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Manifesto for the Humanities

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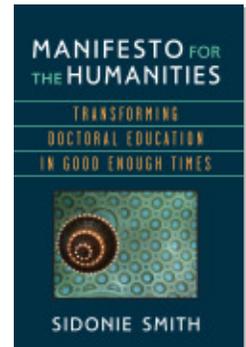
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A Time of Troubles, a Time of Opportunity

Let's start then with what numbers reveal about the current state of humanities doctoral education. Data available on earned doctorates, as reported by individuals and by departments for national surveys, give context to the urgency of now. They provide information about numbers of humanities doctorates, time-to-degree, completion rates, the job market, debt, and demographics.¹ Those data can also give up stories to be imagined of students as they move through their studies or move out of them. That data has also driven over 15 years of initiatives and reports that have motivated administrators, faculty, and doctoral students to advocate for change.

Data Realities and Stories

Here are summary snapshots of the data, spiced with some observations.

Numbers of humanities doctoral degree recipients. The National Science Foundation issues data from its Survey of Earned Doctorates, with a lag time for reporting of approximately one and a half years. Data from the 2011–12 survey, the latest data available at this time, indicate that 5,503 people received their doctorates in humanities fields (including history), of which 48.3% were male, 51.6% female.² For my field of English, including language, literature, rhetoric and composition, and creative writing, the figure for 2012 was 1,286 earned doctorates, a figure that falls midway between the high of 1,680 earned doctorates reported for 1973 and the low of 705 reported for 1987. In other modern languages the figure for 2012 was 685, again about midway between the high of 917 reported in 1974 and the low of 430 reported in 1989.³ The longitudinal data thus register a narrative of the robust expansion of doctoral education from the 1950s to the early 1970s; the precipitous downturn in doctorates from 1973 to the end of the 1980s as an effect of the oil crisis and the recessionary retrenchment in funding for public higher education; the renewed growth in the 1990s up to a new peak in 1998 at 80% of the 1973 peak; the gradual decline, perhaps due to some downsizing of doctoral cohorts

from the late 1990s in response to inadequate funding packages for doctoral students; and then the gradual rise after 2003 that brought the 2013 numbers up over 4,000 graduates in core humanities disciplines.⁴

Time-to-degree. According to the SED, the average time-to-degree for humanities doctorates is significantly longer than for other sectors of doctoral education. In its 2011 survey the SED reported that the average time-to-degree in the humanities was 9.3 years from entering graduate school (and 11.0 years from the baccalaureate) and, in 2012, 9.0 years from entering graduate school (and 11.0 from the baccalaureate). The longitudinal data reveal that in 1970 the average time-to-degree in the humanities was 6.0 years from time of entrance into graduate school (and 9.0 years from graduation from college). By the end of the 1980s, data reported by Thomas B. Hoffer and Vincent Welch Jr. revealed that time-to-degree had risen to 12.6 years (1989).⁵ The figures for 2011 and 2012 continue to register a steady decrease since that high of 12.6.

Such reported data help paint the picture of a continuing time-to-degree problem in doctoral education. More recently, however, the Humanities Indicators project of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, using SED data but shifting methodology, issued its report “Years to Attainment of a Humanities Doctorate.” In late 2014, HI reported the following: “For each of the graduation years 2003 to 2012, the median time humanities Ph.D. recipients spent in their doctoral programs (measured as the difference between the month and year the doctorate was granted and the month and year the student started in the program) was 6.9 years or longer. . . . The median fell from 7.5 years for 2003 graduates to 6.9 years for students graduating in 2011 and 2012.” This report offers a less dire story of time-to-degree and suggests that initiatives to address time-to-degree over the last decade, such as continuous enrollment policies, have borne results. But the fact remains that 6.9 is a median, that half of the graduates took longer to complete their degree. (As an aside: The data from 2010 indicate that the average age at time-of-graduation was between 34 and 35 years across all humanities fields.)⁶

Let me add an observation here. It used to be that faculty rarely worried about time-to-degree or the level of debt students accumulated. They knew they admitted more applicants than would finish; that graduate study weeded out the intellectually immature, the unready and unsteady. But that was then, when the cost of higher education was modest at most and when programs such as the National Defense Education Act supported students who were forgiven a certain percentage of the debt for every year they taught after graduation. For a decade now, time-to-degree has been a concern of every graduate college in the country and of most doctoral programs.

