

ADVICE

Walking the Career-Diversity Walk



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By Leonard Cassuto | JULY 23, 2017

Political pollsters like to talk about the distinction between "hard support" and "soft support." Hard supporters will vote for a candidate no matter what. Soft supporters are known by another name: swing voters. They are the people who say they'll vote for a certain candidate but often change their minds.

The idea of training Ph.D.s for diverse career tracks has hard and soft supporters, too, but some professors may not realize which group they're in. They may believe they're behind graduates who search for jobs beyond the professoriate. But the actions of these faculty members — or their inaction — can suggest otherwise.

Medievalists have been publicly grappling with these issues in recent times. Two major medieval conferences this past spring — the meetings of the Medieval Academy of America (in Toronto) and the International Congress on Medieval Studies (as always, in Kalamazoo, Mich.) — both featured panels devoted to work outside the professoriate.

Simon Forde, director and editor in chief of Medieval Institute Publications at Western Michigan University, spoke on both panels. He bluntly described their aim: to "break down the idea" that if you don't get a professor's job after earning your Ph.D., "you're a complete failure in life."

Forde himself has succeeded in a variety of positions. He got his doctorate from the University of Birmingham in 1985, only to find that "there were absolutely no jobs in the humanities in the U.K." After a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto, Forde initially took a part-time editorial position at the University of Leeds. The job grew, and in a few years, he had become the main editor of the *International Medieval Bibliography* and assistant director of the graduate program there. After more than 15 years at Leeds, Forde moved to Europe and worked in senior positions for scholarly presses in Belgium and Amsterdam for nearly two decades before he moved to the United States in 2015 to take his present job at the university in Kalamazoo.

Thus did Forde gain experience running a publishing unit, a graduate program, and, in Michigan, an annual medieval congress.

"There are lots of skills I have," he said — which is surely an understatement. But he is a staff member at the university — *not* a professor. So when faculty members meet to discuss institute issues, they don't ask Forde to share his skills or knowledge. "I have not been consulted or asked for advice" by the institute's faculty board, he said.

In fact, Forde is "formally enjoined from making a proposal" when the faculty board meets. When it recently prepared a report on the institute for the university's provost, "all affiliated faculty saw it," Forde recalls. But it "was not even circulated to the staff."

That is not one person's fault, Forde believes. The problem is "the structure of the organization" and the habits built into it. "On a personal level," Forde says, he is treated well. But "structurally, there are all kinds of discriminations against staff."

Forde's experience exemplifies my point here: The problem is structural. We may say that we support career diversity for our Ph.D.s, but our own workplace practices — such as when professors vote on things without consulting staff members — show that our support may be softer than we realize. In short, we won't be finished reforming our own attitudes about graduate training while the structures that create those attitudes are still in place. And that architecture has a deeply rooted foundation that reaches all the way back to graduate school.

Kristina Markman, another panelist at the Kalamazoo conference, described how — during graduate school — she encountered opposition from her peers in her efforts to forge a nonfaculty career. She earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of California at Los Angeles in 2015, and has remained at UCLA where she's now a lecturer in history and coordinator of the university's Public History Initiative.

Markman is building an atypical academic career. Her work includes curriculum development, not only for college students but also at the K-12 level. Her goal, she says, is to become "a well-rounded educator with an emphasis on teaching."

When UCLA was named one of four pilot institutions for the American Historical Association's Career Diversity for Historians initiative and received an implementation grant from the Mellon Foundation, Markman got involved in her department's efforts to expand its career horizons. To her surprise, she got "pushback — not from faculty but from other graduate students."

"A lot of graduate students enter UCLA with the assumption that they're going to be placed in some sort of academic position when they finish," Markman said at the conference.

"There seems to be an assumption among students," she wrote in a post about career diversity for history Ph.D.s on the AHA's blog, "that putting together an academic job portfolio is a noble task, while preparing for the nonacademic market is a debasing commercial venture whereby you sell your soul to enhance 'employability.'"

At the Kalamazoo conference, she expanded on that idea. When graduate students "encounter career diversity — or someone like me who is looking for something different," she said, they feel threatened. "I've heard negative comments. People say that those who

don't want to become professors are 'stealing positions' in the graduate program from those who do."

"When you're a graduate student, you commiserate with your fellow graduate students," she said. "You seek asylum within your cohort." When you can't find that safe place, "it's really alienating."

Professors split along similar lines, she said. Most professors "want to train academics," Markman said. "They see it as extra work to advise their students on other career paths."

I hear similar comments all over the country. Some graduate students and professors want their departments to change their approach to doctoral training, but others remain skeptical. Such divisions lead to soft support for the career-diversity movement. They also make for an atmosphere in which a nonfaculty position becomes the job that cannot speak its name. Those graduate students "who are willing to look at other careers," said Markman, "don't say it."

Their silence replaces the conversations that ought to take place in faculty offices, student lounges, and at the proverbial water cooler.

"There are plenty of medievalists with worthwhile careers within academia who are not conventional teachers, or tenured," said Forde, but faculty members aren't always aware of those people — even if they're working in the office next door. Ph.D.'s can be program directors, or publishers, like Forde. One of the other Kalamazoo panelists, Alan M. Stahl, curator of numismatics at Princeton University, specializes in old coins.

Of this group, Forde says, faculty jobs "simply didn't suit us. We chose careers that suited our personalities." Markman uses the lexicon of the closet to describe this choice. "When someone 'comes out,'" she said, "that person risks criticism and even ostracism."

Such forbidding language suggests that our graduate programs have a way to go before we'll be supporting career diversity in practice. Markman offers a number of familiar suggestions, including the involvement of career services and other outreach services — beginning at graduate students' orientation, at professional-development seminars, and in internships.

Those are good ideas — and many departments are implementing them — but Markman emphasizes that students must also take responsibility for themselves. She proposes a simple but potentially trenchant idea: that graduate students "complete an annual values assessment to develop self-reflection and be better prepared to choose a career that aligns with their personal values." This exercise also underscores the very important truth that students are the CEOs of their own graduate education.

Career diversity is making headway in graduate programs nationwide, but the progress is hard-won at every stage. The root of the problem, Forde says, is "the perception that a professor's career is the *only* legitimate one." So long as that perception endures, reforms will have to swim upstream.

We enforce that perception in myriad ways, through graduate education and beyond it. With this column, I'm beginning a series that will focus on the current state of career diversity in academe. Next month, I'll talk about how we interfere with our own progress through the language we use.

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space. His latest book is The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It, published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at lcassuto@erols.com. Twitter handle: @LCassuto.

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