ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING A PROFESSOR

The Graduate Student Experience

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"Take a few minutes to think about your personal journey as a graduate student, on your way toward your professional goals as a teaching scholar. How would you describe the process you’ve been going through? You may want to capture this visually or with words—whichever is helpful for you."

With these instructions, we left our participants alone in a room for 10 minutes with a sheet of paper and a pencil. The drawings and stories they shared with us—midway through our four-year study of their graduate school experiences—provided powerful glimpses into the realities of graduate student lives today. Whatever we remembered from our own experiences, whatever we thought we knew then was wrong with the system, we were not prepared for the threatening cliffs, precipices, chasms, impossible passages, and the like revealed in their drawings. As shown on pages 19 through 21, the poignant sketches of Tom, Susan, and Jerry raise important questions.

What do these drawings represent? What can we learn from the personal journeys they depict? How can stories such as these inform our work with graduate students—especially with those aspiring to become tomorrow’s faculty members?

Questions like these have been an ongoing part of a collaborative, multi-site research project—funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Spencer Foundation—which we undertook in 1995 to examine how graduate students develop into faculty members. The study entails following cohorts of doctoral students over four years at a Research I land-grant institution and a Research I non-land-grant institution, and following a smaller cohort of master’s students over two years at a Master’s (Comprehensive) I institution.

According to their projected completion dates, most of the doctoral students expected to spend a total of five to seven years in graduate school—with those in the sciences anticipating the need for additional multi-year post-doc appointments—before finding positions as assistant professors at a college or university. The master’s students anticipated spending two to three years in their programs preparing for faculty positions at community colleges or admission to doctoral programs.

Why study the experiences of these graduate students? In societal terms, our study of how graduate students become teachers was conceived in response to escalating concerns about the quality of college teaching: What are the graduate school roots of the problem? In scholarly terms, our goal has been to expand what is known about the development of graduate students and faculty, and of teachers in general. In professional terms, each of us is committed to making teaching and learning better at every level in higher education. The primary research question guiding our pro-

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ject, however, is straightforward but challenging: *How do aspiring professors experience their graduate educations, and how does their understanding about becoming a faculty member change throughout the graduate school experience?*

We began with an original pool of 99 participants at the three institutions. At the outset, we selected students who expected to have a TA appointment at some point in their graduate experience. A majority of the 99 indicated interest in pursuing a faculty career. Now, in the fourth year of our study, we find ourselves with 68 participants who still plan to complete (or have completed, in the case of those at the Master’s I institution) their programs of graduate study. The others have moved away from their original expectations and interests: some left their original programs and moved to new ones; some left the area to assume lecturerships; some chose to exit their PhD programs with terminal master’s degrees; some chose to leave school to pursue nonacademic employment; and a few simply disappeared.

Through two in-depth interviews each year, survey questionnaires, focus groups with undergraduates taught by teaching assistants, and interviews with graduate TA supervisors and advisors, we have amassed a wealth of data on our participants and their graduate experiences. Some of the themes emerging from these data have taken us by surprise; some lead us to wonder whether the graduate school programs we are examining are preparing students to assume roles as the next generation of faculty members in ways we’d hope.

As we began this study, each of us was mindful, from our own experiences, of the intellectual growth and lifelong friendships that are associated with graduate study, of the sense of growth and accomplishment as one develops from student to teacher, from apprentice to scholar. Such memories set up expectations for us of what our participants might describe. However, upon reflection, we reminded ourselves that our own stories—like those of students in our current study—more often than not also contained elements of uncertainty, self-doubt, insecurity, personal embarrassment, feelings of isolation, and hopelessness. Our own journeys have seen dramatic ebbs and flows in our confidence in our own academic potential. However, hearing and capturing our participants’ stories—in the present tense, without the benefit of selective memory, and hearing from those who left as well as those who chose to stay—keeps us from romanticizing their particular journeys and reminds us of our own experiences that we’ve tended to repress.

Against the backdrop of these reality checks, interesting findings have emerged. At this point, a majority of those who intend to complete their programs still hope to pursue careers in the professoriate. But a significant number do not. Across the disciplines, many participants—in professional schools (business, journalism, education), the “SMEI” disciplines (chemistry, math, engineering, zoology), the social sciences (communication, history, psychology), and the humanities (English, languages, and music)—have become increasingly ambivalent about their futures and are seriously considering options other than the academy.