Completion rates in the humanities. The Humanities Indicators project analyzed data on completion rates provided by doctoral programs to the National

Research Council for its 2010 report rating doctoral programs across the country. These data revealed that the humanities and mathematical and physical science sectors registered the same median rate of completion at 42%. It is important to note, however, that expected completion for humanities doctorates was set at eight years out from the date of entry into the doctoral program, while for all other sectors it was set at six years out. Across humanities disciplines the rates varied: languages, societies, and cultures programs showed a 33% rate of completion after eight years; history 42% and English 46% after eight years.⁷

Periodically, the Council of Graduate Schools produces the PhD Completion Project figures for completion rates seven years out and 10 years out across humanities fields. In 2008, the CGS released its latest report on completion rates of those who began doctoral education in 1992–1993 through 1994–1995, showing that completion rates after seven years ranged from 17.1% for art history, theory and criticism to 34.2% in philosophy, and across all disciplines averaged 29.4%. Completion rates after 10 years ranged from 40.0% in religion and theology to 50.0% in philosophy (and 62.5% in performance and studio arts). For the humanities as a sector, the 10-year completion rate for these cohorts stood at 48.9%, one of the lowest rates after 10 years in the sectors of higher education measured for this metric.⁸

Some percentage of humanities doctoral students finish their dissertation and degree after the 10-year window set for this report. And, to be sure, other data moderate this picture somewhat. Data from the Mellon Graduate Education Initiative, analyzed in *Educating Scholars: Doctoral Education in the Humanities*, complicate the 10-year cutoff as definitive of an attrition rate. Research on the subject pool of humanities doctoral students in participating programs reveals that “about 25 percent . . . completed their degrees after remaining for 10 years or even longer.” Furthermore, of the pool, “Almost 12 percent of the students who left graduate school at one point ultimately received their doctoral degrees—either in the same field at other institutions or in other fields. An additional 18 percent earned professional degrees in fields like law and business.”⁹ Another finding, important to this topic, is embedded in the data from this initiative. The authors of *Educating Scholars* reported of the cohorts in the project that they “found no indication that protracted degrees make better scholars”; indeed, they found, “Beyond seven years, the probability of getting a tenure-track position declined as degree times lengthened.”¹⁰

More extensive and granular data are needed to get a clearer picture of the attrition rate across the humanities, and not just in certain programs at certain universities reported in *Educating Scholars*. But the percentage of students not completing degrees by 10 years out indicates that at some point in their doctoral studies, a number of students decide not to finish, or to change insti-

tutions, or to change careers, for a myriad of reasons. While the noncompletion rate may not be as dramatic as 50%, a time-to-degree extending to eight years and beyond remains concerning. In the words of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature, the average time-to-degree is “unacceptable.”¹¹

Job openings across the humanities. Statistics from professional associations in humanities disciplines continue to show that doctoral programs graduate more students than there are job openings in humanities fields. This mismatch has long been the case, as longitudinal data indicate, and as reports from professional organizations reveal. Back in 1970, the MLA Commission to Study the Job Market issued a report, authored by David Orr, that lamented the mismatch between graduates and job openings. The report concluded: “Should present trends continue, life in the professions, particularly in the humanities, could turn grim indeed.”¹² Since then, there have been two periods in which the mismatch expanded, the early 1990s and the period following the economic meltdown after 2008. But there is another trend in higher education to factor into the overall job prospects for humanities doctorates; and that is the expansion of higher education and the reconfiguration of the professoriate as disproportionately non-tenure-track and contingent.

