

Opening Doors for the Ph.D.

Colleges make curricular changes to get doctoral students in the humanities better prepared for careers outside academe

By Vimal Patel January 29, 2017 Premium



Josh Garrett-Davis (left), a doctoral student in history at Princeton U., is an assistant curator at the Autry Museum of the American West, where Stephen Aron (right), a history professor at UCLA, leads a research institute.

The data convinced Stephen Aron.

After tracking where his department's doctoral recipients actually land jobs,

the head of the University of California at Los Angeles's history department knew he had to rethink how graduate students are trained.

Only about half of the students get tenure-track jobs at four-year colleges, a finding more or less in line with many university- and national-level Ph.D.-tracking efforts. "If only 50 percent of your graduates are landing in positions for which they are being trained," Mr. Aron says, "well, something's amiss."



It's a reality check that many humanities programs have faced in recent years, often prodded by graduate students dissatisfied by worsening academic job prospects and ever-increasing debt loads. Programs have responded. Many are creating networks of alumni who have carved career paths outside the professoriate and can mentor students on nonacademic careers. Other programs are connecting students with internships at museums and other nonprofit groups that value research skills. And a new position has popped up in recent years at many colleges: career counselors [specifically for graduate students.](#)

But some departments are taking a bigger, and potentially more challenging, step: curricular change. It's easier to create some peripheral programming in a central location like a career office. Embedding the idea into curriculum, Mr. Aron and several other professors say, takes direct aim at the nature of doctoral training and is a steeper climb. You must persuade those faculty

members who passionately believe that the goal of a doctoral program is to create future professors. In short, you are changing entrenched culture.

"Career counselors and alumni networks are easy. That's why everyone's doing it," says Jason R. Puskar, an associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and director of a recent grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities [to better prepare graduate students](#) for careers outside academe. For some professors, "changing the curriculum can feel personally fraught: If a new course is added, will the old courses draw enough enrollments? If requirements shift, who loses? The devil of curricular change is in these kinds of details."

Often with the financial support of groups like the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the NEH, some programs and individual professors are wading into these kinds of questions. A few of the efforts include creating new courses, rethinking the introduction-to-graduate-studies seminar, and embedding a broader range of career skills into existing curricula.

Regardless of the approach, proponents argue that the changes need not be radical. A new emphasis on some nonacademic skills or a new seminar over the course of a six- or seven-year program won't dramatically alter doctoral training, they say. The goal is not to upend Ph.D. programs but to enhance them.

Create a Course

At UCLA, Mr. Aron sees himself as a bridge builder, a scholar with one foot in academe and the other in the museum world. For 12 years he has led the Institute for the Study of the American West at the Autry Museum of the American West, in Los Angeles.

"The goal is to create an environment that doesn't force students to choose whether they're on the public humanities track or the professoriate track," he says, "but to allow people the flexibility to move back and forth and explore a

variety of options."

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Mr. Aron devised a graduate seminar titled "The Many Professions of History," which aims to show students how a history doctorate can be used outside academe. The course, which he co-teaches, features guest visits from history-Ph.D. recipients who have charted a variety of careers, including as museum curators, television producers, and intelligence analysts.

Through example, he wants to show students that an academic job isn't the only measure of success. Yet he admits he's swimming upstream. Doctoral programs measure themselves against one another based on where their students land academic jobs. They tend to hide or ignore the achievements of students who went into nonacademic careers, he says.

Mr. Aron's class is "deconstructing a taboo," says Peter Chesney, a fourth-year student who took the first iteration of the seminar, last year.

"People are afraid of telling their advisers they're interested in nonacademic careers for fear they'll take it personally," Mr. Chesney says. "Efforts like this have existed, but they've been a little camouflaged. Putting it in class form makes a bold statement. It literally has the blessing of the department chair, a prominent Americanist."

A key component of the class is an applied-research assignment as part of a project that tells the history of UCLA. Students who contribute to the effort, called Project 1919 — named after the year the university was founded — work in teams, delivering historical research in public talks, podcasts, and videos, and helping to create a website and digital archive.

Mr. Aron says he wanted to instill skills, [identified by the American Historical Association](#), that would help students outside academe — such as collaboration, communication, and quantitative literacy. "We've come to realize along the way," he says, "that those skills are needed as much in the academy as outside the academy."

Like Mr. Chesney, Nicole Gilhuis started her doctoral program set on a tenure-track job, and that's still her hope after taking the seminar. But she's now open to the idea of working outside the university, and is armed with contacts and a sense of the types of nonacademic jobs, like information analyst for an intelligence agency, that she would enjoy.

"Over the course of the class," she says, "I felt more empowered. If I get a teaching job, great. But there are other things my skills would lend themselves to."

Rethink the Intro Seminar

Seminars like Mr. Aron's, which are not required, tend to attract students who are already asking clear-eyed questions about their careers. Often, however, students start thinking about nonacademic careers too late, only after they realize they may not land their dream academic job or don't want one anymore.

To reach students earlier, some professors are reimagining their introduction-to-doctoral-studies seminars. These courses typically ground students in the mechanics of their discipline and of graduate studies, like literary theory and research techniques. They are often mandatory and set the tone for a student's doctoral journey, making them fertile ground for reform efforts.

At the University of Kansas, Bruce Hayes was motivated by guilt.

