

How to Make a Ph.D. Matter  
By LOUIS MENAND (NYT)  
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**Getting a Ph.D. today means spending your 20's in graduate school, plunging into debt, writing a dissertation no one will read – and becoming more narrow and more bitter each step of the way.**

THE DEBATE OVER THE PRESENT AND FUTURE CONDITION of the American university is consistently reduced to a debate over ideology. The troubled relations between academics and the rest of the society get explained as the consequence of political and philosophical differences: if professors weren't so left-wing or multiculturalist or theoretical, if they could only start to think like the rest of us, the university's social standing would be restored. This manner of posing the issue is good for polemicists, but it is not much good for anyone else. For the real problem has nothing to do with politics and philosophy and everything to do with economics and structure.

Of the many symptoms of the current distress, the most telling is the dismal job market for new professors. The typical person who receives a Ph.D. in English spends eight years in graduate school, accumulates \$10,000 worth of debt and is unable to find a job. Since 1989, the number of advertised job openings for people with Ph.D.'s in English has dropped by nearly 50 percent, and many of the positions that are advertised are withdrawn later after schools revise their budgets. The placement rate for new Ph.D.'s in English is about 45 percent. But the number of doctorates awarded in English goes up almost every year.

The typical person with a new Ph.D. in history is 35 years old, has spent more than eight and a half years as a graduate student and faces a less than 50 percent chance of getting an academic job. Still, in 1994 the number of new Ph.D.'s in history rose 10 percent from the previous year; there are now more employable people with Ph.D.'s in history than ever before. The examples go on. More than 14 percent of new mathematics Ph.D.'s are unemployed. A report on the job-market experiences of chemists who had earned their doctorates between 1988 and 1994 found that a third of them are either engaged in postdoctoral study or are holding teaching positions that are only temporary.

The collapse of the job market for new professors has, in short, not been selective. Virtually every field of study has been affected. Since 1989, the number of academic job openings advertised in the field of history has dropped by 11 percent; in art and art history, 26 percent; in foreign languages, 35 percent; in political science, 37 percent. And every year universities give out more Ph.D.'s than they did the year before. Somehow the supply curve has completely lost sight of the demand curve in American academic life.

This is not just a problem of inefficient social expenditure, of overinvestment in a product – people with brand-new doctorates – nobody wants to buy. It's a problem that can be measured in less quantifiable terms as well. Resentment generated by unmet expectations is up; average intellectual quality is down. Driven by anxiety about the competition for

employment, more people are publishing more articles of less scholarly value at a younger age than ever before. A new academic class system is becoming established, in which younger, part-time and nontenure-track college teachers live in a different economic universe from older, tenured and tenure-track professors. And as the value of professional publications and scholarly expertise rises, the intellectual scope of the American university grows narrower and narrower – and the gap between the culture of people in the academy and the culture of everyone else gets wider and wider.

The lesson of the story the numbers tell seems straightforward enough: if there are fewer jobs for people with Ph.D.'s, then universities should stop giving so many people Ph.D.'s. But this is the wrong solution, because the story told by the numbers is not the most important story. The most important story is the less quantifiable one – of resentment, of the academic generation gap and of the intellectual marginalization of the university. This story has a different lesson. It points, I think, to precisely the opposite solution – which is that there should be a lot more Ph.D.'s awarded and that they should be a lot easier to get.

HOW DID THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY REACH a state in which it seems no longer able to reproduce itself efficiently? The ready assumption would be that if there are fewer jobs for professors, it must be because there are fewer students to teach, but this is not the case. In 1988, at the beginning of the current downward spiral in the job market for professors, there were 13.5 million students enrolled in American institutions of higher learning. Today, there are more than 15 million students. And these are not just part-timers: the number of bachelor's degrees awarded between 1988 and 1993 rose by more than 17 percent. It is expected that 10 years from now, the total enrollment in American colleges and universities will exceed 16 million. The bodies (with minds, presumably, attached) are there.

The academic employment crisis didn't begin yesterday. Like certain other industries, the university was a great beneficiary of the cold war. It was, for many years after 1945, the pet institution of the expanding national Government, which pumped research dollars into its programs and helped to subsidize the educations of millions of people who would otherwise have had no access to higher learning. Between 1940 and 1990, Government funds for academic research grew by a factor of 25 and enrollments increased by a factor of 10. The percentage of college-age Americans actually attending college rose from 16 percent to more than 40 percent, with half of all Americans now enjoying some exposure to higher education at some point in their lives.

