

“From being to doing: mobilizing the humanities”

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May 21, 2015

Thank you, and thanks to Paul Yachnin and the many others who have contributed to organizing this conference and to Lesly Cormack, who invited me to speak at a precursor conference this past March at the University of Alberta.¹

I offer a four-hour session at US and Canadian universities in which I teach humanities PhD students learn how to look for non-academic jobs. Students choosing to attend it typically come from one of two cohorts: second- and third-year students, or students in their fifth year and later. The difference in reaction of the two groups to my material is striking and remarkably consistent. Second- and third-year grad students tend to find it liberating, and their reaction is most often something like this: “coursework and exams are over, and now I face the great white whale of the dissertation. But this material shows me I have more skills and employment alternatives than I thought I did. My dissertation is not my only path; good to know.” Fifth- and later-year grad students, on the other hand, tend to find the very same material disturbing. Their reaction is most often something like this: “I’m finishing the dissertation, but I’m not likely to get a tenure-track job, or a job anywhere I want to go, or any academic job at a decent wage. Why am I hearing about about an unfamiliar search? Why do I have to start over like this? What did I do all this for?” In just two or three years, the students become significantly more resistant even to learning about entering jobs outside the academy, even though in that time they have

¹ As prepared for delivery; edited to add citations. Presented at The Future of Graduate Education in the Humanities, May 21-22, 2015, Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas (IPLAI), McGill University, Montréal, Quebec. The paper from the March 2015 conference is ““Trial is by What is Contrary”: new directions for the Humanities PhD,” Future of the PhD Conference, March 20-21, 2015 University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 11-12. A PDF of that paper is available (requires Adobe reader): <https://uofa.ualberta.ca/arts/-/media/arts/programs/graduate/documents/krook-documents/trial-is-by-what-is-contrary-delivery.pdf>; a video recording is also available, at <https://vimeo.com/125608173>.

become better acquainted with their chances are of getting academic work, which you would think would motivate them to learn this information. Today I am going to discuss how and why so many graduate students change from the former view of learning about the non-academic job market to the latter, and what that change tells us about the current state of graduate education. In that context, I will make recommendations for changes to Humanities PhD programs and discuss the outcomes I hope those changes will bring.

The two salient differences between those cohorts are, first, time spent on the dissertation under the supervision of the dissertation director, and, second, greater proximity to the academic job market itself. By their fifth year in programs that require a master's degree at entry, their time as students has largely shifted from collective learning to the more individual focus on candidacy exams and the dissertation. Intellectual input comes from many fewer faculty members, and the chief among those remaining is the dissertation director. The dissertation director is always on the tenure-track faculty and, as often as not, already tenured. This narrowing of faculty influences goes still further, even if they have a supervisory committee of more than one member, because most departments have only one or at most two faculty members under whose leading direction a student could reasonably work: an Art History graduate student, for example, is unlikely to find more than one specialist in Roman art, and even English departments, usually one of the largest humanities faculties, have no more than one or two senior specialists in any given field who supervise dissertations.

The natural result is that students committing time and energy to the dissertation are most influenced by the intellectual and behavioral role modeling of a very small number of people who influence them directly and indirectly, the tenured or tenure-track faculty. When those students seek employment, their dissertation directors influence them directly, of course, about the market they themselves know best, the academic market for tenure-track jobs. But the indirect influence is, in my

experience, even stronger. As the tenure-track job market is the one where the faculty members supervising dissertations have themselves succeeded, students understandably envision that as success for themselves, even though it is the kind of job the students themselves are statistically least likely to get. So as their dissertations progress, they have an increasingly narrow range of chief intellectual role models modeling success in the type of jobs least likely to be gotten by the graduate students themselves.

Just as every day spent writing the dissertation increases the graduate students' perception of their sunk cost, every day also brings the students closer to entering the academic job market. One of the peculiarities of academics is that while there are very few academic jobs, the path to them is straightforward, compared to most for-profit, non-profit, and public-sector job searches: the known universe of the jobs is a manageably small number (smaller than any of us would like), and the application process is widely understood. That relative ease of the application process contributes to the dynamic of too close a focus on too few outcomes. Given the intellectual complexity of the projects undertaken by the students, the relative simplicity of the pathway has obvious attractions; given how much time, effort, money, and opportunity cost they have sunk into the PhD, resistance to an unfamiliar, complicated, demanding job search toward a different kind of job makes perfect sense.²

