Why Go to Grad School?

By Paula E. Findlen

The past few years have seen a flood of articles informing readers of the dire prospects for doctoral students in such increasingly unemployable fields as the humanities. The bad press is so unrelenting that it’s worth taking time to explain why the advanced pursuit of knowledge can and should be a worthwhile endeavor.

I want to dispel a few myths currently being perpetuated:

Myth No. 1: There has never been a worse time to be a doctoral student in the humanities.

During the past 20 years, increased support for doctoral students and the decreased size of many graduate programs have given a greater proportion of doctoral students the reassurance of decent funding—fully paid tuition and stipends, teaching assistantships, and money to cover many basic living expenses.

Having gone to graduate school in the era before fellowship packages were routinely offered, a time when the largest graduate programs admitted 50 to 100 students per year, mostly without funds, I have a clear sense of how different the current experience is—and why it’s preferable. Small, well-financed programs offer a supportive educational experience that facilitates the pursuit of advanced knowledge.

We need some citizens committed to exploring and producing knowledge, as well as consuming it, and the outcomes cannot be measured solely in economic terms (nor is the Ph.D. the only path to that end, but it is certainly an important one). We need to support graduate education at a reasonable financial level, and to offer those who pursue it strong incentives not to linger. And yes,
we need to expose doctoral students to a wider range of employment possibilities, internship programs, joint degrees, etc., while also taking the lead in educating employers about the skills many Ph.D.’s have to offer the nonacademic world. Our students will not all be employed in academic jobs, but in fact, they never have been.

**Myth No. 2:** There has never been a worse job market for doctoral students in the humanities.

Memories are short. After the more prosperous era of the mid-1990s through around 2008, we seem to have forgotten the truly dreadful market of the 1970s, the awful job market of most of the 1980s, some of the occasional downturns of the 1990s, and the fact that even the best of times has never offered the number of tenure-track jobs equal to the number of Ph.D.’s.

When I applied to graduate school, in 1983-84, some clear-sighted programs included a disclaimer about job prospects in their admissions packets. It was a good thing. My mentors, veterans of the job market of the 1970s, explained the futility of having specific job outcomes in mind. I went to graduate school knowing there were few academic jobs, and I spent every year in graduate school thinking about how I might handle that issue at the end of my degree.

An article written during my senior year by a recent graduate of my college further underscored the uselessness of the very field I was considering. Leslie S.P. Brown’s "Who Cares About the Renaissance?" appeared in *Newsweek* in 1983. Its author, then a graduate student in art history, described in poignant detail the irrelevance of pursuing a life of scholarship devoted to an antiquated and obsolete subject, and the frustrations of her professors (some of whom were also mine) about writing books that almost no one read. She also told readers quite eloquently why she was going to graduate school anyway. I posted the article on my door to remind myself that pursuing graduate work was not an obvious choice. Yet I didn’t then choose to apply to law school.

I decided to go to graduate school to have a period in my life in
which I would not put issues of career and employment in the foreground but would learn history, study many languages, and see how much I liked teaching. (I discovered that I liked it a lot.)

With hindsight, I can say that it all worked out. But the point I want to make for the benefit of students now who are wondering if they should pursue their love of some arcane subject is that there was not a single day in graduate school, or in the period in which I first entered the job market, when I assumed that the outcome of my decision to become an expert on the Renaissance would be a job as a professor. I hoped that might happen; I did everything I could to be a good candidate for any positions that might appear. But I did so with a realistic sense that there were not many of them.

Thinking about the Ph.D. as a decision with unclear job prospects was clarifying. It was a reality check. I made sure not to stay in graduate school too long.

**Myth No. 3:** There will be no academic jobs in the humanities.

Discussions of the academic job market often remind me of the apocalyptic predictions of charismatic preachers who roamed the streets of medieval and Renaissance cities, proclaiming the end of the world. There are certainly fewer jobs than there were a few years ago. And, no doubt, some fields of study are being endangered not only by the economy but also by administrators who no longer see the importance—the "usefulness"—of investing in fields like foreign languages and literatures, or in exploring the relation of the humanities to other areas of knowledge. We are also faced with undergraduates’ changing interests and concerns about their own job prospects.

But will such fields disappear entirely across all institutions? Surely not. Will graduate students interested, say, in Italian literature, medieval music, or 19th-century philosophy have to be trained differently for the current and future job market? Absolutely. The answer is to train broadly rather than narrowly and, in some instances, to train under a different rubric.

