

## BUT NOT THE PH.D.

The last decade has seen dramatic changes in higher education. Let me count just some of the ways. The for-profit university—an oxymoron twenty years ago—has burst into view. Full-time, residential models of education are waning; part-time, commuter and distance formats are being offered by even the most traditional of traditional schools. So called “regular” faculty positions—full-time, full benefits—are increasingly replaced with armies of adjuncts. Among these interrelated developments and the economic instability that drives many of them, there is an even more profound change at the core of higher education: the diminishment of programs that we used to think of as central: the liberal arts degree for colleges and universities, for instance; the Master of Divinity program for seminaries; even the M.B.A., increasing replaced by intensive executive education. Students are gravitating away from programs that educate them deeply, broadly and at length and moving toward shorter degrees and more functional, technical preparation. Almost everything about higher education, including those core identity degrees, seems to be changing very, very fast.

But not the Ph.D. Academic doctoral programs in the arts and sciences have changed very little in structure, format, policies and procedures in the century that such programs have been at the top of the degree heap of American higher education. There have been content changes aplenty, but most programs are organized and conducted much as they were in a century ago. Even in this last interval of rapid change in education, the Ph.D. seems almost immune to many of the forces that are shaping the rest of the industry.

Let’s take our own corner of the enterprise: theology and religion. Here are the dominant trends. At the undergraduate level, majors in the humanities have declined sharply in percentage terms since the 1970s. Religion, long the smallest field, has bumped up and down, but along with philosophy and the rest of humanities, it is losing ground to scientific fields, which are themselves losing ground to business and technical studies. At the professional level, in seminary and rabbinic education, the pool of potential students has been stagnant. Applications, acceptances and headcount enrollment for the M. Div., the bread-and-butter degree, have been falling, and full-time equivalent enrollments have been falling even faster. And this despite the fact that we take almost every student who expresses interest in the M.Div.: the median acceptance rate for Protestant seminaries is about 88 percent, which means that more than half of all schools take more than 88 percent of those who apply. Increasing numbers of the students of both college and seminary programs are part-time, and increasing numbers use some kind of technology to participate in instructional events. In general, the programs that are growing at all are those that are shorter, more precisely targeted to particular occupational specialties. Fewer students, less selectivity, and less time in course. Those are the prevailing trends.

None of this is true for the Ph.D. I studied a sub-set of doctoral programs, the 24 programs that supply the largest numbers of seminary faculty. Not all of you are included on that list, but programs similar to yours are included. The programs I studied select their students from an expanding pool of applicants. The most selective programs accept one applicant in 20; even the least selective reject one of every two who apply. Convenience, now a significant factor in college and professional students’ choice of school, does not figure prominently for the Ph.D. Virtually all of the admitted students will move to live on or near campus of the one of the

schools that accepted them, and they will spend at least four years in full-time residence; many will be on-site for six or seven years or more. It's a paradox or at least a puzzle: in a culture in which the love of learning for its own sake (especially humanistic learning) and concentrated study over an extended period of time seem to be going out of style, the Ph.D., which demands both a passion for knowledge and years of intense focus, still has enormous drawing power.

In fact, I think, it's the enormous prestige and desirability of the Ph.D. that has kept it frozen in time. Students who have faced fierce competition to gain admission to the leading programs—the ones most likely to set the standards for others—are not going to push for change in those programs once they get in. And consumer schools, those who hire doctoral graduates to be their faculty members, don't have much leverage either to ask for change. Until very recently, they have competed with each other for the cream of the crop of doctoral graduates from the small number of doctoral programs that produce faculty who fit their profile and value system. They have not been in a position to ask for something different either.

Recent research on doctoral programs in theology and religion—the Auburn survey, the Wabash research, and various probes by AAR and other organizations—suggests that the result of leaving doctoral programs to their own devices, with little scrutiny or pressure from the outside, is a set of practices that in many cases are not aligned with what the programs themselves say are their goals and aspirations, let alone with situations of students or the needs of the institutions that eventually employ the graduates. Here's a quick review of some of the discrepancies that surface in the research.

