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Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don't Go

It's hard to tell young people that universities view their idealism and energy as an exploitable resource

By THOMAS H. BENTON

Nearly six years ago, I wrote a column called "So You Want to Go to Grad School?" (*The Chronicle*, June 6, 2003). My purpose was to warn undergraduates away from pursuing Ph.D.'s in the humanities by telling them what I had learned about the academic labor system from personal observation and experience.

It was a message many prospective graduate students were not getting from their professors, who were generally too eager to clone themselves. Having heard rumors about unemployed Ph.D.'s, some undergraduates would ask about job prospects in academe, only to be told, "There are always jobs for good people." If the students happened to notice the increasing numbers of well-published, highly credentialed adjuncts teaching part time with no benefits, they would be told, "Don't worry, massive retirements are coming soon, and then there will be plenty of positions available." The encouragement they received from mostly well-meaning but ill-informed professors was bolstered by the message in our culture that education always leads to opportunity.

All these years later, I still get letters from undergraduates who stumble onto that column. They tell me about their interests and accomplishments and ask whether they should go to graduate school, somehow expecting me to encourage them. I usually write back, explaining that in this era of grade inflation (and recommendation inflation), there's an almost unlimited supply of students with perfect grades and glowing letters. Of course, some doctoral program may admit them with full financing, but that doesn't mean they are going to find work as professors when it's all over. The reality is that less than half of all doctorate holders — after nearly a decade of preparation, on average — will ever find tenure-track positions.

The follow-up letters I receive from those prospective Ph.D.'s are often quite angry and incoherent; they've been praised their whole lives, and no one has ever told them that they may not become what they want to be, that higher education is a business that does not necessarily have their best interests at heart. Sometimes they accuse me of being threatened by their obvious talent. I assume they go on to find someone who will tell them what they want to hear: "Yes, my child, you are the one we've been waiting for all our lives." It can be painful, but it is better that undergraduates considering graduate

school in the humanities should know the truth now, instead of when they are 30 and unemployed, or worse, working as adjuncts at less than the minimum wage under the misguided belief that more teaching experience and more glowing recommendations will somehow open the door to a real position.

Most undergraduates don't realize that there is a shrinking percentage of positions in the humanities that offer job security, benefits, and a livable salary (though it is generally much lower than salaries in other fields requiring as many years of training). They don't know that you probably will have to accept living almost anywhere, and that you must also go through a six-year probationary period at the end of which you may be fired for any number of reasons and find yourself exiled from the profession. They seem to think becoming a humanities professor is a reliable prospect — a more responsible and secure choice than, say, attempting to make it as a freelance writer, or an actor, or a professional athlete — and, as a result, they don't make any fallback plans until it is too late.

I have found that most prospective graduate students have given little thought to what will happen to them after they complete their doctorates. They assume that everyone finds a decent position somewhere, even if it's "only" at a community college (expressed with a shudder). Besides, the completion of graduate school seems impossibly far away, so their concerns are mostly focused on the present. Their motives are usually some combination of the following:

- They are excited by some subject and believe they have a deep, sustainable interest in it. (But ask follow-up questions and you find that it is only deep in relation to their undergraduate peers — not in relation to the kind of serious dedication you need in graduate programs.)
- They received high grades and a lot of praise from their professors, and they are not finding similar encouragement outside of an academic environment. They want to return to a context in which they feel validated.
- They are emerging from 16 years of institutional living: a clear, step-by-step process of advancement toward a goal, with measured outcomes, constant reinforcement and support, and clearly defined hierarchies. The world outside school seems so unstructured, ambiguous, difficult to navigate, and frightening.
- With the prospect of an unappealing, entry-level job on the horizon, life in college becomes increasingly idealized. They think graduate school will continue that romantic experience and enable them to stay in college forever as teacher-scholars.
- They can't find a position anywhere that uses the skills on which they most prided themselves in college. They are forced to learn about new things that don't interest them nearly as much. No one is impressed by their knowledge of Jane Austen. There are no mentors to guide and protect them, and they turn to former teachers for help.
- They think that graduate school is a good place to hide from the recession. They'll spend a few years studying literature, preferably on a fellowship, and then, if academe doesn't seem appealing or open to them, they will simply look for a job

> when the market has improved. And, you know, all those baby boomers have to retire someday, and when that happens, there will be jobs available in academe.