Let me take the field I know best and use the most recent data produced by the Modern Language Association as it studies the number of jobs posted in the Job Information Lists produced on a rolling basis through each academic year. Annually in December, a summary report analyzing the data of the Job Information List is released before the annual convention. MLA staff are careful to note that the JIL is a snapshot of job openings in English and foreign languages at a particular moment in the academic year; but they also note that over the last decades it has been “a reliable indicator of the job market in the current hiring season.”¹³ The 2013–14 report registers the precipitous drop in positions advertised in 2008–2009 and observes that “this past year marks the fifth consecutive year the number of jobs advertised in the JIL has remained at a trough level just above 1,000 jobs in each edition, matching the trough of the mid-1990s in both depth and duration.”¹⁴ While the JIL report cannot observe trends in part-time positions (since the jobs advertised are almost all full-time), it does register the ratio of full-time tenure/tenure-tracks positions and non-tenure-track positions. Here the evidence confirms that “the downturn in the number of ads since 2008 has been accompanied by a consistently lower percentage of each year’s total tagged as tenure-track” (2), a cumulative 10-percentage-point drop in that time. As Laurence observed of the 2014 JIL data, the shift from tenure-track positions to non-tenure-tracks positions can be observed in the stark figure of the ratio.

The Survey of Earned Doctorates from 2011 and 2012 indicates that of the

major sectors in the survey, the humanities had the lowest percentage of graduates with “definite employment or study commitments at doctorate award,” somewhere around 58%–59%. The MLA’s Laurence, reviewing the longitudinal data from the association’s survey of student placement, observed that “the placement rate to a tenure-track position for new PhD recipients directly after graduation has barely, and only rarely exceeded 50%. . . . In the most recent, covering graduates who received degrees in 2009–10, only 37.1% had found a tenure-track position.”¹⁵ Figures Laurence cited from the same placement data indicate that for 2009–2010 “just over three-quarters (75.8%) had found faculty positions, full- or part-time, by the November following program completion. When positions in academic administration and placements in postdoctoral fellowships are included, 73.1% reported having found full-time employment in a postsecondary institution, and 79.0% reported having full-time employment of any type, in academia or other settings.”¹⁶ But to reiterate: of graduates, only 37.1% of graduates who reported their career trajectory took up tenure-track positions.

Since 2008, there might be observable a slight uptick here or there, but even with the upticks, the job market is likely to remain constrained for some time to come. And, according to many analysts of the academic marketplace, job prospects may never return to the level of job opportunities at the end of the 1990s. The over 25-year trend to a majority contingent and non-tenure-track academic workforce continues apace.

Debt. Humanities doctoral students currently support their studies through combinations of teaching assistantships, fellowships and other grants, personal resources, employment, and, very rarely, research assistantships. SED data show that from 1998 through 2012 the percentage of students relying primarily on teaching assistantships rose from around 33% to 40.2%. The data show that a far higher percentage of humanities doctoral students support themselves through teaching; indeed, 42% higher than in all other fields. During those same years the percentage of students accessing personal funds declined from 36.7% to 20.9%. As doctoral students spend a median time of seven plus years in preparation, they accumulate high levels of debt. According to the SED, approximately 60% of humanities doctorates completing their degrees in 2012 had accumulated a record-high level of debt: 28% graduated without education debt, 60% had accumulated some debt, and nearly 34% had debt of \$30,000 or more.¹⁷ Student debt for humanities doctorates was higher than student debt in all other fields. Data also reveal that students of color accumulate levels of debt far above the mean.¹⁸ According to 2008 data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study and reported by the Council of Graduate Schools (the latest report), 85% of African American doctorate recipients across all fields had accumulated debt, averaging \$68,000.¹⁹ As

the Humanities Indicators report on paying for doctoral study observes, “The average indebtedness figure for the humanities masks a ‘feast or famine’ situation with respect to the ability of doctorate recipients to secure funding for their studies.”²⁰

Time in this context, as in so many contexts, is money. It is the high cost of debt for many, though not for those with robust fellowship funding or personal resources. And it is the opportunity cost of delaying entering the job market. It is also a gamble on return, since the job market situation remains bleak and the first years out for many will be spent in part-time or non-tenure-track positions at woeful or modest levels of remuneration. As one of my research assistants observed: “The return on the investment of getting a college degree is often very low. Especially at first when the student loan bills start coming in and the student is still unemployed, underemployed, or working for barely a ‘livable’ wage. Extremely stressful, and definitely gives one the feeling of buyer’s remorse.”²¹