A number of common refrains emerge as our students discuss their experiences. We focus here on three: the tensions that graduate students experience in adapting to the
values embodied in higher education; the mixed (or ambiguous) messages they receive about priorities in the academy; and the pleas for support—implicit and explicit—in many of the stories they tell. Interestingly, these themes are equally salient in the lives of participants aiming for the professoriate and those headed elsewhere.

**Adapting to Values**

Although students’ vision of academic life is often what draws them to pursue a graduate degree, most are not explicitly aware of a particular value system within the academy when they enter graduate school. We have found that a significant portion of graduate student development involves efforts to demystify the values of the academy. In a number of cases, our participants have discovered, sifted through, and internalized a new set of values after a few terms; in other cases, participants continue to struggle to integrate in a meaningful way the clashing values and expectations expressed by various voices of authority within the academy.

Developing a coherent understanding of academic culture constitutes only a part of how students resolve this tension, however. Once they begin to make sense of what their institutions expect of them as graduate students, they often engage in an intense struggle to sort out how those values and expectations align with their own. These efforts occur within the context of the participants’ own value structures and meet with varying degrees of success.

In some cases, the students’ expectations and values mesh well with the demands of their academic environment, and any tensions present are experienced as engaging, exhilarating, productive, and useful learning experiences. The perceived values of the academy are internalized fairly easily. For example, Edward, in his personal journey summary, describes his adjustment as

"[g]radually moving toward getting lost in the graduate school experience, questioning your competence, trying to prove yourself, and forgetting about everything else." His first year he put in 14 hours a day, teaching and researching. But after he finished his exams (after he was no longer “on the daily proving grounds with these people”), he realized that he could do perfectly good work in a reasonable amount of time. He realized that he had lost perspective and had forgotten about other things he likes to do. Now, Edward says, “it’s just a few little things, as opposed to this dark band of awfulness that happens.”

—Edward (Math)

For others, though, coming to terms with the academy’s values entails disillusionment and setting aside many of their own values and goals. In these cases, the tensions inherent in this struggle engender a sense of grim determination to finish what they have started, along with some bitterness about the process. Inherent passion and joy in discovering more about one’s field and sharing it with others are replaced with resignation and disappointment. See, for example, Brad’s story of his journey:

"When I came into school here I was very excited. I have a total thirst for wisdom and knowledge, and I wanted to study all these books and different subjects, and I wanted
to take additional minors—to be a scholar, to study for its intrinsic worth. However, very fast, I got disillusioned. And the anxiety—after a while, I only wanted to know, ‘What are the requirements I need to fulfill to graduate and get out of here within my given time frame?’

“So anyway, I figured out very fast that what I want to do is fulfill the requirements, graduate within my given time, with a good marketable thesis, go on for tenure track, do that and then finally do what I wanted to do here...well, actually, intended to do here....My primary goal is to get a job at a research university, because that’s where the market value is and that’s where you set up yourself in your field. Good teachers are not valued; good researchers are valued. That’s the scarce resource...If my first choice were] a teaching school after graduation, I’d be academically dead basically. You always can go from a research school to a teaching school, but you can’t go from a teaching school to a research school. And actually I love the human interaction much more than the research; I’m a much more people-oriented person. But given how the system is set up, I choose to go that way. I’m still fond of the idea of perhaps leaving academia completely.”

—Brad (Business)

Still other graduate students experience the academy as amoral or even vicious; the hapless graduate student in a perceived struggle for survival can experience terrifying and disabling tensions. See, for example, Jeff’s story of his journey and Bruce’s drawing and description of his personal journey: both stories reveal depression, anxiety, and fear.

“Personally, graduate school has taken its toll on me, just as it has many of the people I know in the department. I, as well as some of my friends, have entered counseling due to depression and a feeling of isolation from ‘normal life.’ I’ve also experienced stomach problems related to the psychological ones. The PhD has always been a goal, but the price is steep. The university and my department seem to think we grad students can function [like] machines. Inevitably, many of the people get driven down so far as to leave. It gets depressing at times.”

