

SPECIAL REPORTS

Rebranding the Ph.D.

Criticized for producing graduates with few job prospects, doctoral programs are starting to reform

By Vimal Patel | MARCH 04, 2018 ✓ PREMIUM

When Ashley Rose Young started a Ph.D. program in history, in 2010, she publicly proclaimed her desire to join the professoriate.

Privately, she wasn't so sure.

But telling people you didn't want to be a faculty member, she says, was taboo in her

program, at Duke University. When she did start floating the idea of working outside academe, some professors and fellow graduate students made clear such a move would be disappointing.



Eduardo Luzzatti for The Chronicle

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By the time she earned her Ph.D., seven years later, the stigma was gone. In fact, Duke had done much to bring about the culture change: The university provided her with money to speak at public-history conferences and helped connect her with an internship at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Crucially, she received the same stipend during her museum stint that she would have earned as a teaching or research assistant.

The shift in how humanities doctoral programs are thinking about career preparation is happening beyond Duke as well. Ph.D. programs have an urgent directive from current and prospective students, the public, and the professors who run them: It's time to change.

Doctorates take too long, critics have long argued. They're too expensive, saddling students with ever-larger debt loads. And they're designed to prepare students for an idealized academic job market that never really existed, except for a brief postwar period, rather than the career trajectories they'll actually face.

Slowly, and unevenly, programs are taking note. Humanities doctoral programs, especially, are experimenting with widening their focus, often encouraged by grant money from groups such as the National Endowment for the Humanities and disciplinary bodies such as the American Historical Association. Professors are more open to trying something, anything, different.

There's no silver bullet, though.

The AHA, for example, is encouraging change on many fronts. The association has given history departments money to hire career-diversity officers, infuse career preparation into existing courses, and connect students with a network of former Ph.D. students who have forged careers outside academe.

TAKEAWAY

Preparing Ph.D. Students for Careers Outside Academe

- Programs are encouraging their students to pursue internships and other diverse experiences that might prepare them for nonacademic jobs.
- Not everyone is on board with career-diversity reforms: To many critics, such efforts are academe's way to justify the continued production of doctorates.
- Change does not have to be radical. The American Historical Association, for example, is urging programs to infuse existing curricula with broad skills that are helpful to students regardless of their career track.

"I hope eventually there will be 20 or 30 different ways of approaching the challenge of preparing students for their career pathways," says James Grossman, the association's executive director. "The ways programs are broadening opportunities for their students should be diverse."

Many programs, for example, have reimaged the dissertation, recognizing that a traditional book-length monograph may not be the best option for someone who lands off the tenure track, much less outside academe. Alternative projects might include a collection of articles or an app that takes users on a historical tour.

Grossman says graduate programs are also doing a better job of connecting doctoral students with internships in local and community organizations, as Duke did in placing Young at the Smithsonian.

He hopes for a day when colleges won't view traditional teaching- and research-assistant jobs as the only modes of experiential preparation. He and others would like to see a third way — perhaps a job in another part of the university or in an off-campus internship.

At Duke University, Young was part of a small program called Versatile Humanists at Duke. Paid for by an NEH grant, the program allows students to intern with partners like the Museum of Durham History, the National Humanities Center, or the North Carolina Justice Center, or to create their own internships. Duke provides the students with a stipend, so the off-campus experience keeps them in the same financial situation as if they held a teaching or research assistantship.

Edward Balleisen, a Duke historian and vice provost for interdisciplinary studies, stresses that the goal of the program is to prepare students for careers both inside and outside academe. After Young, a food historian, helped curate a food exhibit for the Smithsonian's American-history museum, she knew her dream job would be to work there. Another student in the program, a film historian who interned at an avant-garde theater in Brooklyn, wants to remain on the academic path.

The skills learned during both internships — managing a project, working on a team, widening one's network — help students whatever their career trajectory, Balleisen says. The program's future, however, is shaky. The stipends are possible because of an NEH grant, but that money isn't guaranteed to be renewed, Balleisen says.

Changing graduate programs more broadly won't be easy. For one thing, not everyone is on board. To many, Ph.D. career-diversity efforts are academe's way to justify the production of more and more doctorates.

Further, some efforts, like providing internships instead of assistantships, aren't always practicable. Colleges may not like to admit it, but many depend on inexpensive graduate-assistant labor.

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But change can be modest. The historical association, for example, is encouraging professors to infuse existing curricula with broad skills that will help students whether they land inside or outside academe.

This is the "low-hanging fruit," as Grossman puts it. This might include exercises that develop presentation skills, such as asking students to summarize a lengthy research paper in a one-page memo or create a poster presentation of a research project.

It's hard to measure the effectiveness of career-diversity efforts. But it's clear academe's new focus on career diversity is helpful to some doctoral candidates, like Young. She finished her Ph.D. in December, and was hired full time as a food historian at the Smithsonian's American-history museum.

"Programs need to be flexible to give students a chance to figure out whether or not a tenure-track job is truly their dream," Young says. "I pursued my passion even when others told me I was unfocused or not traditionally successful.

"I did what I cared about," she says, "and I'm really very happy."

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