Demographics. Data reveal what has become common knowledge across humanities disciplines. The fields of the humanities are shifting toward a 45/55 split of men to women. And data and the lived experience of graduate directors in humanities disciplines reaffirm that the fields of the humanities continue to struggle to recruit applicants from underrepresented groups within the United States and first-generation students from working-class backgrounds. In 2012, the SED revealed that only 4.7% of doctorates reported their ethnicity as Asian, 4.3% black, 7.7% Hispanic, and 0.3% American Indian / Alaska Native, across humanities disciplines.²²

Of course, more recent data will be available by the time this book is out. That’s a given in the life and afterlife of data. And of course, the data one draws on, the statistics one foregrounds, are influenced by what data are collected and how information is organized, and who’s telling stories about it. That said, the current available data offer a snapshot of the state of play in humanities doctoral education at this moment. This snapshot also captures trends; it charts differences among fields and among different demographic groups. It does not tell a story by itself, however. So let me give the numbers a narrative.

So, Now for Narratives to Put with the Numbers

Doctoral students pursue graduate education in the humanities because they imagine themselves doing the work of the humanities over the course of a lifetime. They come to graduate school with a long-nurtured passion for a book, an historical epoch, a twist of linguistic usage, a theory of identity, a question of deeply felt urgency. They come motivated by the models of revered

professors or by the narratives people tell of themselves, their communities, their struggles, their traumas. They come driven by the desire to launch journeys beckoning from all around, amid the dust or digital affordances of the archive, in lines of poetry, in the logic of an assertion, in the dirt of the dig. They come with a fascination for ethnographic fieldwork, with a keen sense of the unsettling question, with perverse pleasure in thinking big—about society, culture, knowledge, politics, about gender and sexuality, racialization and ethnicity.

They come with diligent scholarly habits, with their trained disposition of mind, and, quite likely, with a reverence for solitude. They come with their brilliance in coining a phrase, tracking an argument, targeting gaps in logic. They come with their pasts, their relationships, their histories of success and disappointment, their politics and their nonacademic interests. They come with entangled forms of online and offline lives. They come driven and dedicated, gifted and versatile.

Some come savvy about trends large and small, in the academy, in the humanities, and in their fields. Some have already worked in academic institutions, some in libraries. Others have worked overseas or in the private sector or in an NGO or in government. Many have already published novels or books of poetry or written newspaper columns. Some have an ongoing blog presence.

They arrive and settle in. Here they begin to ask pressing, often disorienting, questions. What will my scholarly work look like? How will I do that work? How will it be communicated? To whom will it be addressed? How will it be funded? Who will own it? Who will have access to it? How will I teach? What will my students be like? What different roles will I play? How will I respond to the pace of change ahead? How will I make my case for this field of study I love—to peers and mentors, to hiring committees and decision makers, to alumni and the public at large? How will my career in the academy unfold? Everything about the life of an academic humanist, it seems, is shifting around them.

As one year passes into another, this doctoral study turns out to be not only an intellectual journey, but also a trial, a cacophony of unpredictable pleasures, a social network, a long slog, a disenchantment, a psychic landscape, a familial sacrifice, a demanding job, an initiation, a shifting terrain of tradition and change, and a cauldron of anxiety, about adequacy, performance, and future prospects.

For me, the numbers intersect with the stories of this lived experience of graduate training. The inflationary rise in the cost of higher education has led to the rise in debt level of students upon graduation. These financial costs to students will undoubtedly continue to rise as budget pressures prompt ongoing or periodic cuts in fellowship funding, travel funding, and summer sti-

pend. Many students stay on track, even some of those who develop a deep skepticism about the project of doctoral education and the prospects ahead. Many find a workable balance between their personal and professional commitments. Many immerse themselves in the diverse opportunities for leadership and professional development available to them. Many bring brilliant dissertations to their defense. Many find tenure-track positions the first or second year on the market, or the third or fourth years.

Others lose momentum after completing exams, finding themselves suddenly adrift without the incessant and somehow soothing pressure of imminent deadlines. They watch debt accumulate, lose steam, dissociate from peers, avoid mentors and advisors, suffer disenchantment with their topic, stall out. They find themselves overwhelmed with teaching responsibilities, anxious at the stack of papers to grade, exhausted with responding to initiatives to improve one's pedagogy. They find themselves about out of funding, and with little progress made on the dissertation. One term passes with little progress, then a year. After fellowships and teaching positions dry up, some slip away entirely. Others enter an exploited labor pool of contingent faculty earning as little as \$2,500 for each course they teach, becoming "freeway flyers" teaching multiple courses at multiple institutions. Some come to the defense after several years away with a less-than-promising dissertation.