—Jeff (Math)

“This [see p. 22] is a symbol of my career, let’s say—this little figure thing. Fear and agitation. Apprehension and anxiety here. Because there’s this little rickety bridge. Those are spikes. Just fear of entering the doctoral program, fear of the entrance exam, and if I don’t do well on it, what that might mean for my future—being afraid my career in music might fizzle out and die. And then it’s really scenic, early on. But here’s a gnarled tree, and here are some things that are going to swoop down and attack. And here is this narrow staircase, but luckily there’s a handrail—my advisor, friends, support. And then there’s a break. It’s a very sad thing; this is when I almost lost the TA. But I leapt successfully over it and it continued in this nice little scenic stuff, mountains and trees.

“But there are little things lurking in the trees—fears, anxiety, imaginary things, some real. Fear that I’m not good enough, that I don’t have the talent to succeed in mu-
sic, that I’m not a good teacher....Then there’s a little bridge (a much better bridge than before), and a little lake and a stream. But then there’s fog. And the fog is not knowing if I’m going to get a TA or not—the third year, it was very uncertain: ‘We’ll give it to you if there’s a spot.’

‘And now there’s this burning desert. But the desert is scenic still; I like it. There is less uncertainty because the road is straighter and flatter, but there are hardships still....I get sunburned. And then you have this winding steep thing that goes up the mountains....And then there’s the stream again...maybe it’s the same stream, I don’t know. And then there’s a better bridge—this is the best bridge yet over the stream (graduation?). But then it all goes into a hole. I guess the hole is just fear that...a career in music is just impossible now. And they’re getting more impossible, cuts in funding in general for music, classical music especially, and especially being a composer. So...everything swirls away into a black hole. I could have been a physics major....I never chose my career based on money, but maybe I should have....’

—Bruce (Music)

Although we certainly did not expect that our participants’ mid-point representations of their graduate journeys would include depictions of them wandering through alpine meadows picking wildflowers, we were somewhat amazed to see the number of precipices, perilously steep slopes, chasms, and traps that many drew. Of more concern to us was the absence in most of the pictures of safety nets, guides, ropes, pitons, or other means of assistance. The majority of students see themselves as alone, facing down the odds and slaying the dragons along their path by themselves. These trials are perceived by some students as unnecessarily difficult, unproductive, and, simply, “not worth it.” And, to use Bruce’s words, many see a “black hole” awaiting them at the end.

A significant number of our participants have voted not to pay the price. They have not been able to demystify the values of the academy and thus to confront and assimilate them for themselves; or they have decided that they do not agree with academic values and academic life and will not embrace them; or they are drawn to other options they feel will provide them more opportunity. In any case, we lose them from higher education. And those who leave undoubtedly include some of the best and brightest students. They clearly are those who have analyzed more carefully higher education and its possibilities. For the academy, this is a serious issue. We have always been able to see the future of the professorate composed of the very best minds of the next generation. What are we seeing now?

**Mixed Messages**

Contributing to graduate students’ confusion—and in some cases, to their rejection of the academy’s values—are the mixed messages they receive on every front. Of course, one of the reasons it is so difficult for them to demystify these messages is that the academy is never a truly unified entity. Certain themes may coherently tie together macro-level academic discourse, but at the micro level of daily life, the messages are indeed varied and mixed. Our participants report that there seems to be a “secret model” of graduate education with implicit norms and rules that may differ from the explicit messages they receive. As our participants battle to negotiate balance in their lives—between teaching and research responsibilities, between personal and professional life, between academic and civic commitments—the various voices of authority within the academy (advisors, faculty members, department chairs, and senior institutional leaders) are expressing divergent ideas about what constitutes balance and success.

These obvious disparate perspectives are problematic enough for graduate students to make sense of; even more confusing are those perspectives that remain hidden behind the vague, politically correct language so prevalent in high-stakes environments. Even when the various explicit messages graduate students hear do coalesce meaningfully, implicit academic structures, policies, and practices may undermine the meanings of those messages.