I know I experienced all of those motivations when I was in my early 20s. The year after I graduated from college (1990) was a recession, and the best job I could find was selling memberships in a health club, part time, in a shopping mall in Philadelphia. A graduate fellowship was an escape that landed me in another city — Miami — with at least enough money to get by. I was aware that my motives for going to graduate school came from the anxieties of transitioning out of college and my difficulty finding appealing work, but I could justify it in practical terms for the last reason I mentioned: I thought I could just leave academe if something better presented itself. I mean, someone with a doctorate must be regarded as something special, right?

Unfortunately, during the three years that I searched for positions outside of academe, I found that humanities Ph.D.'s, without relevant experience or technical skills, generally compete at a moderate disadvantage against undergraduates, and at a serious disadvantage against people with professional degrees. If you take that path, you will be starting at the bottom in your 30s, a decade behind your age cohort, with no savings (and probably a lot of debt).

What almost no prospective graduate students can understand is the extent to which doctoral education in the humanities socializes idealistic, naïve, and psychologically vulnerable people into a profession with a very clear set of values. It teaches them that life outside of academe means failure, which explains the large numbers of graduates who labor for decades as adjuncts, just so they can stay on the periphery of academe. (That's another topic I've written about before; see "Is Graduate School a Cult?" (*The Chronicle*, July 2, 2004.)

I fell for the line about faculty retirements that went around back in the early 90s, thanks to the infamous Bowen and Sosa Report. I still hear that claim today, from people who ought to know better. Even if the long-awaited wave of retirements finally arrives, many of those tenure lines will not be retained, particularly not now, in the context of yet another recession.

Just to be clear: There is work for humanities doctorates (though perhaps not as many as are currently being produced), but there are fewer and fewer real jobs because of conscious policy decisions by colleges and universities. As a result, the handful of real jobs that remain are being pursued by thousands of qualified people — so many that the minority of candidates who get tenure-track positions might as well be considered the winners of a lottery.

Universities (even those with enormous endowments) have historically taken advantage of recessions to bring austerity to teaching. There will be hiring freezes and early retirements. Rather than replacements, more adjuncts will be hired, and more graduate students will be recruited, eventually flooding the market with even more fully qualified teacher-scholars who will work for almost nothing. When the recession ends, the hiring

freezes will become permanent, since departments will have demonstrated that they can function with fewer tenured faculty members.

Nearly every humanities field was already desperately competitive, with hundreds of applications from qualified candidates for every tenure-track position. Now the situation is becoming even worse. For example, the American Historical Association's job listings are down 15 percent and the Modern Languae's listings are down 21 percent, the steepest annual decline ever recorded. Apparently, many already-launched candidate searches are being called off; some responsible observers expect that hiring may be down 40 percent this year.

What is 40 percent worse than desperate?

The majority of job seekers who emerge empty-handed this year will return next year, and for several years after that, and so the competition will snowball, with more and more people chasing fewer and fewer full-time positions.

Meanwhile, more and more students are flattered to find themselves admitted to graduate programs; many are taking on considerable debt to do so. According to the Humanities Indicators Project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, about 23 percent of humanities students end up owing more than $30,000, and more than 14 percent owe more than $50,000.

As things stand, I can only identify a few circumstances under which one might reasonably consider going to graduate school in the humanities:

- You are independently wealthy, and you have no need to earn a living for yourself or provide for anyone else.
- You come from that small class of well-connected people in academe who will be able to find a place for you somewhere.
- You can rely on a partner to provide all of the income and benefits needed by your household.
- You are earning a credential for a position that you already hold — such as a high-school teacher — and your employer is paying for it.

Those are the only people who can safely undertake doctoral education in the humanities. Everyone else who does so is taking an enormous personal risk, the full consequences of which they cannot assess because they do not understand how the academic-labor system works and will not listen to people who try to tell them.

It's hard to tell young people that universities recognize that their idealism and energy — and lack of information — are an exploitable resource. For universities, the impact of graduate programs on the lives of those students is an acceptable externality, like dumping toxins into a river. If you cannot find a tenure-track position, your university will no longer court you; it will pretend you do not exist and will act as if your unemployability is entirely your fault. It will make you feel ashamed, and you will

probably just disappear, convinced it's right rather than that the game was rigged from the beginning.

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