And the future? Unpredictable for any individual graduate, it is distressingly predictable in terms of the academic job prospects. Students learn that openings for tenure-track positions track the economy, that the economic meltdown of 2008 brought a precipitous decline in full-time tenure-track academic positions. They find themselves in an academy with a growing imbalance in the percentage of tenure and tenure-track faculty and part- and full-time non-tenure-track faculty. They hear about doctoral students who enter contingent positions that may or may not lead to satisfying careers in the academy. They learn of the new job search in which advanced doctoral students and recently minted PhDs confront a protracted search process. They hear about graduates spending two, three, four, even five years in search mode, seeking postdoctoral positions or non-tenure-track positions, full- or part-time, along the way. They are pushed to become early and ready professionals, giving papers, writing essays, assembling lists of achievements so their dossiers grab the attention of search committees. They watch the details of the year's searches on the wikis that both compel them to look for news and to resist the call to look. As these realities sink in, doctoral students become even more anxious, and cynical. Many struggle to remain resiliently hopeful. An increasing number of them begin to think about, and plan for, alternative careers.

The numbers thus speak of isolation, of a sense of drift, of the pressure to maintain persistent self-motivation. They speak of anxiety, inertia, a

sense of confusion, embarrassment, shame, a sense of failure. They speak of “languishing,” the term the authors of *Educating Scholars* use to describe the condition of neither finishing nor dropping out.²³ They speak of a daunting overload of obligations to family, to community, to mentors, to peers. They speak of relationships under stress and parenting postponed, a major issue for women in the academy.²⁴ They speak of high levels of economic anxiety. They intimate high levels of stress, and mental distress. In the words of the “White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities,” issued through the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, “As time passes, graduate study can become an increasingly unsustainable financial and personal sacrifice for students.”²⁵

The data also tell stories of graduate programs. They tell of the inability of some programs to adequately support students on teaching assistantships, but more importantly on fellowships. They tell of the increasing gap between resources and support available to those at the elite privates and public flagships and those at less well-funded universities. They tell of difficulties in recruiting diverse cohorts of doctoral students and the consequent lack of demographic diversity around the seminar table, and of the underproduction of doctorates of color. They tell of curricular straitjackets. They tell of sporadic mentoring. They tell of laissez-faire values of scholarly inquiry. They tell of a one-model-fits-all trajectory. They tell of the intensification of professional norms and the difficulties of breaking through normative expectations of an academic humanist.

The Time Is Now

Given these realities—of a higher than desirable average time-to-degree and dismal job prospects into the future—the call for the transformation of doctoral education has now become a broad one. Across North America, deans of graduate schools, foundation officers, faculty, and doctoral students are contributing to a national conversation about the humanities in higher education and about doctoral education for the next generations.

That sense of urgency follows a succession of efforts to address the stark realities of doctoral education in the humanities. Let me briefly, and only selectively, survey these efforts. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, foundations and professional organizations sought to stimulate improvements in the curricular shape and experience of graduate education in ways that would decrease time-to-degree and improve graduation rates. The 10-year Mellon Graduate Education Initiative, the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate, and the Council of Graduate Schools’ PhD Completion Project all tackled time-to-degree and attrition by various means: enhanced funding packages, clearer

goals and regularized feedback on advancement to completion, more rational curricular models, better mentoring, and a more supportive climate.²⁶

A bolder initiative tackling time-to-degree gained attention in late 2012 when the national education press reported on the Stanford initiative on doctoral education in the humanities. At Stanford, a group of faculty leaders in humanities disciplines, among them Russell Berman, 2011 president of the Modern Language Association, wrote the dean of Arts and Sciences requesting 12-month funding for students to decrease time-to-degree to an optimal five years. In order to secure commitment to enhanced funding, the humanities departments agreed to revise coursework, timing of exams, and mentoring.²⁷ In 2015, the University of California–Irvine announced its Mellon-supported 5+2 initiative in doctoral education in the humanities. With two departments (philosophy and visual studies) leading the way, the 5+2 program guarantees five years of fellowship and teaching funding plus an additional two years of intensive teaching in a postdoctoral position for those students finishing their PhD in five years.²⁸ With prestigious private and public universities such as Stanford and Irvine boldly addressing time-to-degree, administrators, faculty, and students have joined in debate, registering enthusiasm or critiquing what they decry as a speeded-up degree concept.