Here's the contrasting vision that I offer students at the end of this pathway: you have more skills than you may realize, but you need to remember them, learn to value them, and develop new language to describe them. You know more people who can help you than you may realize, but they are not only the people the past few years have taught you to respect. Your work will still help you

² Graduate students realize what is happening, though they seldom fully realize how successful and happy they can be outside academics, or how to engage the non-academic job market, which is why my training work has a market. Their anxiety levels often rise as their time in their programs progresses. One response to their plight is a call for better support systems, which is in my mind essentially backwards, even though we do, of course, need better support systems. But even more than that, we need PhD programs that don't engender the need for support systems nearly as much as they do now, and there are many ways to accomplish that, ways which are relatively simple, inexpensive, and short-term.

enormously, but you will need to describe it differently and target different audiences. The PhD is an aspect of your abilities, not your whole identity: it's not that you are a PhD, it's that you have a PhD, and you can deploy your degree usefully, successfully, and happily without being employed as an academic.

A narrowing of privileged role models and proximity to a privileged job market but not to the privileged jobs within it cause students to react much more negatively toward learning about the non-academic job market as they progress toward their degrees. But what are the underlying problems in PhD training that lead students to react this way to what should be positive news – you have more skills and opportunities than you think, if you need or want them – and how are we going to fix those problems? Counter-intuitively, one of the problems is not the academic job market itself. For purposes of our discussion, let's accept the 2011 Statistics Canada numbers that 6,000 PhDs were granted in Canada, for which there were an estimated 500 tenure-track jobs, or a ratio of roughly twelve to one.³ Now let's imagine having four times the number of open slots, from 500 to 2000. That would still mean no more than one candidate in three would get a job, even before candidates from previous years and the international students were added to the applicant pool. So even if the job market magically grew from 500 to 2000, we would still have a large-scale problem. Put another way, we have to rethink the humanities PhD not only because the job market is bad, but because even if it were unimaginably better, we would still have a great deal of human capital at stake, both those hired into the academy and the greater number who are not.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the constraints of the job market, we should primarily focus on two problems whose fixes are within our own control: we train students in too narrow a range of dissertation lengths and types, and we most often implicitly and explicitly devalue non-academic job outcomes.

³ The 6000 figure of granted PhD degrees comes from Statistics Canada, CANSIM 477-0020, 2011. The 500 figure comes from http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/qc/job_futures/statistics/4121.shtml

First, to the range of dissertation lengths and types that we as faculty accept and value. I have argued that we need to change the pattern of scholarship from graduate dissertation as monograph-length work that becomes a book for an assistant professor's tenure to a shorter work that becomes monograph length for the tenure book.⁴ Here is the reasoning behind this proposed change. When a higher percentage of graduate students were likely to get a research and teaching positions in academics, the pattern of a monograph-length dissertation that became a book for tenure made some sense. A good deal of work was done in graduate school in the relative freedom from other academic responsibilities, such as extensive committee work. In that system, assistant professors had both a good foundation for their book and some more time to allow that work to mature. But now that many more students are not finding work in academics at all, and another large group enters as adjuncts without time for research, many staying in that status throughout their time as academics, many fewer of those monograph-length dissertations will be given the time and attention and resources they need to become books. The sixth and seventh years after the master's degree are optimizing dissertations for becoming academic books in support of the jobs the students are least likely to get. We are taking too much from too many students and employing too few of them ourselves to justify all that time, money, and opportunity cost, for them and incidentally for supervising faculty: we need to get them to do a solid piece of scholarship and send those who will not remain in research-supported academics into other jobs sooner than we now do. And the students who do go on to research and teaching positions will still find the support in those jobs to create their monographs out of their dissertations.