Most schools don't know whom they are admitting. Directors says they aim to produce good academic citizens and generous, workable colleagues as well as able scholars and skillful teachers, yet most consider only paper evidence of academic prowess. This is true not only for programs that say that their primary goal is to produce researcher-teachers for the disciplines, but also for those that say that that their principal orientation to social change—they want their graduates to be activists as well as scholars. It true as well for those that are mainly in the business of preparing faculty for seminaries and other church-related institutions. Most programs don't interview. Most admit students one-by-one, with limited—and sometimes no—attention to the shape of the cohort they form. Some schools now have admissions committees that play a significant role in student selection, but in many places, the old system still has a lot of power: every doctoral mentor or sub-specialty gets to fill one slot.

Many problems stem from inattention to recruitment and admissions: gaps in gender and racial/ethnic representation, large amounts invested in students who don't have the character or commitment we say that academic vocations require, privileging the disciplines and their replication over broader purposes that should orient a culture-forming enterprise like doctoral education. It's true that some programs, including some of you present here, are recruiting vigorously and admitting with great care, but most of the industry isn't there yet.

Another discrepancy between espoused principles and program practices: teaching. Every single program says it aims to prepare excellent teachers for the increasingly diverse student bodies of the future. Virtually every faculty job profile has teaching competence as its first or second item. Yet levels of attention and resources for both instruction and practice in teaching are not uniformly high. Assistantships are the most common form of teacher preparation.

Coaching and workshops are also available in some places. But there is much less of the device that Wabash research indicates works better than others to develop good teachers, the opportunity to plan and teach one's own classes or better yet, entire course. Some institutions—present company included—offer such opportunities, usually for some rather than all of their doctoral candidates. Most students, if they want such opportunities, have to make them for themselves. Wabash research also found that a culture that values teaching in the doctoral program goes a long way toward forming the goals and values of students. Not many programs assemble their doctoral faculty to discuss what messages they are sending students about the status of what will be their core responsibility.

Another gap: Both doctoral programs and potential employers of their graduates talk a lot about interdisciplinary competence; directors and seminary deans also told us that they place a high value on the ability of doctoral graduates and new faculty to communicate with a wider public. We did not interview the chairs of the undergraduate religion departments that hire your graduates; if we had, I'm certain that the emphasis on broad competence would have been even stronger—they need teachers who can cross a wide range of specialty areas and teach student with no background in the field. The structures of most programs, however, do not encourage any of these expansions in scope. Most programs don't require much work outside the primary discipline. Interdisciplinary engagement is not prohibited, but the weight of requirements in the primary field is so great that other scholarly conversations are effectively discouraged. And there are no rewards at all during doctoral study for publishing, speaking or broadcasting for general audiences.

Yet another inconsistency: All programs say that they want their graduates to be productively employed, preferably in academe, but most do very little to help them achieve vocational clarity or to find jobs. Yes, it's a dilemma. Should we even raise the question of vocation when—in a tight market—students may have to take whatever job they can get when they finish? The answer has tended to be no: the less said about vocational specifics, the better. Just focus on the discipline and the uses to which it might be put will take care of themselves. In fact, many programs don't even track what their graduates end up doing. If they did, they might discover that total inattention to the very different requirements of teaching and research in different settings makes our graduates not more flexible but, rather, slower to adapt to needs and requirements of the schools in which they eventually will teach. Raising the question of vocation, pushing students to discover their own, may make them more alert to the importance of having a calling, aware the demands of a calling, even if they don't end up at exactly the kind of institution at which they were initially aiming. Further, vocational clarity is a motivator. If you can picture what you might be doing, you may be more likely to move toward completion of the degree in timely way.

One last discrepancy, perhaps the most serious: We are probably admitting more people to Ph.D. programs in theology and religion than can use the degree in their eventual occupation. I can't tell you the amount of overenrollment, because many programs don't know their attrition rates. Those that don't enforce their time to completion deadlines very stringently—and that is quite a few programs—can't say whether the stragglers have dropped out or are just resting. But most programs do admit that significant numbers do not finish, and most of those become inactive after they have either used up their grant eligibility or paid almost full tuition. Add to

this the fact that, especially in the current environment, some students who do finish don't find employment that uses in any way the skills and knowledge acquired in the doctoral program. Put these reports together, and I think it is fair to conclude that, in the aggregate, we are admitting too many students.