In response to constrained job prospects, activism has shifted to preparing doctoral students for new career paths. In 2010, *The Path Forward: The Future of Graduate Education in the United States*, issued by the Commission on the Future of Graduate Education, called for increased emphasis on professional development and “nonacademic career pathways” in doctoral programs.²⁹ And in 2011, Anthony T. Grafton and Jim Grossman, president and executive director of the American Historical Association respectively, published a provocative statement entitled “No More Plan B,” arguing that the job market in humanities disciplines, realistically confronted, would not come roaring back in the near future, even when the economy shifts from sputtering forward to a more robust mode. “As public contributions to higher education shrink, state budgets contract, and a lagging economy takes its toll on endowments and family incomes,” they argued, “there is little reason to expect the demand for tenure-track faculty to expand.”³⁰ What Grafton and Grossman observed of history doctoral students educated to become academic historians is generalizable across the humanities: this emphasis on plan A—academic employment as a tenure-track professor—“pushes talented scholars into narrow channels, and makes it less likely that they will take schooled historical thinking with them into a wide range of employment sectors,” the sectors a large proportion of humanities graduates will enter.³¹ Time to change the discourse of success; time to plan for multiple futures.

The Woodrow Wilson Foundation had already funded a five-year Respon-

sive Ph.D. initiative designed in part to “illuminate paths to alternative careers outside the research university.”³² And the American Council of Learned Societies had begun its Public Fellows Program, placing recent PhDs from the humanities and humanistic social sciences in two-year positions in nonprofit and public service positions.³³ But after the “No More Plan B” mantra got legs, more and more sessions at annual conventions of the major professional organizations began to focus on multiple careers in and out of the academy. Humanities departments and graduate schools across the country now organize panels and workshops on alternative careers for humanities PhDs, inviting to campus graduates working in nonacademic sectors or in alternative academic jobs in higher education. And major intellectual leaders who hold professional jobs inside the academy in libraries, digital humanities labs, and museums and institutes blog, talk, and make the case for the new realities of this expanding sector of humanities professionals.

In addition to tackling time-to-degree and addressing preparation for alternative careers, there are two other strands of transformation on the radar. In the last decade, funding agencies and national organizations have shifted foci in recognition of the changing environment of humanities scholarship addressed in Part II. The Mellon-funded Scholarly Communication Institute, located at the University of Virginia from 2003 to 2013, for instance, held meetings and issued invaluable reports on new media and modes of scholarly communication, and the impact of this new intellectual ecology on doctoral training and its importance to new career paths for professionally trained humanists.

Another strand of program activism has focused on public scholarship. Across North America, initiatives in public or engaged scholarship gained momentum in the humanities with the launch of the *Imagining America* project at a 1999 White House Conference sponsored by the White House Millennium Council, the University of Michigan, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. Under the founding leadership of Julie Ellison and now Timothy K. Eatman, *Imagining America* has, over some 15 years, built a network of more than 100 colleges and universities and other partners, to “push the boundaries of civic engagement in higher education”; issued *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University*; held annual conferences; and now launched the journal *Public*.³⁴ Now there are programs in engaged scholarship involving doctoral students at many universities, including the robust program at the Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, under the leadership of Kathleen Woodward. The Center offers a graduate certificate in public scholarship and the Public Scholarship award program.³⁵ Ellison, Eatman, Woodward, and Gregory Jay advocate that opportunities for engaged scholarship expand the concept of humanities scholarship and its arenas; decenter aca-

demic knowledge production through collaborative cultures of inquiry; provide important models for doctoral training through project-based laboratories; and contribute to community-based efforts to advance social justice and public goods benefits.