The most apparent contradictory or ambiguous messages concern the relative value of the teaching and research dimensions of academic life, particularly at the Research I universities. In official discourse, administrators, department chairs, and many professors embrace teaching as well as research as central to the mission of the university; meanwhile, observed implicit messages—such as tenure decisions or other measures of esteem—often reveal a devaluing of teaching and a valorization of research. See, for example, Denise’s comments:

“I am surprised; there is a very heavy emphasis on teaching. At the same time, all the rewards and everything in the department are still research-based. I think what happens in our department right now is if you publish a lot you are golden. Unless you are an absolutely diabolical teacher, they’re not going to do anything about it. So...it’s hard to say, because I don’t think they are just giving lip service to teaching; I think they are really considering it important....that’s the message I’m getting. On the other hand, the reward structure—that’s not the way that it’s structured at all. I am not into the system yet, so that wouldn’t bother me now, but if the incentives went that way, I don’t know....”

—Denise (Business)

Our participants often internalize the ambiguity surrounding the relative value of teaching and research and are subsequently pulled in opposite directions. Both Frederick’s and George’s comments, for example, show that their commitment to teaching is being undermined by the daily messages conveyed through comments and choices made by faculty members they observe.

“I’ve learned that the people who call the shots do not value teaching. And I’ve learned that I can’t spend as much time on my teaching as I have. I need to be more protective...
Graduate students report that they would like additional forms of support for their professional development as teachers.

and use my time in other areas. So, therefore, there are many things in class which I would like to do, but which I choose not to do because it’s too time-consuming. I hear every day that it’s an irrational choice to spend time on teaching. I have not felt that teaching is valued within the department. It’s belittled, basically—only he who is not a good researcher has to be a good teacher. I have professors telling me, ‘Spend as little time as possible on your teaching, and make sure you’re a good researcher.’

“I think I’ve done a fairly good job [as a teacher], but I’ve never heard any direct praise from the department chair or from my program director. It goes unnoticed. I know, for example, that a student wrote a letter saying that he really enjoyed my class and sent it to the PhD director and to the department chair. I haven’t heard anything from them. Not even a comment. I don’t know if they’ve read the letter or whether they just threw it in the trash can. So, if that’s the way they want to run the department or their program, that’s their choice. I just get the message and do my own thing basically. And it’s sad because I can see now why many faculty people are frustrated, and I don’t want to become the same way, but I’m getting really sarcastic about the whole issue. I don’t want to because I love teaching. I used to love it more than I do now.”

—Frederick (History)

We have been surprised to find that even some participants at the explicitly teaching-oriented Master’s I institution reported internalizing this ambivalence about the value of teaching in faculty life, an indication that the priorities of Research I institutions have spread throughout the system:

“What kind of messages have I received about being a teacher? That it’s really settling for a lesser thing. That if you’re going to be a real person, you’re going to do research....I did hear from one faculty member because I’m good at math, it’s like, ‘Why do you want to settle for teaching? Why do you want to do that?’ And fortunately, I know what I like to do. Because I really like it. I know there’s no money there, but I just love doing it. But no, I don’t think anybody’s encouraged to just teach if you’re any good at something else. While I say that, I need to also say that they’re very serious here about me doing a good teaching job while I’m working as a TA. While they may not think that that’s much of an ambition.”

—Alice (Math)

Requests for Support

Given the ambivalence surrounding the teaching enterprise in the academy, one of the things that has not come as a surprise to us is that graduate students report that they would like additional forms of support for their professional development as teachers. They suggest regular and systematic self-reflection about their experiences; discussing teaching with other TAs; observing and being observed, and then giving and receiving feedback about teaching; and more consistent and relevant mentoring and advising about life as a teaching scholar—in short, real intellectual and emotional engagement with others about teaching.

Although, as Charles Handy noted in the September/October 1998 Change, “we learn by reflecting on what has happened,” and we readily apply that knowledge to our development as researchers, seldom in academia do we systematically reflect on our teaching experiences. Change authors James M. Banner, Jr., and Harold C. Cannon further observed in their November/December 1997 article that
While occasionally we may ask our colleagues for assistance with a syllabus or laboratory experiment—and even observe them teaching—we don’t often sit around the faculty lounge discussing the human elements of teaching....