"As chair of a department, I hire lecturers for one-year contracts, low wages,

minimal benefits, and no job security," says Mr. Hayes, an associate professor of French. "And I have a plethora of people to choose from. I wish universities would not be able to get away with that, but they can get away with that."

He wants his students to avoid the adjunct fate. So students in his mandatory seminar, started in 2012, read news stories about the academic job market and blog about them, which serves as a reality check about their career prospects and an exercise in writing for broader audiences.

Mr. Hayes says that despite the many news stories on the topic, he has noticed a troubling level of naïveté among students. Take Christina Lord, a fourth-year doctoral student in French who entered the program set on becoming a professor. She earned a master's degree at another university and admits being "in my own bubble," her head buried in her coursework and exams, unaware that her chances of landing a tenure-track job after a Ph.D. were not rock solid.

Mr. Hayes's course "was a big wake-up call," Ms. Lord says. Taking the class early in the program allowed her time to develop skills that would be beneficial in nonacademic careers and connect with other resources on campus, like a weeklong boot camp in applied humanities.

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She eventually became less enthusiastic about a career in academe and is keeping her options open, but now she isn't sure that the pursuit of tenure will allow for the work-life balance she seeks.

Some of the skills Ms. Lord learned in Mr. Hayes's course — converting a CV to a résumé or creating a web-based portfolio, for example — seem like the

type of thing a student could learn in a career office. But students usually don't venture out of their departmental cocoons. Ms. Lord says she wouldn't have, at least not early in the program, when her energy was spent on adapting to the rigors of being a Ph.D. student. That's why adding career skills into curriculum is so important, Mr. Hayes says. Colleges have an "ethical imperative" to ensure that students are equipped with this knowledge early.

But the seminar has posed challenges. Adding a three-credit course without inflating time to degree, another major issue in humanities doctoral education, means one fewer class about literature or film — a tradeoff Mr. Hayes says some colleagues in other departments are not willing to make.

Many doctoral programs are also too small to offer a seminar each year. In response to the depressed job market, Mr. Hayes's program, for example, has cut down on the number of its doctoral students, from 16 five years ago to seven now. To ensure a critical mass of students, the French department joined forces with two others — German and Slavic — which now offer the course jointly.

Embed Skills

At the University of New Mexico, faculty members in the history department are focused less on creating new courses, as Mr. Hayes and Mr. Aron have done, than on tweaking the curriculum to embed career skills into existing ones.



David Zentz for The Chronicle

Becky Nicolaidis, an independent scholar and historical consultant, talks about her career outside academe with graduate students at the U. of California at Los Angeles. Her visit is part of a new graduate seminar called "The Many Professions of History."

Professors want to instill skills that are equally useful inside and outside academe, says Virginia Scharff, a history professor at New Mexico. She is her department's point person for a grant from the American Historical Association and the Mellon foundation received in 2014, for \$325,000 over three years. "Where do these things overlap?" she says she and her colleagues asked. "How do you create better professors and better professionals at the same time? We want to recognize those skills and embed them into our seminars and our approach to graduate education."

One thing you shouldn't do is force reform, she says. Lasting change comes from persuading professors, and that works only if the faculty member teaching the course is comfortable with making adjustments.

With the grant, the department hired a graduate student to coordinate the effort. About a quarter of the department's professors are on a steering committee for the grant, helping to create a departmental culture in which such career conversations are increasingly frequent.

With reluctant faculty members, Ms. Scharff argues that some of what they are already doing in their classrooms is preparing students for careers outside academe. One faculty member, for example, was adamant that standards were being weakened but was already requiring students to write blogs, she says. In cases like that, she wants professors to be more deliberate about how they frame the skills.

The strategy won over Sarah Davis-Secord, an associate professor who studies the history of the medieval Mediterranean. After initial reluctance, she now sees that the subjects she teaches — the crusades and jihad in the Middle Ages — can be relevant in a modern context outside academe. A one-day seminar on campus about the uses of history helped persuade her. "I initially thought, of course it makes sense for someone whose dissertation is on U.S. West history to be qualified for a nonprofit or government agency in a Western state. But what does a medievalist have to offer outside of academy?" she says. "I realized what we're teaching them is transferable. For example, we've always taught our students to do a public 20-minute presentation. How different is that from taking the same material and presenting it to a nonspecialized audience?"

David Prior, an assistant professor, is looking for ways to infuse career skills into a new course on American nationalism he is teaching this semester. Much of the class is traditional — students read lots of books and journal articles — but he also wants to expose students to other forms of communication, such as blogs and academically produced videos.

"Graduate seminars are exacting, exhausting, and, when done right, take a tremendous amount of intellectual energy," Mr. Prior says. "We don't want to lose that. At the same time, we want to think about how to change modestly

what we're doing to help students face a job market that's a bloodbath."

Critics of efforts to infuse career training into doctoral programs [point to federal data](#) showing that Ph.D. students have extremely low unemployment rates, typically around 2 percent, as evidence that colleges don't need to pay as much attention to this topic. But that statistic, Mr. Prior says, doesn't account for the quality of the employment or the psychological toll on students who don't land a desired job in academe.

Before arriving at New Mexico, Mr. Prior spent three years mostly working as an adjunct. "By Year 3, I was having an existential crisis about what I would do with my life. It's hard to explain rationally," he says. "In a way, the unemployment statistic is important. We're not talking about Ph.D. students starving to death. But saying, 'Congratulations. We took six to 10 years of your life and you're not totally unemployed when you leave our program' is not the right bar to set."

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