It might be argued that over-enrollment is more of a problem in some sectors than others. Some argue that programs that are major sources of faculty for community colleges, Roman Catholic colleges, Christian colleges and evangelical seminaries, for instance, can enroll more students because there are so many institutions in those spheres to absorb the graduates. Many supplier programs for these institutions, however, offer limited funding. Some directors of such programs reported that some students had amassed massive debt—\$150,000 and more. Even more directors of tuition-driven programs said that they didn't know and preferred not to think about how much their students might be borrowing. Community colleges, Catholic and Christian colleges, and evangelical seminaries, however numerous they are, don't pay new faculty enough to service debt that high, so the most deeply indebted are probably lost to academic and religious professions.

Therefore, all kinds of programs should consider restricting admissions. Funded programs should focus their funding not only on adequate grants and stipends but also on staffing their programs better, as I'll describe in a minute. Tuition-driven programs should not accept students who already have high debt or who have no visible means of paying their programs' costs. And all programs should set their size with an eye to employment possibilities. It's an ethical issue: The Ph.D. requires a massive investment of money and of the time of people's lives. Only those who are likely to be able to use the degree in some way should be offered the opportunity to earn it.

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These problems of the Ph.D. are well known, but they persist. Why? One enormous obstacle to change is resource limitations. Undergraduate and graduate professional programs are larded with administrative and student support staff—admissions, financial aid, academic support, psychological counseling, spiritual formation, clinical supervision, vocational and career guidance, placement assistance. But not the Ph.D. The average program has at best a part-time faculty director and a full-time executive secretary to carry out all its administrative functions. Any proposal for reform is quite honestly met with the query: who will do it?

So you have a program that really does need to change. We are not the only ones saying so. Leaders across the humanities say that if the Ph.D. does not become better resourced, more focused and probably shorter in duration, it can't survive. But there is limited pressure for change—there are plenty of customers for the degree as it is. And most programs' hands are tied by lack of resources. How, then, can the Ph.D. be reshaped and reformed before there's a crisis that threatens its existence?

The most important actors in any potential reform of the Ph.D. are sitting in this room—program directors, key faculty leaders in doctoral programs, and senior administrators of doctorate-granting institutions. Most of you are probably too young to remember Pogo, the possum whose creator, the cartoonist Walt Kelly, described as “the reasonable, patient,

softhearted, naive, friendly person we all think we are." One of Pogo's great lines was this: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." It's true. Almost every problem facing doctoral education cannot, will not be addressed unless you begin the process. Ancillary institutions can help, and I'll have suggestions for them as well, but there's not a lot they can do unless programs take the lead.

Let's begin at the beginning. Most programs should take a hard look at their levels of enrollment. Here's the goal: doctoral programs should admit and enroll only those who can really benefit from doctoral study—benefit in proportion to what the students are required to invest in time and money and what schools invest in them. Programs that have adopted this goal—that have studied their students' time in course, levels of graduation debt and employment records and prospects as well as the quality of the educational experiences provided—those schools have generally decided to downsize.<sup>1</sup> It's not an easy decision. A proposal to admit fewer students meets opposition from faculty who want their "own" doctoral students, from prospective students who want the degree even if they can't use it, and, in the case of the so-called tuition-driven programs, from administrators who have come to rely on doctoral tuition as a revenue stream. (In this last case, it should be noted that no adequate Ph.D. program actually makes money or even pays for itself. What tuition-driven programs do enable schools to lose less—to turn some of their excess capacity into revenue, reducing the need to right size the whole institution. But every Ph.D. program still, on a cost-accounting basis, requires a lot more input of resources than it can cover in revenue from tuition.)

If so many constituencies are invested in larger programs, what arguments can be marshaled for smaller ones? The best argument I can think of for restraint is the one now under serious discussion in the Modern Language Association and in the arts and sciences programs at Harvard, Stanford and elsewhere: unless there is more self-regulation of the Ph.D. in the humanities—sensible enrollment levels, careful monitoring of student progress, sharper vocational focus in programs, shorter times to the degree—it is likely that regulation will come from the outside, from legislators and bureaucrats who are not necessarily sympathetic to the goals of advanced study in the humanities. The kinds of pressures now being brought to bear on for-profit education—show in economic terms that this investment is worth it—may come to bear on you. So adjust your programs now, before others try to cut support for them in unwelcome ways.