...Assistantships fail as apprenticeships not just because too few senior professors work with their younger colleagues, but because the opportunities such apprenticeships offer to examine what goes into teaching are not seized....

...What can we say but to express frustration (at the absence of intellectual engagement about teaching), concern for the interests of the graduate students and their own future students, and agreement with those who believe that far too little is being done to prepare our graduate students for the responsibilities and opportunities of their chosen professions?

Nelson, one of our participants, comments on these same topics:

“If you want to ‘breed’ [a graduate student to be] an excellent teacher, how do you do it? I think we would have to pay a lot more attention to spending time talking about how to teach. I think the idea of a mentor is important, too. I have not taught for the same professor twice. If you were in an apprenticeship as a carpenter, you [wouldn’t] work for 12 different people. Same with becoming a research chemist; I have one supervisor who teaches me what she knows. I’ve never taught for anybody more than 10 weeks, so no, you don’t learn anything from that person other than the occasional tidbit. In chemistry, you know that in a quarter, I can teach you the basic building blocks you’ll need for anything; but if you want to do it, that’s going to take five years of real training. And we don’t have centuries of tradition backing five-year apprenticeships in teaching. We don’t know how to do that.”

—Nelson (Chemistry)

Banner and Cannon speak of the need to create “safe havens” in which to discuss teaching issues that “otherwise would evoke a yawn or scorn.” Although this may sound like an idealistic dream, the combined comments of our participants underscore the urgency of this call. An overwhelming majority of comments we received regarding participation in the study indicated that respondents deeply appreciated the opportunity that our interviews provided simply to talk with an interested person in academia about teaching, and about other aspects of their development. In fact, many of our participants identified the interviews as their primary way of learning how to be reflective about their teaching, often indicating that they looked forward to the next scheduled interview as it was their only structured opportunity to talk in-depth with someone about their reflections and development.

Close on the heels of the need to connect with others about teaching experiences is the expressed need to connect with others in general. Our participants speak of the isolation they feel as they progress in their programs. We expected that there would be a number of students who would call for better mentoring and advising, but we were surprised how strongly many of our participants spoke of battling the isolation that threatens to engulf them as they progress through their graduate programs. See, for example, Tamara’s experience:

Tamara had an African-American female faculty member as her advisor when she entered the program. She came to the program full of anticipation that this advisor would be a mentor for her, and as a “sister,” would look out for her and help her negotiate the hurdles of PhD study. Her experience was not like this at all. She felt her advisor was distant and too busy for her. She ultimately felt betrayed by her, and changed advisors. There is little help for her among her cohort: “There is nobody to connect with, and you don’t have the time to foster the friendships.” Tamara finds being a single mom to be isolating as well. Most of the other students are much younger, hardly any are African-American, and almost none have children.

As of the fall of her fourth year, Tamara is still struggling with her research. She feels abandoned in a world she does not know how to negotiate: “Most of my committee members are working on books, off doing their own thing, and have at least 10 other people they are advising, and so they don’t have the time to do what I think they need to be doing [with me]. The way they are preparing me is that I know I don’t want to be like that.”

—Tamara (Humanities)

AN UNDERLYING ISSUE

While our participants wrestle with these themes (difficulty adapting to the values of academia, confusion about various mixed messages, and the need for more support than they perceive themselves to be getting), we are dismayed by how few of them exhibit a sense of what life in the academy as a teaching scholar and faculty member is like. See, for example, Michael’s comments on this topic:

“I don’t have any idea. At this point, I don’t know. I have no idea. Beats me. I have no idea what’s it’s like to be a faculty member. And I thought being a grad student might give me some idea, and it doesn’t. I don’t have any real power, and I don’t have any real understanding of anything that goes on. I guess it’s about playing the game and making sure everyone likes you until you get tenure; then you can alienate everybody. I don’t even know how that works, I mean, what’s it’s really like. I don’t know anything. I feel like I should, but I don’t.”

