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Taking the doctorate in new directions

A number of programs are exploring options for applied scholarship within the PhD.

By SUZANNE BOWNESS | December 9, 2015

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Art by Stephen Doyle.

When she began her doctorate in social psychology at the University of British Columbia, Ashley Whillans knew that she wanted to study workplace happiness – or, more specifically, the benefits of time off versus more money in relation to job satisfaction. She also wanted her work to have a real-world impact. To that end she began to wonder: what if, rather than seeking out the usual crowd of undergraduates as research subjects, she could collect data from actual workplaces and in exchange she'd offer them her findings?

Ms. Whillans, who's in the second year of her PhD program, reached out to potential partners, including YouEarnedIt, a Texas-based company that designs

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employee-rewards programs. In exchange for real-world customer data, Ms. Whillans would provide these companies with results they could use to tweak their businesses or organizational approaches.

“Since starting graduate school, I have always been very interested in putting science to work to solve real-world problems,” she says. In the case of YouEarnedIt, Ms. Whillans set up a survey to measure whether employees were happier to receive time-saving rewards like getting their lawns mowed and having groceries delivered, or more typical and tangible rewards like iPads and coffee gift cards. The company will in turn be able to share those insights with its customers. For Ms. Whillans, this means her results won’t just sit in a journal somewhere, but be put to use immediately.

Administrators at the companies she reached out to seem just as enthusiastic about the project. Tim Ryan, vice-president of marketing for YouEarnedIt, says he appreciates both the opportunity to help a young researcher as well as the potential improvements the company can make based on Ms. Whillans’ findings. “I love that it’s two-way, that we’re all benefiting from this,” he says.

It’s not just companies catching on to the merit of this kind of fieldwork; Ms. Whillans was assisted in her project through a grant from UBC’s recently launched **Public Scholars Initiative**, a pilot project that, according to the university, is targeted at PhD students “who are interested in explicitly linking their doctoral work to an arena of public benefit and integrating broader and

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more career-relevant forms of scholarship into their doctoral education process.” The program’s first call for proposals attracted 98 applications (mostly from students mid-PhD) and provided up to \$10,000 of funding to each of the 39 selected projects. Besides Ms. Whillans, successful applicants include a political science candidate who is developing a humanitarian training program for those helping former child soldiers, and an applied science student (and former Boeing employee) who is creating a framework to link academic knowledge and industry practice.

“The idea is to integrate scholarship that is preferably collaborative with an entity or individuals outside of academia or in different levels of academia, and to do the diverse types of scholarship that lead to an impact on the public good,” says Susan Porter, dean and vice-provost of graduate and postdoctoral studies at UBC.

Public humanities is just one approach that university leaders are exploring to address the concern that the PhD is in need of attention both in terms of structure and relevance. The often quoted statistic that only 20 percent of doctoral graduates attain tenure-track positions, and the growing awareness that a good number of PhDs leave academia altogether, is finally prompting discussions like the ones held at the **Future Humanities** conference last May at McGill University. The conference attracted scholars, doctoral candidates and academic “refugees” to brainstorm and address issues like lagging completion times and the perceived irrelevance of the PhD outside the academy.

Despite these discussions, there have been few examples of actual change. One promising effort is the **Public Humanities @ Western** program, launched in May 2011 by Joshua Lambier, a PhD candidate in English at Western University. Back then, Mr. Lambier, a Trudeau Scholar, wrote what he calls a “Jerry Maguire-style” vision statement for his doctoral research and presented it to Western’s dean of arts and science. In response, the dean provided a small amount of seed funding that Mr. Lambier used to start approaching arts groups in London as partners.

Today, Mr. Lambier is program director for the initiative, which counts about a dozen program coordinators from disciplines as diverse as sociology, anthropology, music and medicine. The program’s flagship projects include a speaker series, a literary and creativity festival called Words, a campus-community partnership called **Engage Western**, and **Stories of Illness and Health**, an initiative involving Western, the London Public Library and the London Health Sciences Centre to collect and share personal stories of living with illness. Since its inception, Public Humanities @ Western has engaged with 90 local groups and boosted the university’s profile in the community, even though students receive no official credit for their involvement to apply against degree requirements.

