

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Helping History Ph.D.s Expand Their Job Options

By *Vimal Patel* | JANUARY 29, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM



James Grossman

No humanities discipline has embraced the idea of career diversity more than history, and that's in part because the American Historical Association and its executive director, James Grossman, have backed the effort.

The association received a \$1.6-million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2014 to broaden the career paths of history doctoral students. The grant was distributed to four institutions: Columbia University and the Universities of Chicago, New Mexico, and California at Los Angeles.

The chief insight gleaned so far, Mr. Grossman says, is that the skills that enable success beyond the professoriate are also crucial to the work of 21st-

century professors. That caused a shift in how he and others are thinking about the careers effort. What began with a focus on jobs has broadened into an examination of how graduate students are trained.

Mr. Grossman spoke to *The Chronicle* about what they've learned so far, whether history doctorates are being overproduced, and why programs need to pay attention to their doctoral students' career prospects. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How do you prepare a student for nonacademic careers without diminishing the rigors of their academic training?

History Ph.D. recipients are qualified for a lot more things than people think. They

learn to understand how change happens. Combining that with teaching experience is fabulous leadership training. We do that well. What we're missing are five basic skills that can be integrated into existing programs: communication, collaboration, quantitative literacy, intellectual self-confidence, and digital literacy. Just looking at the first one, when I received my Ph.D. in 1982, learning how to teach meant learning how to conduct a seminar and lecture. That's not going to cut it anymore. You need to have much more sophisticated presentation skills and be versed in digital skills. You can't just stand up there and talk for 50 minutes.



Opening Doors for the Ph.D

Ph.D. Colleges make curricular changes to better prepare humanities doctoral students for careers outside academe.

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So you're saying the skills you are encouraging are ones that will help students whether they work inside or outside academe?

That's right. Learning how to read a university's budget, for example, increases your ability to participate in shared governance and makes you a more qualified department and committee chair. It's also essential to working outside the professoriate. These skills are not a waste of time for students wanting an academic career. They make you a better professor.

Doctoral recipients have very low unemployment rates — somewhere around 2 percent. Given that reality, why should universities be paying attention to preparing graduate students for nonacademic careers?

It's true that unemployment rates are low for doctorate recipients, but far too many people are in precarious employment as adjuncts or working part-time. I would like those individuals to have more options. And I want those choices to be something they've thought about, prepared for, and can do well. I also think it would reduce time to degree if more students realize there will be a job for them when they finish. Sometimes knowing that there's light at the end of the tunnel makes you get through the tunnel quicker.

Can you tell me more about why those four colleges were chosen for the AHA-Mellon grants?

We wanted to have geographic diversity. Three are in big cities but different kinds of big cities, and one is in a much smaller city. We wanted institutions that were differently situated in terms of traditional notions of status. We wanted at least one institution that had

a substantial minority enrollment. We wanted a mix of public and private. And we chose places where we knew faculty members were already interested in doing this and felt this was important.

What have you found to work so far?

Among the most important things is thinking more broadly about internships and campus employment for graduate students. History departments, and my guess is other disciplines, need to think more broadly about what an assistantship is. Right now there are just teaching assistantships and research assistantships, but universities ought to consider a third type of assistantship. In the same way that graduate-student stipends in essence pay for students to be apprentices, stipends can also support student apprenticeships in other types of work at the university. There are many needs a university has for the type of work history Ph.D.s can provide.

Some programs and individual faculty members are making curricular changes to better prepare students for nonacademic careers. Why do that as opposed to, say, making training and career advice available in a central place like a graduate school or career office?

Because what's essential is integrating this work into the process of becoming a historian. Having the students go elsewhere for training makes it separate from your identity as a historian. That doesn't mean it's not useful to send people across campus to do all sorts of things. One of the things we've been working on is helping students to figure out what resources there are at a university that can broaden their career horizons and career opportunities.

There's a common view out there that humanities Ph.D.s are being overproduced, and that these career preparation efforts are the academy's way of not confronting that head on. Do you think history Ph.D.s are being overproduced?

No. First, history Ph.D.s are not produced. They are earned. Second, the main problem is that our students, faculty, and potential employers have not sufficiently realized the value of history Ph.D. recipients in a wide variety of employment sectors. It's underutilization, not overproduction. People with history Ph.D.s work in finance, nonprofits, and government. Nancy Pelosi's former chief of staff is a Ph.D. historian. He will tell you that the way he did his job was affected deeply by his training as a historian.

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