

Documenting What Ph.D.s Do for a Living

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The idea that a Ph.D. can prepare you for diverse careers — not just for the professoriate — is now firmly with us.

Most doctoral students in the arts and sciences start out with the desire to become professors. But that's not where most of them end up. By now, most graduate advisers understand that their doctoral students will follow multiple career paths. And increasing numbers of professors and administrators are trying to help students do that.

The number of Ph.D.s who pursue nonfaculty careers varies by field, of course. But the reality in many disciplines is: If you're teaching a graduate seminar with eight students in it, only two of them, on average, will become full-time faculty members. What happens to the rest? And as important, how do they feel about where they end up?

Those questions raise a different one for graduate faculty: How do we assess our efforts to train Ph.D.s for myriad careers? It's one thing to try to help, and another to know that we *are* helping. Who should we be looking at? What should we measure? And how?

People want placement numbers, but stories matter, too. When graduate students branch off from the professorial path, they tend to carve out individual passages, and their experiences are often instructive. Graduate-program administrators have come to appreciate the value of those stories, and are inviting Ph.D.s who took a nonacademic path to come back to campus and share their professional histories with new graduate students.

Data collection also matters. People tell their own stories, but numbers tell stories about groups, stories we need to know.

Doctoral programs have always tracked which of their graduates become professors. We've brought great care to that task. But we haven't shown the same attentiveness to students who went into other kinds of work. Data about their whereabouts went mostly uncollected for a long time.

Only recently did that trend reverse. Today, more and more doctoral programs recognize the value of collecting data on all of their students' career outcomes — and social media has made the job easier. A few years ago, my own department gave summer stipends to a couple of graduate students for an internal project on this front, and they produced a handsome data set. But we have only our own numbers, with no easy way to compare them to what's happening in other programs.

Disciplinary organizations have been collecting this information, too. The joint venture between the [Modern Language Association](#) and the [American Historical Association](#) — funded by the Mellon Foundation — is the most prominent of those efforts. Now the Council of Graduate Schools, or CGS, has embarked upon "[Ph.D. Career Pathways](#)," a new, and most welcome, longitudinal study.

"Pathways," which is also funded by Mellon, centers on two sets of surveys that will be given for three years each.

The first set will be administered to current graduate students in the humanities during their second and fifth years. For three consecutive years, the universities selected for the study will collect information at these stages on how students are identifying and pursuing their professional goals. The survey questions, said Suzanne Ortega, president of the CGS, "focus on career aspirations and values, the importance of work/life balance, and of autonomy at work."

They also ask students "what kinds of curricular and professional development experience they're getting during graduate school." Because the project is surveying the same students in Year 2 and then again at Year 5, we'll get to see how their view of the future, and preparation for it, has evolved (or not).

The council is also trying to get a picture of the work lives of students who have already graduated. A second set of surveys will be given over the next three years to alumni who are three, eight, and 15 years out of graduate school. So in 2017, the CGS will survey Ph.D.s from 2014 (three years out), 2009 (eight), and 2002 (15 years past graduation). In 2018, it will survey Ph.D.s from 2015, 2010, and 2003, and in 2019, from the classes of 2016, 2011, and 2004.

"We want to understand something about the type of employer they work for, the nature of the work they're doing, and their level of responsibility," Ortega said. Are they in charge of entire projects? Parts of projects? Do they manage others? What kind of autonomy do they have?

By surveying graduates three years out of school, you learn about their first jobs. That's important but the CGS wants to go beyond that. "To only understand first jobs," Ortega said, "is an inadequate picture of how education prepares us for the world of work."

Consequently, the study will also survey graduates who are 8 and 15 years beyond their doctorate. The goal is to learn about their employment history as well as their job and career satisfaction — both inside and outside of academe. "What are their recent career transitions?" she asked. "What is the nature of the changes they've experienced in work?" Graduates will also be asked what they remember of the professional development they received — or didn't — in graduate school.

The council selected 29 universities for Pathways. Some are linked, like the 10 institutions in the University of California system that are all participating in the study. All but four of the 29 study sites are public universities. That's presumably because the majority of U.S. graduate students attend public institutions.

Data collection begins this fall. The first published results — a limited analysis — will appear in 2018, and the final report, based on all three years of data, will appear in 2020.

So what will this information do?

The CGS hopes it will be "institutionally actionable" — meaning that it will produce information that can result in "conscious decisions on behalf of students." That sounds good to me. We could use more student-centered decision-making in graduate school.

Specifically, the data will "help programs recruit students by providing data on the nature of the careers they may expect," said Ortega. "It will help retention, too, by keeping 'discouraged dissertators' on track" and by providing accurate information on graduate students' thinking about their careers. That information in turn can guide our thinking about graduate education itself — about curricular redesign, dissertation reform, and other pressing topics.

Pathways can also demonstrate the value of the humanities by showing just what it is that humanists — not just the ones in classrooms — do all day. There's a "pressing need" for that information, said Ortega. "We need to learn more about the nature, quality, and impact of the work done by people trained in the humanities." This work is especially necessary, she said, for the sake of underrepresented groups, who are "especially sensitive" to these issues and "easily disenchanted" with the futures that a graduate humanities program appears to offer them.

This widely scoped effort will bring career diversity the attention that it needs. Julia Kent, assistant vice president of the council and one of the study's designers, said that the priority of Ph.D. Career Pathways is "to expand the definition of what career success means" for graduate schools, graduate students, and alumni. We've needed that for a long time.