My field was once called Renaissance and Reformation. Then it
became Early Modern Europe. Now it is Medieval/Early Modern. Soon it will be the Pre-Modern World. I expect to train students to enfold the smaller subjects within the larger category. They will still teach the Renaissance with the depth and skill it deserves, but they will teach it in a broader context and compete for jobs with other graduate students who study other aspects of the pre-modern world. The narrowly defined silos that were once departments, or distinct subfields with specific employment tracks, can work at the level of research expertise; they can work in teaching subjects of genuine interest to our undergraduates or graduate students. But they are unlikely to be the only thing we can or should do, if they ever were.

**Myth No. 4:** We cannot in good conscience allow people to pursue Ph.D.'s in the humanities.

Why should someone get a Ph.D. in 2014? For all the reasons that have always existed: for unbridled intellectual ecstasy; because you are curious and passionate about learning and want to acquire more academic skills; because you are unable to imagine yourself not doing this for some period of your life, regardless of what job(s) will come later. This is a pragmatic decision, after serious reflection on the alternatives, and with a full understanding of the uncertainties of employment.

Few, if any, employment markets that I know of in the 21st century guarantee specific and stable outcomes. Ask a 50-year-old programmer whether he or she can get a job at Facebook, and you’ll see what I mean.

I would be the first to say that getting a Ph.D. has its frustrations. You defer a number of things along the way, but it is remiss not to discuss what is gained as well. You will be training in something specific and not general like law, business, or education. You will be offered a period in your life in which to learn and think, and see where it takes you. That is a rare and valuable thing. We have begun to assess the Ph.D. as if it were an M.B.A. It isn’t.

So here is my advice to someone contemplating graduate school:
First, unless you have personal financial resources, or will attend a well-funded program, don’t go. If there are doctoral programs out there still admitting graduate students without adequate financial support—or woefully underpaying teaching assistants—they should be pressured (indeed embarrassed) into recalibrating their admissions policies.

Second, you should go to graduate school because you want to have a unique educational experience, one that you can get only by pursuing a Ph.D., and to contribute to knowledge of the subject in the process. Wanting to be a college professor may be a secondary goal, but it shouldn’t be your primary motivation.

Third, if you decide to go to graduate school, make a contract with yourself about how much time you wish to invest in this project of intellectual advancement.

Fourth, prepare yourself for jobs that may use your expertise—but not necessarily as a college teacher. A friend who did a lot of consulting work when tenure-track jobs were not readily forthcoming once told me that having a Ph.D. means two things: You know a lot about a little, and you know better than most people how to look things up—particularly at a time when there is so much cheap, unreliable, useless information out there. If you can convince people that you are better at generating and handling information than they are, you will be valuable. Write and analyze better than the average college graduate, and you will see why a number of employers value that skill, too. Know how to use technology in ways that are relevant to the skills you are developing as a scholar, being mindful that those skills might have other applications. In other words, look up on the scholarly path, but also look outward.

In my most optimistic moments, I have a modest hope that we might evolve beyond the conversation that measures whether we have fulfilled the implicit contract: Ph.D. = academic career. I already sense a strong desire to move forward in this direction at many institutions, and that is encouraging. No program should present its degree as being focused on a single outcome. We need to see the Ph.D. as a flexible degree.
At the same time, we should not diminish the value of advanced research that demonstrates unique skills and the ability to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and its translation. If we can manage to do both, we can ensure a future for this lengthy, uncertain path to a degree.

Paula E. Findlen is a professor of Italian history, chair of the history department, and director of the Suppes Center for History and Philosophy of Science at Stanford University.

19 Comments

procrustes · 2 months ago
Good advice and very similar to what I have told students who ask me for grad school recommendations. I survived the 80s job market, which was ugly. Friends a few years ahead of me went through the crash in the 70s; I have more sympathy for them than the current crop since they actually had every reason to believe jobs were plentiful when they started. When I asked about grad school in the late 70s, my advisor told very bluntly how bad things were. But relatively few borrowed much then. Most of us had fellowships or assistantships that covered our living expenses (unlike the current generation, we had low expectations). And grad students were still expected to read widely in their field and pass general exams that demonstrated this. Overspecialization is a more recent phenomenon.

