

## Should Students Be Encouraged to Pursue Graduate Education in the Humanities?

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Last January at the Modern Language Association convention in Seattle, Brian Croxall, one of the leading young scholars of the digital humanities—and a self-described “failure,” since he does not hold a permanent academic position—began his talk with a PowerPoint slide of a rejection letter that he had just received from a small department of English: “Please accept our sincere thanks for your interest in the position. We received more than nine hundred applications, so it is truly the case that there are many, many talented scholars whom we are not able to interview.”<sup>1</sup> With odds like that, Croxall observed, it might be time to rethink graduate education in the humanities, at least insofar as it trains students to become college teachers.

As *The Economist* recently observed, “there is an oversupply of PhDs” because “universities have discovered that PhD students are cheap, highly motivated and disposable labour.” Choosing to participate in this system—if only for the sake of intellectual growth—has the unfortunate consequence of undermining the profession those students hope to enter because, as *The Economist* notes, “Using PhD students to do much of the undergraduate teaching cuts the number of full-time jobs.”<sup>2</sup> According to the current president of the MLA, Michael Berube, “adjunct, contingent faculty members now make up over 1 million of the 1.5 million people teaching in American colleges and universities.”<sup>3</sup> Writing for the Manhattan Institute’s online publication, *Minding the Campus*, Charlotte Allen recounts some alarming statistics: “In 1975, according to a 2009 AAUP study, some 57 percent of all university faculty either had tenure or were on the tenure track. Now only 31 percent of them fall into that category, while 50 percent

of university faculty are part-time adjuncts earning next to nothing.”<sup>4</sup> Since the beginning of the recession, the number of tenure-track positions advertised has dropped sharply, so one might reasonably conclude that the percentage of tenure-stream faculty is also significantly lower now.

During the last forty years, graduate schools have shifted most of the work of teaching from tenure-track faculty members to a variety of contingent workers, including graduate students, visiting professors, and adjuncts. Such workers are far less expensive than tenure-stream faculty members; apart from graduate students, such workers usually have no health benefits and no job security. Contingent faculty members can be fired—or rather “not renewed”—for any number of reasons, undermining the integrity of the grading process, the autonomy of the classroom, and the processes of faculty governance. In most cases, there is no way to enter the profession without contributing to this process by working for five or more years as a teaching assistant and, in most cases, serving for several more years—if not permanently—as a contingent teacher at multiple institutions. Moreover, the difficulties of that position are compounded by the probability that a humanities doctoral graduate has accumulated substantial debt, perhaps more than \$30,000 in addition to any debt remaining from his or her undergraduate education.<sup>5</sup> The *Chronicle of Higher Education* regularly recounts the woes of recent graduates who are underemployed, burdened by debt, and without prospects for any career path besides ongoing contingent teaching or some form of self-employment. That outcome—the experience of many, if not most, doctoral recipients—is not reflected by what departments say about themselves to prospective students.<sup>6</sup>

Writing for *The Nation* last year, William Deresiewicz observes, “Most professors I know are willing to talk with students about pursuing a PhD, but their advice comes down to three words: ‘don’t do it.’” “At Yale,” Deresiewicz continues, “we were overjoyed if half our graduating students found positions. That’s right—half. Imagine running a medical school on that basis.”<sup>7</sup> It seems safe to say that the graduates of most humanities programs do not fare as well as those from Yale. Charlotte Allen notes, “According to the American Association of University Professors, the ratio of tenure-track openings to new doctorates is more like 1 to 4,” and that ratio does not include all of the graduates from prior years who remain on the job market while working in contingent positions.<sup>8</sup> Robert Townsend, writing for the American Historical Association, using prerecession data, states that the number of PhD recipients has outpaced the number of jobs since the early 1970s: “Until programs reduce the number of students in their programs and revise the culture of history doctoral training, the sense of crisis in the job market for history PhDs seems only likely to grow worse for the foreseeable future.”<sup>9</sup>

It is not just the difficulty of finding an academic position that is troubling about graduate school in the humanities; it is the experience itself for many students. Graduate school lasts, on average, nine or ten years, and those years are often characterized by social isolation, economic insecurity, and deepening anxiety about the value of one's work and prospects for the future.<sup>10</sup> Wilfred M. McClay, writing for *Christianity Today*, observes, "No area of American higher education is more in need of reform, and less likely to receive it, than graduate education." His focus is not on what happens after receiving the doctorate so much as what happens to students along the way:

As our chief means of forming college teachers, graduate training could hardly be more dysfunctional if we had set out to make it that way. It is miraculous that there are so many thoughtful teachers and independent-minded scholars in our colleges, when they have been run through a dismal regimen that is as hostile to human nurture as it is to critical thinking.<sup>11</sup>

