

Why grad students should seek out opportunities for collaboration (essay)

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Collaborate: An Imperative for Graduate Students

To prepare for a rapidly evolving job market, Ph.D. students must gain experience working as part of a team, argues James M. Van Wyck.

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By

[James M. Van Wyck](#)

Graduate students need to seek out opportunities for collaboration at every stage of their graduate career. Experience working as part of a team is valuable for Ph.D. students preparing for a rapidly evolving academic job market, and it is indispensable for those pursuing careers beyond academe.

Want proof? Survey the requirements section of ads for positions you could see yourself taking. Many of the job ads on [The Versatile PhD](#), for example, include variations on the theme of collaboration: “ability to cultivate relationships,” “collaborative working style,” “demonstrated commitment to a collaborative work style” or “exceptional relationship-building skills.” Some jobs seek candidates with a “proven ability to work with, and commitment to” a particular population group.

In most cases, you’ll need a track record of collaboration rather than a few items tacked onto your résumé as you near the finish line. What you need is a pattern of collaborative work.

That’s because hiring is a costly, taxing business. Hiring committees are, on the whole, not eager to take risks. They’d rather not have to open up another search if a new hire clashes with staff.

Can you blame them? Imagine the following scenario: you’re on a committee charged with hiring a director for a newly minted Medicine and the Arts program. One applicant is an emergency room physician, looking to make a career change. Although she has no direct experience -- she’s been busy studying for 12 years and then practicing medicine for the last two years -- in the last year she’s led a local library’s literacy campaign, published three poems and written a convincing *New York Times* editorial about the value of poetry in the emergency room. You want to hire her and have her start tomorrow.

But your colleagues on the hiring committee disagree, reminding you that the directorship will require collaboration of a kind very different from the hierarchical and specialized collaboration she’s practiced in the ER. Another colleague worries that the relevant experience she has (grouped tightly in the past year) might indicate a passing fancy, rather than a calling. You acquiesce, and the committee declines to interview the applicant.

Through no fault of their own, many graduate students (particularly in the humanities) leave graduate school with a

résumé that looks like that of our hypothetical physician. That's because graduate students can go for years without collaborating beyond the narrow confines of their discipline or subdiscipline. If your résumé doesn't include recurring and gradually evolving collaboration, prospective employers won't be able to trace a pattern. Even those who want to hire you -- like you wanted to hire the M.D. -- will have difficulty finding reasons to keep your application in play.

And let's not forget that Ph.D.s looking for careers beyond academe must often overcome stereotypes associated with the three letters trailing their names. As Susan Basalla and Maggie Debelius note in [So What Are You Going to Do with That?: Finding Careers Outside of Academia](#), a common assumption is that "Academics can't work in teams."

Some of this caution is justified: graduate programs in the humanities have a tendency to incentivize specialization at the expense of collaboration. The more successful a student is, the more likely they are to conduct solitary research in a quiet laboratory or archive.

Graduate programs with more established pipelines to specific types of careers read the tea leaves long ago: the best graduate programs in fields like engineering and business [extol the collaborative environment students will experience](#). Meanwhile, the humanities Ph.D. is in the process of a lumbering, long-needed overhaul. Clarion voices like Leonard Cassuto, professor of English and American studies at Fordham University, and [Sidonie Smith](#), professor of the humanities at the University of Michigan, are calling for graduate course work and dissertations to evolve. If the advice of Cassuto, Smith and others is taken to heart, the humanities Ph.D. of the future will incorporate collaborative elements at every step.

Such reforms will take time, however, and until they take effect, graduate students will have to improvise. If your graduate program doesn't encourage or foster collaboration, you'll likely need to seek out your own opportunities.

That means you'll need to diagnose your daily, weekly, semester-long and yearlong work habits. Are you constantly working alone? Make plans to spend a little time on collaborative projects at each stage of your graduate training, and by the time you get your degree, you'll have a track record of collaborative work that will combat the stereotype that Ph.D.s don't play well with others.

In what follows, I suggest one pattern that Ph.D.s in the humanities might follow. I'm assuming (rather optimistically) that the student would graduate in seven years. The goal is to have a variety of experiences that show progressive growth -- collaborations that gets progressively richer and less connected to your own institution.

Years 1-2: Strategy and groundwork. Don't let anyone tell you differently: your first years in graduate school are the best time to go above and beyond the prescribed paths set out by your graduate program. The first years are the ideal time to find out -- via informational interviews and poking around on websites -- the kinds of skills and experiences that it takes to succeed in careers beyond academia. As Jake Livengood, assistant director of Graduate Student Career Services at MIT Global Education & Career Development Career Services, reminds us, it is crucial to [take the time to try on different roles in graduate school](#).

Years one and two are also good years to find mentors within and without academe. Find successful tenure-track and alt-ac models whose experience can help you craft a plan for your time in graduate school.

You can also use these years to develop specific skill sets that will buttress future collaborative projects. For example, you could brush up on your social media skills by managing a social media account for a professional organization in your field or by creating a collaborative blog.

Years 3-4: Branching out and networking. Your goal during these years is to form strong, long-term partnerships (even if only informal) with people or organizations outside of academe. Ideally, by now you would have developed intramural opportunities. Now is the time to forge working relationships with community partners.

Don't overlook opportunities close to home; depending on your interests, local historical societies, regional food

banks and neighborhood libraries are examples of venues that you can use to begin branching out. You might, for example, look to form a team to hold an interdisciplinary conference that incorporates schools, nonprofits or libraries. Finally, look for ways to write and think in public, with bonus points for items like co-written articles and co-curated exhibits.

Years 5-6: Targeted projects and leadership opportunities. You'll likely be working on your dissertation (or a similar capstone project) so there will be less time for face-to-face meetings. Be strategic about your time, and engage in collaborative projects selectively. Now that you're well on your way to earning a Ph.D., you could seek out opportunities like co-writing a grant proposal or establishing a new pedagogy program on your campus. Be on the lookout for leadership roles within and without the college university.

Year 7: Assessing and networking. You're in the home stretch: take a deep breath and assess what you've done. Rather than scrambling for professionalization opportunities, you'd do well to use this year to reach out to prior contacts for reference letters, LinkedIn endorsements (yes, it's completely appropriate that you ask prior connections for these) and leads on jobs. Job searches take a lot of time, [especially jobs attractive to Ph.D.s](#).

So as you move toward a robust job search, try to collaborate with people who share your passions and goals. Keeping your ear to the ground will mean that you will be more likely to slide into a position that isn't listed on the usual job sites. As you've probably heard, a significant percentage (some people would say an overwhelming majority) of jobs aren't posted. They are gotten through connections, word of mouth and being in the right place at the right time.

When you collaborate with others, you'll be the evidence that Ph.D.s are worth hiring not only for the specialized knowledge they acquire and create but also for the abilities, passion and ambitions they share. When you avoid low-risk, low-stakes activities within academe and instead forge new paths, you'll be the evidence that counteracts another stereotype Basalla and Debelius cite: "Academics aren't risk takers."

Bio

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