Lisa Feldkamp · 2 months ago
Thank you! I got my PhD in Classics, am working in the non-academic world and couldn't be happier with the turn that my career is taken. I will say that I did expect that my PhD would lead to an academic job and so there was initial disappointment and a feeling of failure, but my PhD skills (particularly the ability to find accurate information mentioned above) have proven useful in my new career. Plus, I had some wonderful years studying a subject that I love and teaching some amazing students.

charlesreitz · 2 months ago
This part can not be emphasized enough: "you should go to graduate school because you want to have a unique educational experience, one that you can get only by pursuing a Ph.D., and to contribute to knowledge of the subject in the process." This motivation must be uppermost.

quepasso · 2 months ago
yes. and programs need to start telling people up front that any other reason (including wanting to be a college teacher) is not a good one to get a Ph.D. and colleges need to start hiring people with pedagogical expertise (beyond mere experience) for teaching jobs (with no research components.
Although this excellent article concentrates on the humanities the advice is also applicable to STEM. Additional good advice is the separation of a PhD from job positions and careers exclusively in academia. Having been in an "alternative" science career (non-lab, non-professorship) for decades, I mentor high school and college science students about the wealth of alternative careers available, for both BS and PhD degree holders.

4 | Reply | Share

"Things have been worse before" is hardly a ringing endorsement.

21 | Reply | Share

Thank you Paula Findlen for getting this exactly right. Humanities Ph.D.’s are valuable to our society and economy beyond just professorial roles. Graduate students should, however, prepare themselves for many possible career paths. See http://www.historians.org/jobs...

3 | Reply | Share

Oh Lord. "Follow your dreams, little bird, and you will soar with the eagles!"

The TT job market is very demonstrably worse than it has ever been, the backlog of unemployed but still seeking Ph.Ds increases every year, and with the recent Republican victories we are heading into yet another round of belt tightening and replacing retiring TT lines with some poverty-wage adjuncts. But go ahead and go to grad school for ten years--it is an adventure!

"With hindsight, I can say that it all worked out."

Survivorship bias.

26 | Reply | Share

The author specifically advises that anyone considering graduate school set a limit on how long they are willing to spend doing it. I doubt she has 10 years in mind.

1 | Reply | Share

does any grad student have more than 5 years in mind when they start? without advice what to do if it takes you longer this is no advice at all.

5 | Reply | Share

While this article does come around to some good points near the end about being realistic in perspectives when entering graduate school and trying to be flexible with the degree, it does nothing to dispel the issue that this is rarely taking place. Professors are primarily mentoring graduate students to be other professors. Few professors or programs are doing much to promote other career paths with the Ph.D., particularly in the humanities. Job placement may have always been bad, but that does little for students who have gone through programs encouraged that they’ll beat the long odds and are still unemployed or underemployed. This article does nothing but sugar coat the problem, and we hardly need more of that.

11 | Reply | Share

True. Graduate programs, especially in the humanities, often gauge their success by how many of their graduates go into tenure-track positions--as if no other profession is worthy of notice.

2 | Reply | Share
i am always a bit curious about how professors that have spent their whole life in academia are going to prepare students for work outside of academia - 5+ years from now. really, (academic, field specific) writing skills and looking stuff up is supposed to do the trick? how does that work? hey, i have trained for 5+ years to be an academic researcher so i have writing and research skills specific to this very specific area but they can cross over. you can check by reading my 100+ page dissertation. maybe i am too out of touch. are there any potential employers here that would hire someone out of a PhD program based on these skills? and would they hire him/her over someone with a masters but 5 years work experience?

No, they can't adequately prepare students for professions outside of the professoriate. Without work experience and professional contacts outside of a purely academic setting, how can they?

Writing and research skills used in academia are different from their non-ac counterpart. That isn't to say that graduate students can't modify those skills for non-ac roles, but they have to demonstrate that they can actually apply them in a professional setting outside academe, which they can do with internships, volunteer work, etc. But good luck finding an advisor who agrees to support his/her advisee's doing work outside of their graduate research. On top of that, a recommendation from a professor doesn't carry nearly the same weight (or any weight really) as one from a manager who is working in the same non-ac field the student is trying to break into.

