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Changing the Way We Socialize Doctoral Students

By Leonard Cassuto

This month's column begins with the career of an academic I'll call "Jack." It ends in the classroom of a professional development seminar—a place where more graduate students need to be.

Jack got his bachelor's from an elite college in the early 1980s, and then began graduate school at an elite university. There he exemplified the national trend toward slow completion. He didn't get his Ph.D. until 12 years later, in the mid-1990s.

Like many other young Ph.D.'s then and now, Jack had bad luck on the job market despite a solid publication record. He didn't get a tenure-track job out of the gate, so he took a visiting assistant professorship at a major state university. With that appointment, Jack began a career-long migration in search of permanent employment. That passage took Jack from campus to campus, with his two longest stops lasting four years each; one of those stints was in the writing program of a major private university, and the other was a visiting professorship at a different private university. The visiting job took the form of a series of one-year contracts, so Jack never knew from year to year whether he'd be employed beyond May.

Through it all, he evolved from a committed teacher into a fantastically dedicated one. He struggled with mixed success to maintain a publishing agenda while testing the job market again and again.

After that last four-year stint ended, Jack failed for the first time to land on his feet at another university. Then, in what amounts to a cruel cosmic joke, Jack got cancer. His diagnosis gave him a new job, as caregiver to himself. That job, like all the others, proved temporary. He died this past fall.

The philosopher George Berkeley is credited (perhaps not rightly) with asking whether a tree falling in the forest makes a sound if no one is there to hear it. Jack's life and death generated no headlines, but when you look closely at his unfortunate career, his ups and

downs say a lot about the way that we prepare graduate students for employment, especially in the humanities and in some of the social sciences.

Like most people with the gumption to complete a Ph.D., Jack felt that he deserved an academic job. Coming out of a top doctoral program at an elite university, he also felt that he deserved a job with a low teaching load and generous research support. Over the course of his years as a temporary faculty member, his sights gradually dropped—but his expectations always trailed them. In other words, the assistant professorships that Jack most wanted were always a little more desirable than the ones for which he could realistically compete.

Why, at a time when graduate students are lucky if they get a tenure-track job at all, should we focus on the travails of an unfortunate graduate of a top program?

Because the gap between Jack's expectations and his reality is full of significance for graduate teachers as well as graduate students.

Virtually all graduate students receive their Ph.D.'s from a research university. They get their first classroom experience there, and their dissertations are mainly guided by professors whose research occupies a prominent place in their work lives. We should hardly be surprised that dissertation advisers become the first role models for graduate students. Jack was no exception.

But most academic jobs aren't at research universities, and those other jobs look jarringly different to graduate students than the positions held by their role models. That disjunction ought to be blindingly obvious (and some commentators have noticed it here and there), but I was years out of graduate school before its import registered on me.

It amounts to this: Graduate school is professional school, but most Ph.D programs badly neglect graduate students' professional development. We spend years of their training ignoring that development, and then, only at the last moment when students are about to hit the job market, do we attend to their immediate professional needs. By neglecting their career goals, we allow their desires to coalesce from their immediate surroundings—the research university—and to harden over time.

We teach graduate students to want the kinds of jobs that most of them won't ever get. Jack was typical in that regard. Like most graduate students, he was socialized in a way that left him

disadvantaged in the larger professional world that he sought to enter.

Unlike many problems faced by the academy today, this one can be solved in-house and at modest cost. Of course, dissertation advisers must shoulder some of the responsibility for teaching their students about the range of professional options, and I'll have plenty to say about the adviser-student relationship in future columns. But even before students choose an adviser, the department as a whole can meet this need in the classroom.

All of which brings me to the need for professional-development seminars. We accept that graduate teachers need to teach students the content of their disciplines, but our jobs don't end there. We also need to teach students *about* their disciplines. That means teaching them what the professional world of their field looks like and how it works, both inside and outside the university.

In other words, we have to prepare Ph.D.'s to seek jobs of all kinds—and that means more than just credentialing students to seek those positions. We also have to show them what those jobs look like, so they won't be shocked when they peer outside the research-university gates. In short, we have a responsibility to socialize graduate students in a consciously different way than most departments do now.

Professional-development seminars offered by Ph.D.-granting departments, and required of all doctoral students at a certain point in their careers, can do wonders to orient them to their larger milieu at a time when it's rapidly changing. Some departments have begun to offer such seminars, and they're an example worth following.

A professional-development seminar can be woven into a graduate student's early course work, or it can serve as a capstone class before a Ph.D. candidate advances to the dissertation phase. Either way, the mandate of such a course is to look around in many directions.

For example, the University of Michigan's "Introduction to Graduate Studies" requires that beginning graduate students in English and modern languages interview a senior professor in the department, thereby offering a look upward at a role model's career. But the course also requires an outward-looking "Alternative Careers Workshop."

Graduate students in a seminar offered by the geography department at the University of Minnesota are visited by a series of professors who discuss not only conferences, research, and

publishing but also the choice of a career path, as well as gender and class issues that occur in some workplaces and family circumstances that affect students' progress to the degree and often past it.

Ultimately, a good professional-development seminar educates students about the culture of the profession.

Jack couldn't imagine himself as anything but an academic, but he might have seen his alternatives more clearly if he had been able to compare them with a wider set of professional choices both inside and outside of academe. There are many ways to show graduate students what their larger professional world looks like, but all of those ways start with the teachers: It's part of our jobs to show students that world.

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