This lack of recognition is a far cry from the situation in the U.S., where students can earn master’s degrees in public humanities at Brown University and Yale University, or a PhD in public humanities at the University of

Washington. Imagining America, an umbrella organization dedicated to “advancing the public and civic purposes of humanities,” is supported by more than 90 institutions.

Roberta Cauchi-Santoro followed up a traditional PhD in comparative literature with a two-year Mitacs-funded postdoc that fits the public humanities profile. She echoes both Ms. Whillans and Mr. Lambier in their desire for more official support of the field. “I think this kind of project should not be undertaken by a postdoc totally independently on their own initiative, but should be arranged by core faculty members who actually come up with projects and then give the PhD students, even in their first and second year, the opportunity to carry out some parts of the research,” says Dr. Cauchi-Santoro. For her own project, she looked at 35 buildings in downtown London, Ontario (many slated for demolition), and interviewed locals about them. The project allowed her to make valuable community connections, she says.

For Mr. Lambier, the enthusiasm his work received from the local community was not always matched by faculty at Western. “I got a much more mixed reaction,” he says. “There were some immediate champions, but I think the majority were either suspicious or lukewarm. They’d ask: ‘Why would you want to do this? Where does this fit into your PhD?’”

Controversies about changing the PhD go beyond the field of public humanities. How about making the degree more interdisciplinary? Many critics

see this as a threat to traditional departmental silos. Or more coursework-based degrees? Some consider them a useful grounding in a discipline's language and methodologies, while others argue the option repeats much of what's covered in the master's degree and lacks consistency. And what of comprehensive exams and the PhD's crowning glory, the dissertation? While their purpose and relevance have been questioned (particularly in light of lengthy completion times), most are wary of any change for fear of diminishing their rigour.

For dissertation defenders, Félix Grenier might be considered a blasphemer. A doctoral candidate in political studies at the University of Ottawa, he points to the gradual disappearance of the purely research-focused social sciences master's degree in favour of the coursework-stream master's as a marker of things to come. "I see it coming at the PhD level. You will see it in maybe 10, 15, 20 years," he says.

Mr. Grenier's dissertation explores the sociology of knowledge in international relations through graduate education programs. At a recent roundtable discussion with representatives from international studies programs, he learned that these programs, which currently offer mostly master's degrees, are looking to develop doctoral streams. In a field that already values applied work, the challenge is to create a program that would prepare students equally for positions in non-governmental organizations and government as for pure research. Mr. Grenier's most controversial idea for making a hands-on PhD a reality is to have students select either a research track or an applied track for

their doctoral degree, much like they already do at the master's level.

“A program should help them decide very quickly, in the first six months, what they want to do,” Mr. Grenier says. Researchers who aspire to the tenure track would pursue a traditional dissertation whereas those inclined towards non-academic jobs could select applied components like internships, publishable articles, policy papers or patents. He realizes the potential for debate this option stirs up: “Are they the same kind of program? I’m not sure. It’s a hanging question that remains to be solved,” he says.

Even for those who support switching up the dissertation for other forms, the idea of a two-track PhD may take it too far. “I’m wary of suggesting we should have academic PhDs versus alt-ac PhDs because I don’t think it’s fair to ask students to self-select before they’ve become PhDs,” says Frédéric Bouchard, a professor of philosophy and director of the Centre interuniversitaire de recherche sur la science et la technologie at Université de Montréal. Western’s Mr. Lambier agrees: “I would be very suspicious of creating a PhD A and a PhD B. If somebody had to identify right from the get-go that to do PhD B means you’re off the tenure track, I think it’d be very discouraging and I don’t think it would take,” he says.