—Michael (Music)

Those like Michael, who recognize the extent of what they don’t know, worry us less than those who seem quite oblivious to the fact that neither they nor their advisors have much sense of what the future holds for them. Although we have a small group of participants who clearly understand the labor market, many new graduate students embark on their graduate careers ignoring warnings about the dismal odds of finding jobs in academia; once they are on board,
they and their advisors continue to forge ahead, ignoring the signs that existing basic assumptions about graduate preparation and academic success may well be unfounded. Many of our participants who attest to “doing just fine” appear to be naive and lacking in knowledge about what professors do, what service is, what it means to be involved in faculty governance, what a faculty career entails, and what career opportunities are available. Further, we find it alarming that, among those participants who demonstrate the clearest grasp of the evolving realities of faculty life are some who are choosing to leave academia, either with or without their degrees. See, for example, Carl’s comments on this topic:

“I don’t think they [jobs] are going to be there, just the way things are going in academics. So, I’d say, [graduate school is] more a preparation for making sure that the people are able to survive in a competitive market once they get out. Most of the people who get out are going to have to work outside of academics for a livelihood. I could finish up and then still go out there [to industry], but...how much longer do I want to wait to do this?”

—Carl (Math)

Is this simply the way it is, the way it should be? These questions are not just interesting puzzles. These colorful and dramatic graduate student stories force us to move away from statistics and abstract ideas about graduate education to confront the real-life experiences of these highly motivated, intelligent, caring, hardworking individuals. These interviews lead us to join others in calling for meaningful change. Unfortunately, however, demands for change are not new.

**Changing the Graduate Student Experience**

Over the decades, there have been many, many calls for increased attention to graduate student teaching development. As G.J. Laing, dean of the University of Chicago’s graduate school, wrote in 1930:

> What are we doing in the way of equipping them [the graduate students] for their chosen work? Have the departments of the various graduate schools kept the teaching career sufficiently in mind in the organization of their program[s] of studies? Or have they arranged their courses with an eye to the production of research workers only, thinking of the teacher’s duties merely as a means of livelihood that will furnish the young instructor or professor with enough money to buy food, drink, clothes, and shelter for himself and his family, and enable him to pay insurance premiums and contribute to the portrait funds of retiring colleagues, while he carries on his research?” (“The Newer Educational Program and the Training of Teachers,” in W. S. Gray, ed., *The Training of College Teachers, Including Their Preliminary Preparation and In-Service Improvement*, University of Chicago Press.)

Reiterating the need to focus on the teaching development of graduate students nearly 60 years later, Jody Nyquist, Robert Abbott, and Donald Wulff (*Teaching Assistant Training in the 1990s*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989) argued that “This time we must act—and produce results—if we hope to provide TA training that enhances both the quality of undergraduate education and the possibility that outstanding graduate TAs will become the professors of tomorrow.” And as Melissa Anderson noted in 1998,

> Our data do indicate that substantial numbers of students are having experiences that could be dramatically improved, both with respect to the quality of their education and the longer term effects on their professionalization. We find grounds for concern and a need for more detailed understanding of student reports that graduate school is changing in ways they do not like. (*The Experience of Being in Graduate School: An Exploration*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

But even more sobering are the numerous reports that repeatedly have called for change in graduate education, seemingly with no effect. The 30-plus reports and calls for reform not only echo the older reports but emphasize the exact same issues: time-to-degree, preparation for teaching, the need to foster an understanding of faculty roles and the academy, effective mentoring, overproduction, narrowness of—or disconnected—specialization, and economic issues. Examples include reports from such esteemed bodies as the Brookings Institution, Council of Graduate Schools, Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, National Board on Graduate Education, Association of American Universities, National Science Foundation, House Committee on Science, Committee on Science Engineering and Public Policy of the National Academy of Sciences, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Despite this history of calls for reform in graduate education, the reports from our participants show how little has changed in terms of their preparation for the various roles that faculty members must fill. Why does this issue persist as an unresolved problem?

Perhaps we don’t change our approach because we believe at heart that tough experiences truly are justified in the name of “social Darwinism.” Is it possible that those who have come through the system simply write off the frustrations stemming from institutional ambiguities, lack of preparation for teaching, personal and professional crises, and emotional and financial hardships? Do we actually consider such experiences an unfortunate but necessary part of “the graduate experience”? After all, we made it through.

Or is it that we cannot see a way to change the very structure of higher education, which prevents us from making the academy a more attractive place to work? Consider (among others) the two following structural issues, which make it difficult to effect change.