A first step in this direction is to gather information so many programs lack: find out, if you don't already know, what your graduates are doing, what has become of those who did not find employment related to their studies, how those who are making full use of their training now evaluate their educational experiences, and what happened to those who paid for their degrees but didn't earn them—most attrition, we heard from the program directors we interviewed for our study, occurs during the dissertation phase, after the substantial tuition charges have been

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents to this paper raised the question of "critical mass": if programs size is drastically reduced, the learning environment for students who remain may be compromised. Some programs have dealt with this challenge by reducing the number of specialty areas in which students are admitted at the same time that they have cut the total size of their programs. By this device, cohorts of students in each field are of sufficient size, even though fewer students are admitted overall.

covered. Look at these data, and then ask yourselves, then, whether the huge amounts of resources you are pouring into the Ph.D. are being used as well as possible, or whether changes in program size as well as procedures and practices could increase your return on investment.

Let's suppose that, though a long process of negotiation that might involve downsizing and other measures, you could increase the resources you have available per student. What then? How would you deploy those resources to be most effective?

Most obviously, fewer students can be better funded. The better the funding, our study showed, the more selective the program, and probably the better the students. The better the funding, the faster most students will finish, and the better their financial condition when they do, since living expenses are the root of most educational borrowing. And the better the financial condition of your graduates, the more flexibility they will have in pursuing the opportunities that are most closely aligned with their sense of vocation. Better funding of fewer students can reap huge benefits for students and programs alike.

Note that this message is not only for programs that currently don't offer much funding. Even the most generous doctoral funding—tuition plus a stipend of \$30,000 isn't lavish. No student can live on that without family support, outside employment, or borrowing. Every program here that has the freedom to do so—I know that some of you are constrained by university limits—[every program that can do so] should try to raise its funding levels and keep them as high as possible.

The other field for investment is in the program itself. Recruitment, for instance. Our survey suggests that most programs do little or none of this—with large numbers of applicants coming your way, you don't have to. But do these applicants include all the best students and future teachers and scholars? Is there among them, for instance, sufficient racial, ethnic and national diversity to reflect the massive demographic changes in North America and the increasingly global structure of much of higher education? (The answer to that question is no—the demographic profile of doctoral students has been slow to change on these dimensions and women are still only one-third of doctoral students overall.)

One reason that makeup of the doctoral student body remains fairly homogeneous is that students are drawn disproportionately from a small number of masters' level programs—those that are, not surprisingly, located in doctorate-granting institutions. In short, we admit our own. Students who do their masters work in institutions that have selective doctoral programs get into selective doctoral programs at a higher rate than students from elsewhere. A number of students I interviewed recently in Auburn's new study of able seminary students told us they yearn to do doctoral work but who knew that their chances of admission to well-funded programs were slim, because their schools and faculty advisors aren't well know at the centers of academic power. Among them are some who seemed very, very capable—interpersonally as well as intellectually, including quite a few Hispanics and African Americans. Surfacing applicants from these more remote Masters programs could add dimensions of quality to the pool of doctoral students that the traditional trade routes don't necessarily supply.

So one direction for reform is recruitment. Schools need to do this one their own, but supporting institutions such as the Wabash Center, the Fund for Theological Education, the

Hispanic Theological Initiative and perhaps the Louisville Institute's new program to prepare seminary faculty—these helping institutions might help. They might, for instance, organize conferences for college and post-college students who are thinking about applying to doctoral programs. At these gatherings, prospective students could learn more about the demands of doctoral study and the vocations for which it prepares. Bring program directors to such gatherings and they would have the opportunity to meet and size up a lot of prospective students in a preliminary way. To level the playing field a bit, prospective doctoral students should be invited from universities and seminaries that have not traditionally been seed-beds of future scholars as well as from those that have sent many of their graduates into academic life.

