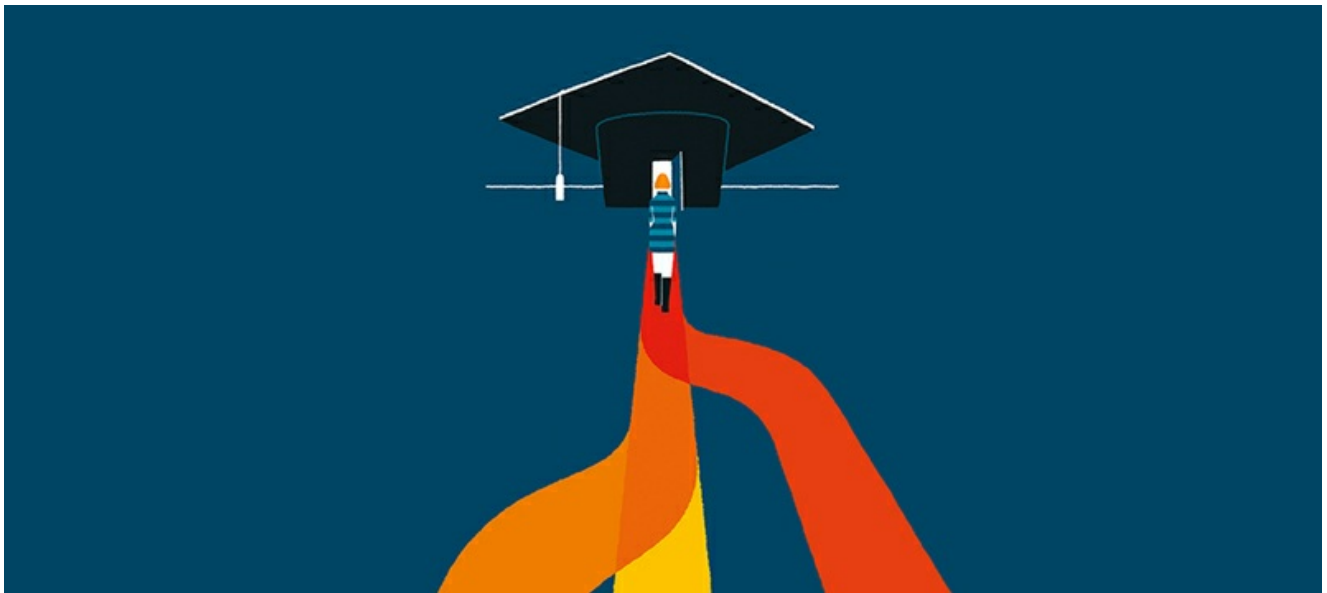


# Reformers Want Faster Ph.D.s. They're Wrong.

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*Image: Martin Leon Barreto For The Chronicle*

*By Heather Steffen*

In his 1903 essay, “The Ph.D. Octopus,” William James lamented the rapid expansion of American graduate education, which had become a “tyrannical Machine with unforeseen powers of exclusion and corruption.” It produced neither intelligent scholarship nor good teachers but instead fostered a culture of fear among young scholars, who were taught to see failure of the doctoral exam as “a sentence of doom that they are not fit, and are broken-spirited men thereafter.” James found fault with administrators’ quest for prestige and hypercredentialed faculty, but he also assigned the professoriate a share of the blame. “We of the university faculties,” he wrote, “are responsible for creating this new class of American failures, and heavy is the responsibility.”

Though few today would call unemployed Ph.D.s or “drop out” A.B.D.s failures (at least publicly), a growing body of literature on emotional and psychological ill health in the 21st-century academy attests to the persistence of the dynamics James identified. One need only think of the rapid rise of “quit lit.” Graduate school, Rebecca Schuman wrote in an essay that epitomizes the genre, “lasts at least six years and will ruin your life in a very real way. But ... this ruin is predestined, and completely unrelated to how ‘right’ you do things.”

From James's century-old critique to "quit lit," failure emerges as more than a trope of writing about scholarly life. In fact, failure — or fear of it — appears to be constitutive of academics' emotional and intellectual lives in general and of the doctoral-student experience in particular.