Now about variation in type of dissertation. Paul Yachnin recounted to me a discussion with graduate students about another proposal to augment the forms of the dissertation, a proposal

⁴ Anne Krook, "'Trial is by What is Contrary': new directions for the Humanities PhD," Future of the PhD Conference, March 20-21, 2015 University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 11-12.

described at length in the *White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities*.⁵ He told me of his surprise at the depth of resistance from the graduate students to that proposal, a proposal whose varied experimental forms I also support. When I first heard of the students' resistance I didn't get it, but here is what I realized over time. Students don't necessarily reject the shorter dissertation I propose and the alternative forms the *White Paper* outlines because they are bad ideas – more discussion and some trials will be needed to determine that. But in a difficult academic job market, where we have modeled and valued the type of job above all others that students know they may very well not get, of course they hang onto the one tangible proof that they are in fact scholars and do in fact deserve the respect that goes with it. And of course they hang onto the chance to succeed in the eyes of their dissertation directors, who understand and respect and themselves succeeded with the classic recent form of the dissertation. The students hang onto the classic dissertation in part because they may not get much else out of our profession other than approval that they have completed it. That is an understandable reaction but a terrible reason to preserve the dissertation in its current form and length. And we must not use the students' wishes in this regard as a reason to keep the dissertation in its current form without acknowledging how we have influenced that opinion.

Whatever happens to the dissertation, my proposal, the *White Paper's*, or some other ones, we need to acknowledge this dynamic. Students don't value dissertations as currently constructed in a vacuum; they value them in their current form in part because their role models do, and value it as the requirement for a tenure-track appointment, which their role models value. The shorter work I propose and the alternative kinds of dissertations the white paper discusses and whatever other experiments we conduct will be valued by the students only if faculty members value them, which will require supplementing how many faculty members now think of the dissertation. To do that, we must understand the costs and opportunity costs of the sixth and seventh year of post-masters' PhD programs

⁵ "White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities," Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, McGill University, December 2013, 11-18, 19.

where those dissertations become proto-books. We need to conduct the imaginative exercise of asking “what would happen if PhD programs had a hard stop after five years, six with a master’s degree? What would the costs and gains be to the profession? And what would the costs and gains be to the students who pursue careers elsewhere, if those other dissertations were available options?”

Now to the second problem, that faculty sometimes devalue non-academic job outcomes. When students begin their degree courses, we can’t, of course, know who will finish, or who will get academic jobs once they finish, though we know the rough current percentage and aggregate numbers of those who do not. The professoriate must replace itself over time, but in doing so we will take in more than the one student who will eventually fill a supervisor’s tenured job, or, in Lesly Cormack’s memorable phrase, “our replacement who lives in the basement until we retire, and then moves upstairs into the house.” The cost of refreshing the professoriate explicitly involves creating more PhDs than we need. Given that fact, we need to devote at least some thought, time, and resources to preparing students for the non-academic working world, where many will not only work but where they will be examples of and ambassadors for the value of advanced training in the humanities.⁶

In spite of knowing this about the profession’s internal economics, most faculty members don’t much value non-academic job outcomes. Graduate students from every university where I have ever taught say privately to me “I know I might have to look for non-academic work, and I know I need a reference from my advisor, but if I ask for one for a non-academic job she’ll never take me seriously again and I will have no chance for any academic work, ever, and probably get a crummy reference for outside work, too.” And every faculty member with whom I have discussed this behavior acknowledges that it is common.

⁶ Let’s not forget that universities are publicly funded, and that all those graduate students are not only voters themselves, but model the value of the humanities PhD to other voters, often through social media, with the massive potential reach: they may influence many more people’s thinking about the humanities than those who remain in academic classrooms.

Encouraging students to remain in academics, even as part-time, poorly paid adjuncts, happens in part because many faculty believe it is in graduate students' best interest to remain in academics at whatever level possible to give them the best chance of eventual academic employment, and they may very well be right in many cases. Two troubling facts underlie this comforting belief. One is the percentage of students who will indeed eventually succeed in getting academic work of any kind, and the sheer number of those who will not. The economics of refreshing the professoriate require over-intake and over-production, and we need to be honest about that cost, most of which the students are bearing. The second is more insidious for the ethics of the academy: that tenured research faculty benefit from a large, low-paid contingent labor force, which does a great deal of teaching at low wages and thereby makes funds available for the kinds of teaching, research, sabbaticals, and the other benefits that the tenure-track faculty enjoy that the contingent labor force does not. Most times, I believe, the encouragement to remain happens for benevolent reasons: "hang on to give yourself a chance of getting an academic job." But sometimes faculty members simply do not know about or value other kinds of work, or want to think it is necessary for students to seek it, especially when it comes to their best graduate students. Whatever the cause, it does happen that faculty will give students a reference for a position that will place them in such a contingent status and encourage them to remain in it, but tacitly dismiss them for asking for a reference that will take them out of that economy. Even if faculty mean well, and for the record I believe they almost always do, we must give graduate students the best help we can to either stay in it if they want or to help them leave it, honorably and feeling confident in themselves and their intellectual value, and we must do that absolutely without prejudice. It is time for faculty to acknowledge, address, and remedy the dynamic in which we actively encourage graduate students to remain in academics, which may well be fine, but intentionally or unintentionally punish them for seeking work outside academics, which is never fine.