The hiring culture is different too. Academe prizes potential over proven experience (no adjuncts please!!!). Outside academe no one cares about your potential; they care about what you've already done. Work

I read this article interested because I have heard the argument against grad school so many times I was curious to see the argument for it. I fully intend on continuing my education after my Masters and have never had one doubt since my return to school in 2009 what objectives I would achieve. I have come to find out that this is unique during the course of a university degree. That people often don't understand what they want out of life and then proceed to pay an outrage sum for it. I chose to put a ten year gap between high school and uni. Along the way I discovered what I like and didn't about the work place offered to me by my high school education. I chose the Liberal Arts because I have deep intellectual curiosity about anything to do with history and knowledge. I didn't go back to school thinking, "Oh, someday I will make a million dollars." I went back to school because I understood that life wasn't giving me what I wanted without it. I am choosing to continue because since I returned life is giving me what I want. I am about to graduate with a Bachelors in Museum Studies and a minor in German. I have studied abroad several times and expanded my resume in ways I couldn't even imagine and not once in all the times I have heard the argument against my P.H.D have I ever thought, "Well maybe I shouldn't..." My confidence might be rare but I say nothing in this world is sure, not even tomorrow but history lives on if we remember. My pursuit is not a career in the academic field but if I got a job as a professor I wouldn't turn it down. Life should not be about how much you make but how much you enjoyed it. I think the humanities may be that rare group of individuals who understand that philosophy. Just the opinion of a bachelor student but I say if you are thinking of grad school and how it would benefit your life, then asking someone else what they think is just silly. Its your life. No one knows you
better than you.

JHC - 2 months ago

"When I applied to graduate school, in 1983-84..."

smdh

paynejohnny - 2 months ago

When I applied to grad school, I was waiting tables for minimum wage at a Sheraton, having previously worked as a garbageman, grocery store cashier, and substitute math teacher. When I got accepted, having a few thousand dollars and tuition waived seemed like a fortune. I spent endless hours studying, reading, getting every ounce I could even from careless advisors and mediocre teachers. I knew I would succeed, no matter what the prognostications. Well, that's what I told myself. In fact, I could have failed abjectly. I lived modestly, had a child, taught extra courses when I could as a TA. I finished my PhD in four years, the allotted time of my fellowship. I almost got an ulcer, but it went away. I came onto the job market during a "bad" period. I completely ignored the pessimism and griping around me, especially that of fellow students, some of whom carried a sense of entitlement, who swore they'd only accept jobs "at good places" (and later got nothing). I put out 33 applications, got 5 campus interviews, and landed a job at a top-tier institution, while all the rest turned me down (I would have gone to any of them). One offer: that's all I needed. I beat out 100 other applicants for that spot. Was there blind luck involved? Of course. Committees have their whims. Even had I ended up #2 or #3, I would have been unemployed, I guess. But I would have just as doogingly gone on. I'm nothing special, but I never wasted a

see more

Guest - 2 months ago

Findlen makes a few good points, but overall, this is a variation of the long-festering "life of the mind" argument, which is an easy thing to tout if you have a secure job. "Unbridled intellectual ecstasy" and program funding might be good things when you're a student, but once you're cast out of the academic sausage grinder, those things simply translate to "unemployment" in a world dominated by the utter sham of neoliberal economics. Finally, regarding Dr. Findlen's wish to, "evolve beyond the conversation that measures whether we have fulfilled the implicit contract: Ph.D. = academic career:" only a gainfully employed person would say something that is so obviously bullshit. I'm sorry, Dr. Findlen, but even as I look with hope towards new paths, I AM still angry and regretful, and don't you dare try and smooth over the reality of the 21st century labour market with already over-used platitudes.

8 ^ | v - Reply - Share

CCHistory Prof - 2 months ago

I have never, ever, advised a student to go to graduate school in my discipline (American History). I always advise against it. Still, I know of at least two who did go on to grad school.

The bigger problems are the economy combined and starry-eyed students. No advice from me convinces them when they see me and thing "he got a job."

My most successful arguments are not economic, but personal. A PhD means that plans to get married, have children, purchase a house, etc... get put on very long hold, typically until the early-mid 30s at least, very possibly closer to 40. I try to explain to students how they may feel differently about their lives at age 34 than they do at 24. Their significant other, if they have one, may move on while they themselves are still in "student" mode. That sometimes influences them.

Economic arguments will not work. Any students who have come of age in this century have heard "there are no jobs" for the vast majority of disciplines. I'm in
my 30s and I remember hearing that in college too, so much so that it was almost oppressive, as if there were NO jobs for ANYONE except maybe engineers and doctors.