**Structural Issue No. 1: Universities’ desperate need for the research dollars generated primarily within the sciences (which build buildings and support instructional programs) requires them to pursue research at whatever the cost to graduate student education.** This issue is reflected in Jim’s comments:
“I think any research advisor in their right mind would kill me for [seeking additional TA opportunities]. It’s certainly not something that I would do. It’d be ludicrously unfair to a professor—to the professor that you are working for, to seek out another teaching assistantship. You are literally robbing them of thousands of dollars of effective research. It would almost be stealing from your employer to do that. The professors depend on the graduate students because the graduate students do all of the work in the lab. Not a whole lot of people tend to volunteer [their graduate assistants as TAs] because it would mean sacrificing their own careers.”

—Jim (Chemistry)

Structural Issue No. 2: The continued demand for TA-taught service courses in the humanities and social sciences often creates a need for more graduate students than a department can supervise and mentor. This problem is reflected in Sally’s comments on her supervisor’s lack of availability:

“We didn’t have meeting times. If we tried to schedule a meeting, he would e-mail us with an excuse of why he couldn’t do it. It was never a face-to-face ‘I can’t meet you.’ All the communication was through e-mail.”

—Sally (Psychology)

Beyond these structural forces are deep-seated cultural norms—especially the valorization of research and scholarship by most members of the academy, often at the expense of attention to teaching and service. Is the academy ready to match its behavior to the rhetoric it espouses about teaching?

These are questions beyond our study, of course. But we are now convinced that the contexts in which graduate students function in this important stage of socialization into the faculty role mold the values that will profoundly affect the way they approach their faculty lives in the future. It is obvious that our project touches upon hotly and historically contested ground. To be sure, our primary goal remains clear: to understand how graduate students develop—especially as teachers but also as prospective faculty who will have multiple roles.

However, the ground that seemed solid enough to take for granted as we embarked on this project is definitely shifting. We are finding that the academic, economic, political, and personal contexts in which graduate student preparation occurs appear to have a far more powerful impact on the development of prospective teaching scholars than any TA-preparation program (no matter how well designed) ever could. We’re learning that our research questions, given the seemingly outdated assumptions underlying them—and most preparation programs—often draw from our participants as many quizical looks and questions as they do coherent responses.

For example, we’re learning that in order to discuss our participants’ development as teachers at six-month intervals, our participants must be encouraged to think about teaching on their own during the time between the one- or two-term teaching assistantships that many of them experience in their entire graduate careers. We’re learning that in discussing the preparation of graduate students as teaching scholars, our participants occasionally frame their comments hypothetically, noting without irony that such preparation might be a good idea.

We return to the fundamental question to which our data—the experiences and concerns of our graduate students—point: Can and should we really change graduate education? Bruce Wilshire, in *The Moral Collapse of the University*, wrote that “Only when the extent of our difficulties is known can we realistically hope to reconstruct the university effectively” (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990). Although our data represent only a very small number of graduate students, we feel we know enough from these cases to suggest some directions for change. Any real reform in the experiences of graduate students may depend, however, on a rethinking of the academy’s values and a structural reorganization—processes way beyond offering TA orientations, “preparing future faculty” programs, or even better mentoring, as essential as these are.

And much is at stake. The issue goes beyond altruistic concern for the lives of graduate students, as important as we believe that concern should be. We also are considering the future of the academy and whether we are adequately preparing the kind of innovative, committed, and thoughtful faculty members needed to become the next generation of the professoriate. As universities and colleges face rapidly changing external contexts, demanding competition, and high expectations from students and the broader public, are we willing to let some of the best and brightest of our graduate students slip quietly off to other occupations? And do we believe that we can afford to let those who are committed to joining the professoriate do so without careful attention and preparation for their roles?

We must ask these and other important questions, and we should ask those who will be the next generation of faculty to join in answering them. How can we demystify the academy, clarify our values, and behave accordingly so that messages about what we value are clear, consistent, and convincing? How can we attract the very best of the next generation? How can we better prepare them for their roles? What should the pictures of graduate student journeys look like? Should they be different from what we have found so far?

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