A professor at Harvard, Louis Menand, observes that the current pressures placed on graduate students result in "a narrowing of the intellectual range" of students who must become hyper-specialized to compete in the academic labor market.<sup>12</sup> In other words, graduate school in the humanities is not about the balanced cultivation of the whole person (or the "life of the mind"); it is intensive and often costly professional training for positions that are not likely to be available for graduates. It is not surprising that in a 2009 study, 67 percent of graduate students said they felt "hopeless," 54 percent said they were "depressed," and nearly 10 percent said they "had considered suicide."<sup>13</sup>

Despite those grim prospects, most universities have not reduced the size of their graduate programs; on the contrary, they have enlarged them because their institutional prestige depends on it, and they benefit from the labor of those students as teaching assistants and, later, as contributions to the pool of surplus academic workers. Correspondingly, many undergraduate programs—and individual professors—rate their success by the number of students they place in graduate school without giving any attention to longer-range outcomes for those students.<sup>14</sup> Students who do not find academic positions often blame themselves rather than conclude that higher education is structured so that the majority of doctoral graduates will never find secure work in their field; they are imbued with the idea that these institutions and their mentors are concerned about them as human beings. Deresiewicz notes the paradox: "How professors square their Jekyll-and-Hyde roles in the process—devoted teachers of individual students, co-managers of a system that exploits them as a group—I do not know."<sup>15</sup>

In such a context, I believe that college professors should be mindful of our own complex motives when advising students about graduate school in the humanities. For one thing, if we are tenured faculty members, most of us are the survivors of the circumstances I have just presented (unless we were hired in the 1960s). We might have a strong inclination to believe that we succeeded because of our hard work and intelligence, but when there are 900 applicants for a position the difference between the winning candidate and many of the others is smaller—as they say about close elections—than the margin of error. We should be wary of the tendency to say, “I made it; so can you.”

Moreover, I think that faculty members, as a group, conduct research and teach because we love our subjects and we want to share that love with others. Whether we use the word or not, we often feel that we have a special destiny, and there is something profoundly gratifying about helping a young person pursue a similar course in life. It can have the overwhelming feeling of “calling” for both parties: the caller and the called. Preparing a student for graduate school can feel like a sacred act, like accepting a novice into a monastery. It is something that we often want to do and we do out of love with the best of intentions: unambiguously affirming a choice that should not be made lightly, without serious reflection, research, and consultation with a wide range of mentors, some of whom might present starkly different perspectives.

Professors should exercise caution in our advice because students can be extraordinarily vulnerable to our influence. College students who are nearing graduation have many reasons to feel drawn toward graduate school beyond the love of a particular subject and the desire to teach. The end of college marks a major change in one’s life: movement away from the familiar environment of school toward something that seems far less structured and reassuring. Anxiety about the outside world is often compounded during economic downturns when appealing jobs are hard to find, particularly for students in humanities disciplines who often struggle to find occupations that make use of their skills and reflect their values. Such students often believe graduate school will be a continuation of the experiences they may have valued as a student at, for example, an idyllic liberal arts college, when the reality of graduate education at a major university is often quite different from that.

As *The Economist* notes, only 49 percent of humanities doctoral students will have a PhD ten years after their first date of enrollment. No doubt, a large number of students leave doctoral training due to vocational discernment: They discover that graduate education is highly professionalized, hypercompetitive, and extraordinarily risky in terms of debt, opportunity cost, psychological impact, and the probability of long-term displacement from more secure paths of

employment. There are strong incentives—both good and bad—not to reveal that information to students, and students are equally motivated not to look too carefully before they commit themselves—perhaps prematurely—to that path.

If they are young, they may not yet realize that their calling can be fulfilled in many ways besides going to graduate school. There are other fields that value research, teaching, and service that do not require a decade of postgraduate training. Their professors may not know some of those ways because they have been outside of the wider marketplace for a long time. If students can gain experience in internships, service learning, and entry-level employment before going to graduate school—perhaps just for a few years—they might avoid some of the pitfalls I have described, or they might decide that those risks are worth taking. They may also learn that they have a stronger calling to join with a partner, perhaps raise a family, or take on other adult responsibilities that a decade in graduate school, followed by uncertain employment prospects, might preclude.

I agree with the thoughts of the recent president of the American Historical Association, Anthony Grafton: “One reason graduate school demands so much time, so much effort, and so much difficulty is that it is designed—badly, and clumsily, but not insanely—to attract and then to test people who think they have this sort of calling. Graduate study is nothing less than a quest—and you cannot undertake a meaningful quest without trials.” I am not arguing that graduate school should be easy (though I believe it should not take so long), or that all graduates should be guaranteed tenure-track positions, but I agree with Grafton that “[t]he need to staff undergraduate sections and courses, and not the realistic chances of graduate placement, often determine admissions policies.”<sup>16</sup> From my perspective, the reality of an exploitative system complicates whatever idealism I might otherwise wish to offer my students as a possible fulfillment of their calling.

As a college professor, I would never advise an individual student *not* to go to graduate school in the humanities. I think it is admirable for a student to want to pursue an advanced degree in any field. Moreover, I believe that I have a duty to help such students find their calling and achieve success on any path that they have chosen. I often write letters of recommendation for students who have decided to apply to graduate school, and I try to maintain supportive relationships with them for many years afterward. That is one of the most rewarding parts of being a teacher.

