesto*. While I remain sorry for all the Iowans who suffered through those classes, the students at the three schools I have taught at since are most likely better off from that “great deal of time.” I have been a full professor for twenty years, and I am still learning how to teach effectively.

If one begins to deconstruct Professor Pannapacker’s argument—for example his criticism of my point that some fields or some subfields in my discipline of history are flourishing but they may not be when someone now entering graduate school finishes in eight years—there are pointers to what I take to be an untenable proposition: that unless the future can be predicted we should not take risks.² Now, there are no guarantees in life. I have not a clue why a dear sister my age now has bone marrow cancer and I do not. I am not assured a painless life, and I am not guaranteed that markets will always work to my advantage.

On his point about selective communication—or misrepresentation—and thus the need for more transparency on the part of graduate school programs, we agree completely. Having made his point, Professor Pannapacker then goes on to argue, in the context of the American Historical Association’s call that “departments publish information regarding graduate placement,” that “almost no one who is part of the national conversation on this recommendation believes that individual departments will comply.” I tested this statement for my own discipline by analyzing the American Historical Association’s 2010–2011 *Directory of History Departments*, which is on my bookshelf and thus readily available to any of my students who would like to borrow it, using the twelve schools in the Big Ten (disclaimer: I earned my PhD at one of them). All but

one department included a list of students who had completed a PhD that year (perhaps that one had no PhD students finishing in 2010). Of the remaining eleven, all indicated whether their graduates had teaching positions, postdocs, or nothing. Of the total ($n = 105$), 45.7 percent had teaching positions, 12.3 percent had postdocs, and 41.9 percent failed to list any connection with an educational institution. I presume this means neither teaching nor a postdoc, although when I looked online at the nothing category for one of the schools, I discovered most individuals were now teaching in institutions of higher education or had some relevant professional position.

The conclusion I reached was that these departments were not misleading anyone who bothered to spend the hour or so that it took me to generate these data. What a potential graduate student would then find helpful is to compare these departments against each other, ascertaining which had percentages for placement above 45.7 percent—which is what I ask students to do who come to me seeking advice about which programs in history they should apply to. My guess is that history is not unique in publishing these data. By the way, this same transparency is being demanded by parents from schools like mine—as they should. The entire system of higher education has some soul-searching to do.

In addition to straight-up disagreements, I also need to address some significant misreadings of what I stated in my initial response. Professor Pannacker questioned the following statement of mine: “We must be honest—even brutally honest—with the mediocre student who has dreamed of herself as a professor but has rarely if ever exhibited the quality of work and self-discipline necessary to make it into much less survive graduate school.” His response included this statement: “the path to tenure depends, most of all, on the kind of persistence that is hard to sustain without a strong sense of calling.” I am not sure what the difference is between us. Perhaps had I phrased my point differently (along the lines of, “a student with an average GPA, say 2.5 and whose papers exhibit carelessness with language and argument, not to say research, would never be accepted into a graduate program and should not spend the time or money trying”), he would not have responded as he did.

Professor Pannacker averts the understanding that declining state funding for public universities is an important cause of the problem we are addressing, accusing me of caricaturing his position by “suggesting that I paint administrators as Dickensian villains.” I thought in using characters from a Dickens novel as word pictures that an English professor would appreciate human faces applied to a desiccated theoretical argument. *Quis putavisset?* He does address one difficulty with which I am in agreement—that too many schools choose to spend too much money on nonacademics. I recall being flabbergasted when shown

a climbing wall at a college we visited with our high school senior daughter. Perhaps because it problematizes his argument Professor Pannacker too quickly dismisses the failure of state governments to fund public colleges and universities even at a 50 percent level. State support for higher education here in Michigan has decreased dramatically over the last several decades, leaving universities with gaps in funding that threaten the quality of their educational experience. Since 2001, state budgets have seen a reduction of over \$2,500 in per student appropriations, resulting in 2008 state funding for public universities that is almost \$442 million below the amount appropriated in 2002 (plus inflation).³ While it is true that administrators choose to build climbing walls, they are also forced by their budgets to make personnel decisions, for example, hiring adjuncts rather than tenure-track professors, due to restraints imposed on them.

I readily affirm Professor Pannacker's statement that "we need to work harder to help our students see how they can match their passions to the world's needs." While I suggested that many departments such as mine included professors who had—or have—careers outside academe, his response was to question whether reflections on such careers had any value if our connections to them were not ongoing. It is unclear what, exactly, he expects from college and university faculty who do what we can with the limited time available. Perhaps we can agree to disagree on this matter while agreeing that undergraduate students contemplating PhD work in humanities fields should look for information and perspectives from multiple sources—pastors or priests, spouses or significant others, career services offices, professionals, their own research into careers—and professors.