Two major reports issued within six months of one another captured the range of intersecting issues relevant to transforming doctoral education for the 21st century. They both acknowledge the troubling realities of the academic humanities and the changing conditions of the scholarly and teaching life of faculty; they both make recommendations for change. In Canada, the “White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities” appeared in December 2013, a product of the Knowledge Synthesis Project on the future of graduate education across the disciplines funded by SSHRC.³⁶ Held at the Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas at McGill University, under the leadership of Paul Yachnin, the humanities meeting brought together faculty across the arts and humanities, professional humanists in arts institutions across Canada, and humanities doctoral students at McGill to think proactively about new directions, new partnerships, and new concepts of the degree.³⁷ And in May 2014, the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature, chaired by Berman, issued its report and its extensive list of recommendations.³⁸ I was fortunate to have served on both committees and have benefited from extended conversations unfolding over the course of the year of meetings and consultations. Traces of those conversations and references to the recommendations will emerge in my arguments for change in the next sections of this book.

And finally, two 2015 books engage, directly and in depth, the troubles with graduate education in the United States: Leonard Cassuto’s *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* and Julie R. Posselt’s *Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping*.³⁹ Cassuto’s *Mess* tracks the history of graduate admissions across a century and a half of U.S. higher education; elaborates the ways in which graduate education enforces conformity to constraining norms of professionalism, devalues teaching, and reifies research training; offers a critique of the ethos of prestige; and calls for greater transparency in presenting future prospects to prospective students. Posselt’s probing study gets granular with the actual work of admissions committees and the values that circulate through discussions of students who “fit” the program and those who don’t. In their deliberations and their iterations of criteria for acceptance, Posselt observed the enactment of what she terms “homophily,” the love of like kind, a disposition that is risk averse. As the abstract for her book suggests: “Good intentions notwithstanding, what counts in practice as merit often serves to institutionalize inequalities.” Both scholars provide hands-on suggestions for transforming graduate education,

Cassuto by reordering the ethos of graduate education toward an expanded repertoire of values, most particularly the importance of pedagogical training and engaged scholarship, and Posselt by making admissions processes less constrained by reproductive norms that value prestige applicants perceived as having the right stuff.

What Is to Be Done?

Here's what the foundation initiatives, white papers, task force reports, and scholarly books do not call for in this disruptive, challenging, and daunting time. They do not call for the elimination of doctoral programs in the humanities. They do not call for some rationing system for doctoral education that would determine which programs survive, which grow, and which close down. They do not caution against developing and launching new kinds of doctoral programs in the humanities. They do not claim that graduate programs are educating too many humanists at the doctoral level. Others do make these arguments, as is evidenced in the media and in responses to the reports. They call for decreasing the number of programs and the size of cohorts. But not here, in the activities, statements, and aspirations of all those foundations, institutions, administrators, faculty, and students who are taking a stand, making a case, calling for change.

The SSHRC white paper affirmed the value to the nation of robust doctoral education in the humanities: "We argue that the world of the 21st century needs high quality humanities research and teaching now more than ever. The need has to do with the undergraduate education of tens of thousands of young Canadians each year. It also has to do with how the kinds of knowledge borne of [sic] the humanities can contribute to clearer, more historically informed, and more ethical understandings of problems that face modern Canada."⁴⁰ Of course, humanists make the case for humanities doctoral education before a skeptical and sometimes downright dismissive public; but that doesn't mean the investment in that case is only self-serving. I believe in the case that's made. There will never be too many doctorally trained professionals and lifelong learners in this country, this hemisphere, and around the globe.

For me, it's misguided to advocate for major cuts to doctoral programs in the humanities or for closure of some number of them. Critics who call for drastic cuts in admissions might recollect that many programs made significant cuts throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, after tenure-track positions did not materialize in the early 1990s when institutions experienced a robust number of retirements. In the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, *Inside Higher Education* reported in May 2009 on "Top Ph.D. Programs, Shrinking"; and three years later the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted that "Grad Programs in

Humanities Are Shrinking,” in reporting on several large flagship universities.⁴¹ Those critics who call for the closure of programs never put on the table a realistic plan on how such an initiative for selective closure might advance.