One problem with these theoretical discussions is that they’re just that – theoretical. Meanwhile, after a strategic review in 2005, the University of Saskatchewan’s history department eliminated its traditional first year of

coursework in favour of directing doctoral students straight into comprehensive exams (in a major and two minor fields) on set dates early on in year two. The program also instituted mandatory biweekly meetings with supervisors, guaranteed five-year funding, and teaching fellowships to give students experience as course directors. Martha Smith-Norris, director of graduate studies in the department, says the change was generally well received. “I think overall people prefer the more efficient process, and the fact that now statistically we can show that our students are finishing on average around six years,” she says.

Dr. Smith-Norris also began to track her history PhDs post-graduation, yet another task that many vow to implement but have yet to start (among the exceptions are UBC and Concordia University, and at a national level there is a new project that emerged from the McGill conference called TRaCE, which will track PhDs outside academia and organize them into a network). Tracking students all the way back from 1990, Dr. Smith-Norris found that of 29 PhD students who graduated, nine had academic jobs, three had senior administrative jobs at the university, and four are postdocs. Others went on to get jobs at NGOs, to do other professional degrees, or into a combination of sessional and writing work.

In total, there were 72 students who entered the program since 1990 (which historically admitted one to two per year and after its redesign admitted around five per year), of which 32 are currently still completing their degrees. Dr.

Smith-Norris says tracking the graduates is fairly labour-intensive, using digital “trails” such as online searches and LinkedIn profiles in addition to direct contact. However, she believes the results have the potential to inspire her students to persevere with the program. “It’s important for the students to have a more concrete idea of what is possible and what their peers are doing with their degrees,” she says.

To increase the professional development aspect of the PhD, some departments are starting to invite consultants like Anne Krook to help doctoral candidates to prepare for non-academic job searches. (Dr. Krook wrote an essay on the subject, “[Mobilizing the humanities for diverse careers](#),” for University Affairs published last June). Dr. Krook shared her own experience as a case study: denied tenure, she reinvented herself as a business communications professional and consultant, starting with a position at Amazon.

Her experience suggests that perhaps one of the most helpful changes to the PhD is one that costs very little: encouraging students to see the world outside the academy as intellectually stimulating. “Frankly, Amazon was the most intellectually demanding place I ever worked. I didn’t find it less demanding than academics. I did not turn off my brain when I stopped being a faculty member,” she says.

Dr. Bouchard at U de Montréal agrees: “We easily fall into this mythology of universities that they are the only place where breakthroughs happen. But

everyone outside of universities knows there are lots of people doing highly innovative things.”

As for Ms. Whillans at UBC, she says that opening up her PhD has “definitely broadened my horizons and it’s made me feel a little bit better about my prospects when I graduate. Actually working with these industry and government contacts has made me realize that the skills that we’re gaining in a graduate program are broader than we often think.”

This is the second of a two-part series by Suzanne Bowness examining PhD programs. The first instalment, “[What’s up with alt-ac careers](#),” was published online in September.

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Rachel Arteaga / January 14, 2016 at 8:30 pm

At the University of Washington, as mentioned, we have a thriving community of practice in public scholarship. As a graduate student in English here, I can attest to the level of rigor and deep personal investments that go into projects ranging from prison education to public-facing digital archives to music and film festivals informed by feminist theory. Faculty, staff, and doctoral students across our three campuses often identify as publicly-engaged scholars, and, as importantly, there are institutional structures of support and recognition for collaborative humanistic inquiry with and for diverse publics. While we do not have a PhD in public humanities, we do have the Certificate in Public Scholarship, a course of study that can be pursued in conjunction with a doctorate from a department (such as English or History). In fact, we recently expanded our historic commitment to public scholarship with the support of a new grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; it is made up of three fellowship categories. One supports the development of new graduate seminars to train students in the methods and approaches of the public humanities. Another will fund doctoral students to undertake their own projects in public scholarship. And the third places graduate students into direct collaboration with two-year colleges in Seattle, where they are mentored by faculty in their disciplines. We are already seeing new curriculum being developed in this partnership. Public scholarship is important intellectual work, and it should be more widely recognized by academic institutions both in the United States and in Canada.

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