I remain troubled about our different understandings of wisdom and knowledge. I made this statement: "True calling, real calling, is based on wisdom more than it is based on knowledge." Professor Pannacker responded, "I do not understand the theology behind this assertion, since 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?" I am baffled that he drew this point from what I wrote; indeed, it appears as something of a caricature to suggest that my words, "wisdom more than knowledge" are the equivalent of "wisdom from ignorance." In terms of the theological underpinnings, one might begin with Psalm 51:6; Proverbs 2:6 and 4:7; and James 1:5, but the index of a decent study Bible will lead students to many more texts. Either before or after the search for wisdom regarding vocation the student who is contemplating an application to PhD programs must go, as Pannacker suggests, and do research—which is what I have argued here and in my first response.

I have a rule that I share with students in every course I teach that contains instruction in writing: rarely use long quotations, and if you do, follow them up

with your own analysis. I reacted viscerally to the half-page long quotation by the anonymous humanities PhD that Professor Pannacker finds compelling. Having read it, I find it twaddle. Of greater worry is how far the author is from any of the concerns Pannacker and I are raising here; his or her understanding of entry into something called “academic capitalism” is the opportunity to do political work inside the academy. Hence, the author states that “present-day radicals, by contrast, generally do not find a Greater Good in the prospect that the work we do will bring us closer to God, but rather, in the this-worldly and, seeming to us, more reasonable belief that such work creates the possibility of generating political community and radical social transformation.”

If this is not the language of *homo economicus*, I do not know what is.

Following this—as if it were based on the ramblings of the above blogger—is the insinuation that I am somehow splitting off Christian ethics from social justice, slipping down the slope toward ethical passivity. I am just guessing, but I suspect I spent more time in graduate school and in my academic career working on social justice issues than has my esteemed colleague, so being lectured to by him on the topic is disconcerting. Perhaps our different languages led to different definitions of social justice. His comment, “Who is to say that someone else’s suffering is good for them?” ignores considerable biblical teaching. If Professor Pannacker thinks that not achieving the American dream represents *suffering* he has more serious problems than what we have been discussing here.⁴ For Dorothy Sayers, our work is not about finding a job to guarantee a particular standard of living; rather, it ought to be centered on calling, “the full expression of the worker’s faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.”⁵

Professor Pannacker and I will quibble about our data. He thought I had dismissed his evidence without presenting any of my own. It is rather the case that two scholars are arguing over competing evidence.

If I might end on a note of agreement, all that I have said in my two responses has been to one end, which Professor Pannacker articulated well: Professors, particularly those called to teaching rather than research institutions, must engage with students who are considering graduate school in the humanities; as mentors we must help them, and in his words, “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.” I am not sure anyone has ever found graduate school itself as a calling fulfilled; rather, this happens beyond and sometimes in spite of graduate education.

Notes

1. On his related concern about stipends failing to keep up with inflation, the American Historical Association reports that 90 percent of first-year students at top-ranked programs had full financial support. See Robert B. Townsend, "NPC Report Provides Data on History Doctoral Programs," *Perspectives on History* (December 2010), available at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1012/1012new4.cfm>.
2. Cf. Robert B. Townsend, "The Ecology of the History Job: Shifting Realities in a Fluid Market," American Historical Association, *Perspectives on History* (December 2011), available at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2011/1112/the-ecology-of-the-history-job-shifting-realities-in-a-fluid-market.cfm>, which makes the same point I did in my response regarding job openings in Middle Eastern history outpacing the supply of historians trained in that subject.
3. See "State Relations," available at <http://msu.edu/unit/vpga/state-relations.html>; "State Higher Education Executive Officers," available at <http://sheeo.org/>, 2008; see also "State Higher Education Finance: FY 2007," available at http://www.sheeo.org/finance/shef_fy07.pdf.
4. On this matter of the commodification of happiness, see Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 32; and Robert J. Samuelson, "The American Dream's Empty Promise," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2012, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/robert-samuelson-the-american-dreams-empty-promise/2012/09/23/e630946c-0428-11e2-8102-ebee9c66e190_story.html.
5. Dorothy Sayers, "Why Work?" *Creed or Chaos?* (1949); repr. in *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 128.