There you have my understanding of how graduate students in the humanities have wound up where I find them in the fifth and sixth years attending my course: given an opportunity to broaden their understanding of their skills and opportunities to help them get the jobs that the majority of them actually will get, many students reject that vision, because they have been trained spend their energy and time on one type of dissertation for one type of outcome and because they and their role models do not value the many other job outcomes the students might have. Through the PhD program's progressive narrowing of influence and work product, under whose structure the students faithfully work, they have been trained to believe they have become something, so the opportunity to do something other than what they have become creates anxiety and frustration and a turning away from its perceived failure.

Here are some simple proposals to drain that swamp. Interestingly, while I have so far spoken mostly about the majority case – students who take non-academic jobs – these proposals will also benefit the students who remain in the research and teaching arm of the profession.

Since it *could* be any student who winds up outside academics, we have to act as though it could be any of them, even those whom we believe might get academic work. Since it *will* be a high percentage of them, we have to act as though it will be. I am speaking to you now as someone who has both trained students with PhDs for academic jobs and seen them hired as tenure-track assistant professors and eventually tenured, but who also, much later, hired other students with PhDs into non-academic jobs. I am here to say that those who do not thrive in non-academic jobs often do not because they have not been taught to how to address their new working worlds effectively in writing and speaking. Those are both solvable problems, with accessible, affordable, shorter-term fixes, which will also benefit the profession as it currently exists.

One fix is teaching students to write for broader audiences in a wider variety of venues, and not just at the dissertation stage. For graduate students starting PhD programs now, we should require that

they write for parallel non-academic publication: every piece of scholarship, every seminar paper, should have a short parallel summary of the information and argument explicitly addressing a non-academic forum. Publication is not the point at this stage; engagement with different audiences and styles of communication is the point. Requiring such a parallel summary version, whether ever published or not, would have several beneficial outcomes. Graduate students and faculty would be encouraged to remember that audiences other than academic ones also consume information. Graduate students would learn the discipline of writing short pieces for non-specialized audiences, which both academic and non-academic careers require much more often than long ones for specialists (think: course descriptions, grant applications, conference proposals). Recruiting outside readers would develop in students and faculty the verbal skills of engaging with other workplaces and a network of people who could help them if they seek non-academic jobs. Students would develop a portfolio of short pieces that would be useful to them in the event that they decide to seek non-academic work and a skill that they actually will need within academics, if they wind up there.

Of all the proposals for changing PhD education that I make, this one gets the most resistance from humanities faculty, probably because it seems farthest from their areas of expertise and farthest from their understanding of what expertise is. But there are those already on campus who have that expertise, often in Career Services or Human Resource departments, who understand how students now reach into the work world and how they address it, in speaking and writing. There are also a large number of people in the for-profit, non-profit, and public-sector worlds who desperately need and want the skills PhD students bring, but who also want the students to engage with them and their people. If we were to start with one department at one university, and put together a small group of interested parties from inside and outside the university, including graduate students, and ask them to propose a way to create and evaluate short non-academic summaries of graduate student work, we could do a trial run with seminar papers submitted by volunteers from one course the fall semester of 2015. We

should not let the perfect be the enemy of the better, we should not let the lack of a perfectly realized vision stall a trial, and we should start with a small experiment this fall.

Another benefit to alternate-audience summary is that it would create a support network for shorter, alternative forms of the dissertation. Those alternative formats imply a wider range of supervisory input and broader audiences than dissertations have traditionally had, and these shorter kinds of engagement, pre-dissertation, will allow students and faculty to find and engage those advisors and audiences, some of whom will come from outside the university. If adjunct faculty included such outside expertise and influence, that would be a profoundly positive development in our understanding of how we can enrich the faculty with adjunct work, not just use it to take cost out of the system. There's a frequently successful model of just this kind of borrowed expertise in business schools.

