

The Gender Politics of Doctoral Reform

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Image: Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

Round numbers and new decades invite us to take stock of things. The last decade was a big one for career diversity and doctoral reform in academe. The organizers of the Modern Language Association and other professional organizations are clearly "woke" to the need for changes in graduate education.

But what about the membership? At this year's MLA convention in Seattle, I decided to look more closely at the audiences that show up to listen, and have their say, at sessions about doctoral reform.

Those sessions have been plentiful in recent years. This year, they included discussions of the larger conditions governing the constricted tenure-track market — the demographics, the contingent status of full-time, non-tenure-track teaching jobs, and the "ethics of pedagogy" ("what we owe to our students"). There were also the now-expected workshops offering advice to graduate students on managing the academic job market and exploring nonfaculty career paths. Job candidates could go to separate workshops on CV- and résumé-writing. Another workshop — focused on job searches "inside and outside the academy" — invited participants to move from table to table, talking with Ph.D.s employed in a mix of professions.

Who is attending all of those sessions on doctoral training, job searching, and career diversity?

Based on what I witnessed at this year's convention: lots and lots of women and very few men, especially white men. The ratio isn't a random blip, either — I've noticed it for years. So why do the demographics of doctoral reform skew female, and what might that mean?

We can start with the numbers. "The profession as a whole is more female now," said Jean Howard, a professor of English at Columbia University, in an interview via email. That is notably true of many other humanities fields, too.

The numbers on the biological clock demand attention, too. Many women in academe postpone having children until after they have earned tenure. But as the road to a stable academic career gets ever longer, women may be more inclined to look for a suitable exit ramp that leads to a more family-friendly life.

But there's more to this pattern than sheer numbers. I've spoken to multidisciplinary audiences at campuses around the country, and I see the same proportions, not just in the humanities.

The nature of a job affects who chooses to do it — and so does the perception of the job. "The work of reform" is "sometimes feminized," wrote Katina Rogers, a director of programs and administration involving graduate training at the City University of New York Graduate Center, in an email. It involves "a lot of care and maintenance and collective effort."

The keyword: care. Many of the changes in graduate education entail more care for the students. That's both appropriate and overdue — graduate students' welfare has been ignored for too long while we all hunkered down and waited for literally decades for the academic job market to return to its brief postwar heyday.

Today, only the most Panglossian professors maintain that futile vigil. Most others are trying to come to grips with a New Normal for ourselves and our students. But new models of graduate education that prepare students for diverse career paths (not just for the professoriate) necessarily require more advising. Dissertation advisers can't just rely on the

old template. We need to have wider conversations with our advisees about their career options, involving experts from other areas, like career services.

For about 100 years now, faculty members have been socialized to think of their jobs as a triadic combination of research, teaching, and service. As a form of teaching, graduate advising has an intellectual component — scholarly training — that allies it with research. But the caretaking, career-preparatory part of advising leans more toward service.

Nicky Agate, the assistant director of scholarly communication at Columbia University, spoke on an MLA panel on "Disrupting the Academic Prestige Economy." She noticed that the whole panel was female — as was 80 percent of the audience — and wondered about how to get more male professors interested in training their graduate students for multiple career paths. Why won't they? They're worried, said Agate, that they "won't be able to produce mini-me's anymore."

Service has traditionally been the least-prestigious, least-respected member of the research-teaching-service triad. Not coincidentally, service also has a long and continuing history of being feminized. Service is seen as soft, lacking in intellectual heft and rigor, and unworthy of the rewards reaped by research. Michelle A. Massé, a professor of English at Louisiana State University and co-editor of *Over Ten Million Served: Gendered Service in Language and Literature Workplaces*, called service "the handmaid to both teaching and research."

Improving graduate advising is central to doctoral-education reforms. But the more those changes emphasize advising, the more feminized that movement becomes. Is it any wonder that men stay away when we gather to talk about how to improve Ph.D. training and career options?

But not all men avoid those conversations. There are some men who show up to talk about changes in doctoral education — and most of them are nonwhite.

Amardeep Singh, a professor of English at Lehigh University, is one of them. As the current director of graduate studies of his department, he bore witness to the "disproportionate amount of the heavy lifting" that women do when it comes to administration of academic departments.

"The reluctance I've encountered from some male colleagues," he said, "runs along the lines of, 'It's fine that you want to help our graduate students get jobs, but I have serious books to write.'" Singh decided to serve as graduate-studies director because "We can't just feed our students to the wolves."

The combination of women and nonwhite men make up a natural reform constituency. "Minority men still see themselves as new to the game," said Howard. "They naturally ally with women and see themselves as, like women, subordinate for a long time to white men."

There's a practical aspect to this, adds Rogers: "The people who are most invested in reform are often those who have historically not been well served by the existing system."

They're also more attuned to the alternatives. "We know enough to look outside the usual networks because we're often excluded from those networks to begin with," said Megan Ferry, professor of Chinese and Asian studies and chair of the modern-languages and literatures department at Union College, who led a career-diversity workshop at MLA. "We're more open to the possibility that there's no set path for us."

Women and nonwhite men both gain from a more diverse system — and so does everyone else. Hiring committees have already gotten that memo. There are very few professorships out there, but "both women and men of color are the ones getting the jobs now," said Howard.

Which raises a paradox. The same white men who avoid sessions on doctoral-education reform and nonacademic careers actually need them the most.

It's no secret that the language and literature fields under the MLA aegis produce a more diverse pool of candidates than many other disciplines. Moreover, the faculty members in those departments generally encourage efforts to hire candidates from underrepresented groups.

"The academic job market isn't sparing anyone these days," said Stacy M. Hartman, director of the Publics Lab at the CUNY Graduate Center, in an email. But as Howard points out, white men "objectively" face "a disadvantage" in faculty hiring these days, as literature and language departments not only look to hire diverse candidates but also to create tenure-track jobs in nonwhite, non-Western literary subfields.

So why don't more white male graduate students and Ph.D.'s show up at these graduate-career sessions and prepare themselves more broadly?

"Old habits of mind fade away very slowly," said Howard, and "asking for help isn't in their tool kit." Perhaps white men "just don't see themselves as benefiting from these workshops," she said, adding that there remains "plenty of room to learn how to present oneself to best advantage." But you have to want to do that.

That imperative applies to doctoral training as a whole. "Anyone who is concerned about the future of the humanities and the academy should be participating in these conversations" about reform, said Hartman. The women and nonwhite men who populate them now are keeping themselves open to possibility. That makes them role models for the rest of us.

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He writes regularly about graduate education. His new book, *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It*, is published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at lcassuto@erols.com. His Twitter handle is [@LCassuto](https://twitter.com/LCassuto).



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