At the same time, I do not encourage students to consider graduate school in the humanities, either. I do not discourage or encourage. I do not think it is appropriate for me to tell students what to do with their lives. I am not in a position to judge the validity of any student’s calling, nor can I know what the future might hold for that student. Sometimes a choice that seems foolhardy can lead to a positive outcome that no one could have foreseen.

What does that mean in practice? I listen to students. I praise their intellectual ambitions. I point them to reliable sources of information about graduate school in the humanities. I have my own opinions about that, some of which I have expressed elsewhere, but it is up to the students to judge the validity of those opinions—as well as the rebuttals they have received—if they should find them. From the student’s perspective, I would not settle for the advice, “Don’t go—it’s a trap,” any more than I would from someone who said, simply, “Go—follow your bliss.” Prospective graduate students should seek the advice of those who are marginally employed—the majority of college teachers—as well as the advice of tenured faculty who are more likely to encourage them. It is important for students to seek multiple sources of information to enable an informed, clear-minded process of vocational discernment rather than a choice motivated by the need for security, deference to the desires of others, and a limited understanding of the probable outcomes of such a choice.

Calling should come from knowledge; if the calling is genuine, the recipient should confront the risks involved and resolve to try anyway.

## Notes

1. Brian Croxall, “Five Questions and Three Answers about Alt-Ac,” *Brian Croxall*, January 7, 2012, available at [www.briancroxall.net/2012/01/07/five-questions-and-three-answers-about-alt-ac/](http://www.briancroxall.net/2012/01/07/five-questions-and-three-answers-about-alt-ac/).
2. “The Disposable Academic: Why Doing a PhD is Often a Waste of Time,” *The Economist*, December 16, 2010, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/17723223>.
3. Michael Bérubé, “Among the Majority,” *Inside Higher Ed*, February 1, 2012, available at [www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/02/01/essay-summit-adjunct-leaders](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/02/01/essay-summit-adjunct-leaders).
4. Charlotte Allen, “A Terrible Time for New Ph.D.s,” *Minding the Campus*, February 3, 2011, available at [www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2011/02/a\\_terrible\\_time\\_for\\_new\\_phds.html](http://www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2011/02/a_terrible_time_for_new_phds.html). Allen’s essay includes a helpful compilation of recent data on the situation for humanities graduates.
5. National Science Foundation, “Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities,” *NSF.gov*, December 2010, see also [www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf11306/theme4.cfm#5](http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf11306/theme4.cfm#5).
6. Robin Wilson, “Master’s in English: Will Mow Lawns,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 28, 2010, available at [www.chronicle.com/article/The-Quality-Measure-That/125544/](http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Quality-Measure-That/125544/).

7. William Deresiewicz, "Faulty Towers: The Crisis in Higher Education," *The Nation*, May 23, 2011, available at [www.thenation.com/article/160410/faulty-towers-crisis-higher-education](http://www.thenation.com/article/160410/faulty-towers-crisis-higher-education).
8. Allen, "A Terrible Time for New Ph.D.s."
9. Robert B. Townsend, "A Grim Year on the Academic Job Market for Historians," *Perspectives on History*, January 2010, available at [www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2010/1001/1001new1.cfm](http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2010/1001/1001new1.cfm).
10. For a lengthy catalogue of those concerns, see "100 Reasons NOT to Go to Graduate School," September 10, 2012, available at <http://100rsns.blogspot.com/>. Some key propositions and discussions: "Graduate School Is Not What It Used to Be," "There Are Very Few Jobs," "There Is a Psychological Cost," "Adjuncthood Awaits," "Marriage and Family Usually Wait," "Where You Live Will Be Chosen for You," "There Are too Many PhDs," "It Is Stressful, Lonely, and Unforgiving," and, "There Is a Culture of Fear."
11. Wilfred M. McClay, "Books & Culture Corner: The Ph.D. Octopus, 100 Years On," *Christianity Today*, September 1, 2003, available at [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/septemberweb-only/9-15-12.0.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/septemberweb-only/9-15-12.0.html).
12. Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: Norton, 2010), 153.
13. Piper Fogg, "Grad-School Blues," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 20, 2009, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Grad-School-Blues/29566/>. By comparison, 9.5 percent of adults in the United States suffer from depression in a given year, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.
14. For more discussion on the changing academic labor system, the reader might consult any of the following: Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: NYU Press, 2008); Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Cary Nelson, *No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Jack H. Shuster and Martin J. Finkelstein, *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
15. Deresiewicz, "Faulty Towers: The Crisis in Higher Education."
16. Anthony T. Grafton, "Humanities and Inhumanities," *The New Republic*, February 17, 2010, available at [www.tnr.com/article/politics/humanities-and-inhumanities?page=0,1](http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/humanities-and-inhumanities?page=0,1).