The most intense period in this 50-year expansion was the 1960's. In that decade alone, enrollment increased by more than 120 percent, and more faculty positions were created than had existed in the entire 360-year history of American higher education to that point. But this enormous surge in the number of professors had an immediately depressing effect on the market for the following classes of Ph.D.'s. The recent erosion in the academic job market is not even a decline from relative prosperity: that market, particularly in the humanities, has been depressed since the early 1970's.

Many people expected that the generation of professors who entered the academic economy in the 1960's would be due for professional expiration in the 1990's – another reason why the actual employment scene in 1996 is so discouraging. The 1990's was supposed to be the time of demographic transition in the university. But the generation of professors who got in when universities were flush is getting out when funds are evaporating. They are leaving, but their budget lines are leaving with them.

For the most striking fact about the expansion of the university since 1960, the decade in which all those professors now due to retire got their jobs, is that it took place overwhelmingly in the public sector. Between 1960 and 1980, the number of public institutions of higher education in America more than doubled – from 700 to 1,600. And although there are today 1.5 million more students enrolled in private colleges and universities than there were in 1960, there are 8 million more students enrolled in public institutions.

And this is therefore where the crunch is being felt. With less reason to pour money into research and development now that the cold war is over, and with more pressure to lower taxes and reduce spending, the Federal Government and many state governments are reducing subsidies to public higher education. State appropriation to public higher education in California, which has the largest system in the country, was cut 29 percent between 1991-92 and 1993-94. In the same period, state expenditures have decreased by 4 percent. (State expenditures on corrections, though, have increased by 40 percent. If prison guards were required to hold doctorates, the academic placement rate could be reversed overnight.)

THIS WAS NOT THE IDEAL TIME for an internal crisis of confidence to arise. But academic uncertainty about the purpose and the wisdom of isolating intellectual work within universities has never been greater. "We live in a state of educational anomie," says Stanley N. Katz, the president of the American Council of Learned Societies, in "The Condition of American Liberal Education," a book published last year by the College Board.

Academic professionalism has never been more intense, but the point of all the "rigor" is less and less self-evident. In a recent survey of the condition of the social sciences, titled "Visions of the Sociological Tradition," Donald Levine concludes that the established disciplines in social science "no longer fulfill the function of providing orienting frameworks for intellectual communities." The Modern Language Association's annual conventions now feature panels with titles like "Paradigms Lost." What is it exactly, these panels ask, that requires English professors to be locked up in this airborne Giant Peach of professional journals, presses and conferences, making refinements on theoretical arguments few people outside the field can make sense of? Why, as Levine's book implies, should there be separate departments of sociology, anthropology, history and political science, each with its own theories and methods and its own solar system of academic stars and black holes? What makes these disciplines useful ways of carving up the world for inquiry, and what pedagogical or social good is the inquiry doing?

This reconsideration of the intellectual basis of academic work would be stimulating if it did not have the misfortune of coinciding with those other malign portents – the end of the cold war, the reduction in state support and the wider public criticism of academic thought. Academic self-doubt is only adding to the sense of general uncertainty. So why, in circumstances of unraveling conviction and commitment, is creating more Ph.D.'s a good idea?

THE KEY STATISTIC in the profile of the typical new Ph.D. is the extraordinary amount of time he or she has spent acquiring the thing. As the old question asks, how many graduate students does it take to screw in a light bulb? One is the answer, but it takes him seven years. The median elapsed time between the B.A. and the Ph.D. is now 10.5 years, of which 7.1 are spent as a registered student trying to get the bulb in the socket. The median age of those graduating this year with a Ph.D. is slightly over 34.

This is not a function of the difficulty of the research. Students in the humanities are among those who take the longest – 11.9 years between degrees, 8.3 of them as registered students. William G. Bowen and Neil L. Rudenstine suggest in their landmark study, "In Pursuit of the Ph.D.," that this is because it is in the humanities that the paradigms for scholarship have become the most unclear. But whatever the reason, getting a doctorate is now an enormous investment in training for a profession that offers, in many fields, a less than 50 percent chance of employment.

Money would help, of course. But there are a few things the American academy needs even more than money. One is greater intellectual freshness and sense of purpose. Another is a higher degree of interchange with the world of art and ideas outside the university. Indifference, and even hostility, to academic writing is not restricted to conservatives who regard the university as a refuge of left-wing thought. It is shared by many liberal nonacademic intellectuals as well. I can't think of a single person I know who entered college around the time I did, in 1969, and who did not go on to become a professor, who has the slightest sympathy with or interest in (except, occasionally, a negative one) what goes on within university humanities departments. And many of these people are themselves producers and consumers of art and ideas.