After recruitment comes selection. The mechanisms for improving selection processes are not complicated, but it takes both resources and political will to put them in place. An admissions committee that has the power of final selection is an effective way to form a balanced cohort, though wresting control of final selection from individual faculty members is difficult in programs where that privilege is entrenched. Programs that require interviews of finalists have reported that that procedure makes a big difference. They say that it helps the program to make a much wiser selection among the many candidates who are qualified based on grades, test scores, recommendations and writing samples. Interviewing does cost money for staff to arrange visits and host students on site, accommodations on campus, and perhaps even travel assistance for the most promising candidates. It also takes faculty time, so there's the political challenge of convincing faculty members of its value. But programs that have more resources allocated per student are more likely to be able to find both the money and the time required for more careful selection.

Then there are the all the forms of support that undergraduates and professional graduate students expect from their institutions, but that doctoral students have usually gone without, especially vocational counseling and guidance in placement. As I reported before, when we asked program directors whether they provide opportunities for vocational discernment, they often responded that, because employment is so chancy, it doesn't seem to make much sense to focus on helping students figure out the uses to which they want to put their intensive and extensive training. But it's very possible that if students were helped to be more intentional, both shaping their studies and making connections in the segment of the field in which they would most like to work, their chances of ending up there might be greatly increased.

Because doctorates in theology and religion can lead in different career directions, particular programs might be strained in their ability to provide all the different kinds of guidance students might want or need. Certainly this is an area where other organizations can help. The Louisville Institute program is planning to identify and convene students who hope to work in theological education. That program will introduce them to the seminary world and to senior leaders in it, and it will provide teaching externships in theological schools for some students as well. One can imagine that other agencies, perhaps the Wabash Center, could host similar gatherings for doctoral students whose dream is to teach in at the undergraduate level, or to find an assignment that heavily emphasizes research and graduate-level teaching. Perhaps the Fund for Theological Education could provide a meeting point for doctoral students who want to spend their lives as pastor-scholars.

Placement help, however, is the job of the schools. AAR and other guilds can provide meeting grounds for employers and job-seekers, but the principal responsibility for assistance falls on doctoral programs. Again, it takes staff to track openings and promote the school's graduates. It takes political leverage with faculty to get them to advocate for the young scholars they trained—some faculty members are great at this, others pretty irresponsible. The function should not be left to chance. Program directors and senior department or school administrators should insist that helping students find their way after they graduate is part of the doctoral mentor's job description.

And then there is the matter of teaching. This is an area in which a number of you are already at work in creative ways—that's what got you to this conference. Every program needs to have the preparation of teachers at its core, offering not only instruction in the art of teaching, but opportunities to do it. Assistantships are important, especially if they require actual teaching as well as paper grading and discussion group leadership. Most valuable, as already noted, are the opportunity to plan and teach entire courses. Programs should at least help their advanced students find such opportunities, if they don't provide them. Agencies can help too—the Louisville Institute externships will be an invaluable contribution in one sector; Wabash can probably devise new ways to support the training of graduate students in teaching—but the commitment of every program to teacher preparation has to be the foundation. Most teaching training and practice opportunities will continue to be offered by the home institution. And don't forget the point I lifted earlier from Wabash research: the culture of teaching in doctoral programs is formative in and of itself. If doctoral mentors communicate a disdain for or irritation with the demands of teaching, students will be infected with that. Program directors need to work with doctoral faculty to be sure that they communicate respect for what is likely to be the central function of most of their graduates' professional assignments in the future.

There are other arenas for reform that I don't have time to explore here in any detail—how to promote “interdisciplinarity,” for instance. But I believe that the pattern I have been describing could lead to program improvement on every almost every front. The first step is discipline: search out, select, and fund only those students who are likely to complete their programs and put the degree to good use. Second: reorganize, so that some resources are directed to the kinds of administration and support that programs and students need. Third, continue to cooperate. Form solid alliances with each other to share ideas and pool your efforts, and use the impressive array of supporting agencies in this field a base for joint programming and collaborative work. Discipline, reorganization, collaboration. Follow those steps and a great deal can change, including—yes—even the Ph.D.

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