James and Schuman both get at the destructive variants of academic failure: things like failing to get hired, pass an exam, earn tenure or a degree, or publish a book. But for students, professors, teachers, and most creative workers, failure can also be productive. When one's research question turns out to be off the mark, new avenues of inquiry open up. The best class discussions sometimes happen when you've run out of time to prep for class. A dissertation that would never see the light of day as a monograph becomes relevant as a series of articles. In all these cases, what turns failure into a different kind of success — what makes it productive rather than destructive — is *time*. But almost everyone thinks humanities doctoral students spend too much time working on their degrees.

A nationwide graduate-education reform movement, bringing together professional organizations, philanthropic foundations, scholarly groups, and universities, has come to see lengthy time to degree as linked to a cluster of problems: student debt, invisible barriers to graduate study, the difficulty of translating academic training into a marketable skill set for nonacademic careers, and, most recently, the need to pause graduate admissions in order to support current students during the pandemic recession.

These reformers want to increase graduate student diversity and access to humanities doctoral education while producing more-employable graduates who will finish faster and carry less educational debt. For example, Stanford's Russell A. Berman, who led the Modern Language Association's Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature, sees shortening time to degree as a leveling strategy. Reformers rightly observe that shortening program duration can decrease debt load, which might increase access for nontraditional students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color. Most graduate students and faculty would agree that these are fine goals, but it is worth considering what might be lost when we target "surplus time" spent pursuing a degree as though it were the root cause of higher education's inequitable and exclusionary practices.

The concept of failure can help us here. Decreased time to degree heightens the destructive potential of failure while limiting its productive possibilities.

Shortened time to degree, when enforced by intimidating policies, makes failure more destructive for doctoral students. For students to complete doctoral programs with their mental health relatively intact, progress requirements and required timelines must be flexible. Otherwise, strict time-to-degree policies can turn manageable failure into devastation of students' career paths, self-confidence, identities, or finances — harms which are more likely to befall students of color, student parents, and students from low-income backgrounds.

Insufficiently flexible time-to-degree requirements make it impossible to survive common failures — both one’s own and those of others — and can inadvertently lead to already vulnerable students being punished for the unavoidable failures everyone encounters in life. Inflexible policies cannot account for failures of a student’s mental health or a loved one’s physical health, a cheap apartment’s ceiling collapsing, a marriage breaking up, a sibling’s murder, or an adviser who fails to read one’s work on time. Reformers must strive to work against the survival-of-the-fittest culture that permeates graduate study and rewards students for hiding their wounds like a cat who doesn’t show symptoms until it’s too late for a cure.

Done incorrectly, faster humanities Ph.D.s will not only harm individual students but also threaten two core missions of the contemporary humanities: advanced scholarly inquiry and an investment in positive social change driven by humanistic values.

To understand why, we need to address questions about the nature of intellectual inquiry and the social role of the university. A useful starting point is the work of James’s contemporary Thorstein Veblen. For Veblen, individuals and cultures are animated by two mutually reinforcing drives: “idle curiosity” and the instinct of workmanship. The instinct of workmanship, as Veblen described it in 1914, “occupies the interest with practical expedients, ways and means, devices and contrivances of efficiency and economy, proficiency, creative work and technological mastery of facts. Much of the functional content of the instinct of workmanship,” he wrote, “is a proclivity for taking pains.” In other words, workmanship accomplishes what proponents of the faster Ph.D. are seeking: It pushes us to figure out how to achieve our goals as efficiently as possible.

Idle curiosity, on the other hand, provides the inspiration behind our acts of workmanship. As Veblen defined it, idle curiosity is “a disinterested proclivity to gain a knowledge of things and to reduce this knowledge to a comprehensible system.” Far from connoting laziness, the “idle” in “idle curiosity” highlights its disinterested, autotelic, and nonpecuniary nature. As Norman Kaplan explains, for Veblen, “idle” refers to “an absence of an ulterior end, especially in terms of concern for the uses to which the product of curiosity, namely, knowledge, will be put.”

