

Where are our PhD grads? A report on the TRaCE Project

UA www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/in-my-opinion/where-are-our-phd-grads-a-report-on-the-trace-project/

With information collected on 2,400 PhD graduates, we can begin to see what humanities programs contribute to the academy and beyond.

In May 2015, the Future Humanities conference, put on by McGill University's Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, or IPLAI, brought together more than 130 graduate students, faculty and administrators from 26 Canadian universities (francophone and anglophone), along with a number of PhD holders with careers outside the academy and representatives from organizations such as the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences and MITACS. (For an overview of what transpired at the conference, see this [video](#) and [article](#).)

The conference saw two days of discussion on key issues facing humanities graduate programs and the humanities in general. Two primary questions were raised: Where are our PhD graduates and what are they doing? And, how can we mobilize humanities research, teaching and ways of knowing so that what we do inside the academy can also have a robust life in the non-academic world?

The [TRaCE project](#), a one-year experiment in data gathering and community building, took shape in the months following the Montreal meeting. Funding comes from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, partner organizations and the participating universities. The specific goal of the project is four-fold: (1) to track humanities PhDs; (2) to report on where they are, whether inside or outside the academy, and what they have achieved; (3) to connect them with each other and with faculty and students inside the academy; and (4) to sponsor exchanges of knowledge and knowhow among PhD students, faculty members and PhD grads pursuing careers in non-academic sectors.

Stage 1 of TRaCE involved gathering data on 10 cohorts of PhD graduates (2004-2014) from 60-plus departments or programs across Canada. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario and Maren Wood of Lilli Research helped the TRaCE researchers – a cohort of PhD students from across Canada and TRaCE liaison officer Eliza Bateman, herself a PhD student in law at McGill – to develop a methodology of data-gathering from public, web-based sources. With information about the whereabouts of 2,400 PhD grads in hand, it is now possible to begin to see what humanities PhD programs contribute to the global academy, the social and economic life of Canada, and to the well-being of the graduates themselves.

We have been able to show, for example, what percentages of grads are working in higher education, and we can break those findings down by discipline. We also have data on gender and employment outcomes for 79 percent of our total PhD sample. To see what else we are learning, have a look at the data analyses on the [TRaCE website](#). New data appear each week.

The data gathering is foundational for the other two stages of the project. Stage 2 is going on now. Grad student researchers across the country are reaching out to the grads from their programs, explaining TRaCE to them, and telling them that their expertise and experience are dearly needed by the departments where they did their PhDs and even more by the PhD students themselves. The students are interviewing their predecessors; the interview notes become the basis for stories about why and how the grads got into PhD programs, what happened to them there, and what they have done with their PhDs since graduation.

By telling the stories of their educational and professional lives, PhD grads are raising the profile of the many pathways that lead to and through the PhD and into a wide range of fields, including but far from limited to higher education. New stories appear on the website regularly. A community that didn't know it existed is slowly becoming visible to itself.

In about a month, once membership on the site reaches an optimal level, project manager Sheetal Lodhia and the web designers at [Good Lookin Kids](#) will enable the built-in networking capacity of the website. PhD students will then be able to get in touch with the PhD grads whose stories are posted on the site and will be able to learn more about the multiple career pathways that lead from the PhD. People who have a stake in the social and intellectual value of humanistic knowledge, whether they are inside or outside the university system and at all stages of their careers, will be able to share knowledge and know-how with each other.

Stage 3, to begin this fall, will see the participating universities invite back to campus a number of PhD grads to take part in doctoral programs in a range of ways – as mentors, guest teachers, program advisors, or presenters on panels about entrepreneurship, etc. Stage 3 will also foster two-way traffic – PhD grads from outside the university contributing to the advancement of doctoral education and PhD students and faculty taking a greater role in public arts and humanities initiatives. The faculty, student and non-academic PhD members of the project are now brainstorming about what kinds of exchanges will be most effective and beneficial.

And there is still much work ahead for us. This week (May 16-18), a [Future of the PhD in the Humanities conference](#) is being held at Carleton University. The Ottawa meeting is looking for concrete ways to implement some of the ideas that took shape at the McGill conference a year ago.

In the planning stages, finally, is a five-year project, TRaCE 2.0, that will seek to engage with the humanities PhD grads that we have not yet connected with, as well as to reach out to social sciences PhDs and to MFA and PhD graduates in the fine arts. The long-term goals of TRaCE 2.0 will be to change the culture of the university itself by reorienting it toward the public world; to work toward common cause among researchers and teachers in the humanities, social sciences and fine arts; and to create an infrastructure for a new national community in the arts, humanities and social sciences dedicated to mobilizing humanistic knowledge for the public good.

Paul Yachnin is the Tomlinson Professor of Shakespeare Studies and former director of the Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, McGill University.