One thing that has cut American cultural life in two in this way is the wall of credentialism that has arisen between academic intellectuals and everyone else. Graduate students looking for work sometimes complain that their credential is not transferable – that despite their enhanced literacy skills, they are actually considered less rather than more employable by people in nonacademic fields like publishing or advertising or business. But transferability is a two-way street. If a publisher suddenly decided to take up a career as a professor and proposed to walk into a college department and start to teach, academics would be outraged. Where is the credential? David Damrosch, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia who last year published a book critical of the culture of the university, "We Scholars," points out that in 1969 fully one-third of the nation's faculty members did not have a Ph.D. But during the 1970's, he says, the doctorate became mandatory for academic employment.

When the market tightened, professionalism grew and credentialism became wildly overvalued. And the more the academy walled itself off by specialization and credentialism, the more it exacerbated its division from the rest of the educated world. The division is destructive on both sides. The nonacademic world would be enriched if more people in it had had exposure to academic research and teaching, thereby acquiring a little understanding of the issues that bugaboos like "critical theory" and "the multicultural curriculum" are attempts to deal with. And the academic world would be enlivened if it conceived of its purpose as something larger and more various than mere professional reproduction.

Three things make graduate education so time-consuming: the lack of intellectual focus in many fields, the time spent working as a part-time instructor, and the dissertation. If all Ph.D. programs were three-year programs, with no teaching and no dissertation – if getting a doctorate were like getting a law degree – graduate education would immediately acquire focus and efficiency. It would attract more of the many students who, after completing college, yearn for deeper immersion in academic study but who cannot imagine spending seven years struggling through a graduate program only to find themselves virtually disqualified for anything but a teaching career they can no longer count on having.

The intellectual gain would be an increase in diversity within the academy. More students would be entering graduate school without having a commitment to academia and would thus be likely to be more skeptical of the reigning scholarly paradigms in their fields. But when these students do graduate and go on to careers outside the university, they would bring with them an understanding of those paradigms, which might lead to a greater commonality between professors and other people who work with art and ideas. The gain in efficiency would come from providing graduate-level education to people who can emerge from school in their mid-20's, rather than in their mid-30's, and still contemplate a number of career options. And the gain in focus would come from reconceiving higher learning in a field as a sequence of courses – much as law schools require basic courses in contracts, property, torts and civil procedure along with various electives – rather than as the present potpourri of specialized classes reflecting the particular research interests of the professors who happen to be teaching in a given semester.

The objection that a longer apprenticeship is necessary to produce qualified college teachers is specious, since many first- and second-year graduate students now teach college classes without training or supervision. In a bad economy, this teaching can even become a source of exploitation, as graduate students work, year after year, at unlivably low rates while searching for full-time employment. If universities had to hire people who already had degrees and did not feel like indentured servants, the academic employment scene would be a lot healthier. Doctoral programs could even require one course in pedagogy, which would be one more course in pedagogy than most professors have ever had in their lives.

The case against the dissertation requirement is partly an old one, which is that there is no correlation between the ability to write a dissertation and the ability to teach, and partly a

more recent one (made by, among others, Professor Damrosch), which is that many scholarly books today are just journal articles on steroids. Few dissertations, the majority of which are written in conditions of poverty and overwork, are publishable in any case without substantial rewriting. The production of a single publishable article for each student graduated would be a net plus for American scholarship.

Shortening and intensifying graduate education in this way might seem to make less sense for the natural sciences, but in fact the idea has already been broached in that area. Last March, Anne C. Petersen, then the deputy director of the National Science Foundation, argued in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that "the PH.D. should be construed in our society more like the law degree. A lot of people go to law school with no plans to practice law." And Jesse H. Ausubel of Rockefeller University and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation has suggested "valorizing the master's degree" in the sciences – making the M.S. a viable employment credential. If this makes sense for biologists, it ought to make sense for literary critics and historians.

Since the 1960's, the American academy has profited by a huge increase in the number of Americans demanding higher education and the benefits it can bring. And it has profited, even during bad patches in national economic prosperity, from continued public investment and support. But it has been damaged by an increasing and increasingly pointless emphasis on credentialism. Now the expansion seems to have halted. It's a good time to take another look at the kind of good universities can do.