Idle curiosity is the source of scholars’ pleasure in the work of inquiry. The political scientist Sidney Plotkin describes Veblen’s meaning: “Knowing is imbued with a sense of gratification that is akin to the craftsman’s satisfaction at doing a job well. The gratification is not only or even mainly in the result. It is also or chiefly in the carefully wrought process of getting to the result. Pleasure is not only in what is newly known; it also derives from the process of thinking, reading, learning, doing research, exchanging ideas and putting them to the test of debate, getting to know things better.” Yet idle curiosity has social utility. As Clare Eby, an English professor at the University of Connecticut, notes, Veblen “defends idle curiosity as the force driving technology, and therefore the evolution of human culture, forward” by prompting what Veblen calls “impressive mutations in the development of

thought.”

By compressing the time students have to select and hone research questions, and by focusing only on the goal (a job, degree completion, or the dissertation) rather than on the process of learning and research, shortening time to degree shuts down the free play of idle curiosity. It disincentivizes intellectual risk taking, arduous methods, the pursuit of promising tangents, and the productive repurposing of accidents and failures that can lead to new insights and prompt real contributions to scholarly and public knowledge.

In the context of Veblen’s heterodox, anticapitalist economic theory, idle curiosity and the instinct of workmanship function in opposition to and in spite of the barbarities and inefficiencies of capitalism. In contrast to the market’s wastefulness and inefficiency, they offer a renewable resource of inspiration, progress, and practicality. Success and failure in Veblen’s scheme are flipped: capitalist economic success — the attainment of leisure-class status — makes one less useful, less responsible for the success of a culture, while “idle” inquiry, investigation, and creativity are revealed to be engines of progress. From Veblen’s perspective, “failure” in the humanities may be a sign that we’re doing something right.

As the Columbia queer theorist Jack Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.” The university should be one such setting. Against the “toxic positivity of contemporary life,” Halberstam proposes an exuberant reclamation of failure: “We can recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.” This is failure you can dance to.

Do we really want the humanities to succeed if succeeding means giving up their anticapitalist, antiracist, decolonial, and feminist values?

The doctoral-reform movement’s obsession with shortening time to degree and teaching skills over content is a cynical response to the immense structural problems of the modern university and its role in the production of counterhegemonic knowledge. (Does anyone really think you can do critical theory for General Motors? When was the last time Amazon needed to conceptualize “overdetermination”?) The U.S. university and its doctoral programs are many things other than incubators of social change and critical thought, and scholars’ scholarly desires and teachers’ teacherly hopes may soon need to find homes outside of or alongside the university. But for now at least, we’re looking at actually existing institutions that house actually existing people, lives, learning communities, and research trajectories. For them — for us — the reform movement’s jaded focus on faster Ph.D.s is the wrong place to start.

Instead, we need to enact flexible policies that approach failure with openness, creativity, and hope. A primary concern of such policies should be figuring out ways to help students manage everyday failures as they occur. The MLA's 2013 document "Improving Institutional Circumstances for Graduate Students in Languages and Literatures," written by the MLA's Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession (of which I was a member), lists questions all reformers should consider when rewriting graduate policy. Among its recommendations are a living wage; health insurance; clear communication between advisers, departments, and students; and considerations for international students — all of which would go a long way toward shortening time to degree simply by minimizing the ramifications of students' financial, academic, and personal failures and by removing the anxiety that total crisis may be just around the corner.

Most current graduate-program policy revisions build in language about extenuating circumstances, leaves of absence, and in absentia status, but they don't always convey to a student that it is possible to keep working during a period of crisis or failure. Such policies don't acknowledge that for some students working slower or part time could be a healthier, more productive, and ultimately more successful solution than not working at all as they get their lives back to normal.

Ideally, humanists would be working to save the *content* of our studies and our teaching, not their forms or time frames. The forms and time frames have caused trouble for a long time, but the content of humanities scholarship has proved stalwart in the face of all its battles. The material of the humanities continues to offer the same promise as a resource for change that Veblen locates in idle curiosity and Halberstam finds in failure. Mobilizing it is a complicated, difficult task, but it deserves better than to be endlessly reduced to questions of time to degree, placement, and skill building.

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