Another fix, medium- rather than short-term, is training faculty to value and support the non-academic jobs that we know many of our students will have to seek. The way to do this is first to set expectations privately among the faculty and thereafter publicly and jointly with the graduate students. Faculty have to set the standard for and among themselves that, since we take in more graduate students than there are faculty slots available, we have to support student efforts to get non-academic work if they need or want to. Deans, chairs, and departmental directors of graduate studies have to make that clear to the entire faculty responsible for training and placing graduate students. And then departmental faculty members, led by their directors of graduate studies and supported by their chair and their dean, need to sit down with the students and make it clear what their policies are. I recommend adapting a technique I have found effective for this type of communication in the corporate world, namely the all-hands meeting. I suggest that, once a year, probably sometime after the fall semester is underway, the director of graduate studies and the chair invite all the department's graduate students from every year to a meeting with all the departmental faculty, and say, out loud, "we know many of you will likely seek work outside of academics, either while you see academic work

or as a permanent job. You have our support if you choose to do this, and it will not prejudice any subsequent recommendation.” This is not a topic for a memo or an email, though that will be required as confirmation and follow-up; we have to look each other in the eye and say this out loud, both because it is true and because we have been acting otherwise. This is the cost of our accountability to each other. I have heard it said that we cannot make faculty show up for a meeting, and while that might be true, it is also true that we can over time create a culture of accountability to all our students on this issue, and we have to start doing that.

The sum of the changes I am proposing is this: shorten the dissertation, so book-length monographs are a product of research faculty, and so graduate students can enter-the non-academic workforce sooner, if they need to; test new forms of the thesis, and recognize the faculty’s role in hitherto validating only the standard form when gauging student resistance; train graduate students to address non-academic audiences in writing and in spoken presentation; support graduate students when they seek professional work outside academics, and train their supervisory faculty to support them. Notice that none of this requires much money, and all of it requires a great deal of analysis and intellectual will, so these efforts are perfectly suited to us as academics.

The psychological sum of the changes I am proposing is to move away from treating the PhD as something that creates a graduate student’s identity and so causes it to collapse when it does not finish developing into a tenure-track job. Instead, we should start treating it as a collection of knowledge and skills they acquire that they may use in research positions but will statistically be much more likely to use in other ways, with other audiences. And we as faculty have to believe and act as though the intellectual challenges they will address are worthy of the best intellects and training. Let me give you an example of one such challenge from my home state of Washington in the U.S., where a century ago rivers were dammed up to create reliable water supplies for agriculture and power. Recently we have

decided to take down many of some of those dams, notably the Elwha.⁷ Public discussion over removing the Elwha dam and the associated cost was not easy. Interestingly, a heightened value placed on restoring ecosystems and Native American fishing and ritual rights was blamed in some quarters for the decision, but in fact the power generated by the dam had become less efficient over time, so the benefits had fallen while our understanding of the ecological costs, and the costs themselves, rose. Success turned on creating and defending a framing narrative to justify the decision, something most humanities PhD students understand and do well. The citizens of Washington, and of the US, needed every single person holding an advanced degree with its own knowledge and skill across many disciplines, including humanities disciplines, to consider, solve, and defend that problem. I don't expect any of the other problems we will wrestle with will be easier, and I expect to need every trained mind we have. As Bill Clinton said in a different context, "We don't have a person to waste." If we are going to have all that expertise available to us when we need it, we have to train graduate students to bring their best work to a range of audiences and we as faculty have to be grateful when they do that do.

What I want out of all of these changes, and what I think is realistic to believe we will get, are graduate students who, at the end of their dissertations, have the same attitude toward the non-academic work world that the second- and third-year cohort does now when I present them an alternative vision of their future, where the non-academic workplace is a path they may choose to go down, or not. If they do, it will be toward a future of good use of their skills, their knowledge base, their explanatory powers, and their training as a whole, and toward problems worthy of their intellect and their training. What I have seen from these pre-candidacy students who become informed about alternatives to the academic workplace is that they actually become more optimistic about their dissertations, not less, because their intellects and their futures are not entirely constrained by the contours of a shrinking tenure-track workforce. They may well enter it, and they may well not, but their

⁷ The Elwha dam was begun in 1910 and finished in 1913. Removal began in 2011 and was completed in 2013.

knowledge and their skills have a purpose, and they have value not for what they are but for what they do, and they have many opportunities to do that. They need that, and I as an employer need that, and the problems of our present and future need that, and with just a little adjustment to their training we can help them get that and keep it through their time as graduate students in humanities PhD programs.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.