And they might recall administrators who acted to close down humanities departments and doctoral programs in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown usually made the argument for closure on similar grounds. Russell Berman made this point in his “Essay Defending the MLA Report on Doctoral Education,” published in *Inside Higher Education* in July 2014: “The scope of the humanities in higher education in the United States already faces significant reduction. We should be fighting for the humanities rather than closing off advanced study, the key to sustained presence in colleges and universities.”⁴² Critics who call for the closure of programs should offer up their plan on how such an initiative might advance; should talk from the position of having acted on their argumentative principles. Let them say how. Let them say where. Let them say by what criteria. Let them say to what end.

I refuse arguments calling for fewer doctoral programs for several reasons. The strength of doctoral education in the humanities in the United States is the diversity of schools offering doctoral training: public, private, religious, secular, urban, regional, gigantic, small. The strength is in the diversity of emphases, constellations of faculty, and cross-disciplinary filiations. The more the diversity, from my point of view, the more energy and impetus for innovation, for risk-taking, for experimentation, for recognizing and achieving excellence. And here’s a second reason, about another kind of diversity. It comes via Dolan Hubbard, who argues that “the national debate about the overproduction of PhDs dangerously ignores the underproduction of African American PhDs within the academy. . . . The quiet consensus to limit access to graduate programs is an ethnically and socially irresponsible position when viewed from the perspective of the underproduction of African American PhDs.”⁴³ Humanities departments also underproduce doctorates who come from Hispanic communities, from indigenous communities, who are the first in their families to go to university.

My reasons are personal as well. I am the product of a second-tier, and some might say third-tier, doctoral program at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. I grew up in Cleveland and returned there after I got a BA and MA at the University of Michigan. I had trained for high school teaching but knew after one semester it was not the career I wanted. So I applied to Case because it was a university I knew. My brother got a PhD in physics there in the early 1960s. That university and the faculty in that department gave me my career. I was the beneficiary of the program’s modest size, its small doctoral cohort, and its openness to women graduate students. I was the beneficiary of faculty who maintained high expectations of their female students at

a time when larger, flagship state universities and the elite privates tolerated a woman or two but failed to mentor them adequately or with grace and generosity. I knew I would never have the bona fides of my many colleagues with PhDs from the Ivys. But I have always taken pride in my pedigree from Case. This is exactly the kind of doctoral program that could be seen as expendable when those trained at the elite privates and publics make the case for down-sizing doctoral education in the United States.

I have also served on review teams for doctoral programs at large and small universities. I was bowled over, when on a review team at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, at the quality of the faculty, the dedication of the doctoral students, and the sense of teaching mission absorbed and reflected. There are far more gifted, imaginative, and passionate candidates for doctoral education than can be served by the elites. Think of what would happen to diversity of vision, heritage, background, life circumstances, intellectual style, learning dispositions, if admissions filters were homogenized in certain metrics of preparation. That, for me, is that.

The overarching theme of the reports and white papers and initiatives, taken collectively, is that the times require the transformation of doctoral education, to prepare students for the new everyday life of the academic humanist, to energize them to complete their degrees and in a reasonable time, to design degrees that can be completed in five or six years, and to help students imagine many possible careers. That's what the MLA and SSHRC reports map out in their different ways. They call for new kinds of courses, new kinds of programs, new kinds of dissertations, new modes of skills training.

And doctoral students are partners in this call for transformation. They serve on task forces, sit on committees and staff meetings, organize panels, give papers. They seek out new sets of skills. They talk with advisors about new dissertation platforms and authoring tools. They press the norms of their discipline, if tentatively and with concern for the consequences to their careers. They conceptualize new kinds of dissertations. They push against the normative discourse of humanities doctoral training. They advocate for a more inclusive climate, and curriculum. They carve out new positions in the academy when they graduate. They are on the front line of change.

What is needed, then, is a posttraditional doctoral education, for students and for a sustainable humanities. What I am calling a posttraditional doctoral education involves several strands of transformation: conceptualizing flexible programs, expanding forms of the dissertation, and enhancing preparation responsive to conditions on the ground. Let's reimagine doctoral programs that will support and energize students to stay on track, hold fast to peer networks, find multiple kinds of mentors, minimize debt and anxiety, and maintain a sense of possibility, if not certainty, about the future, whatever career

path unfolds. To meet these goals, and to prepare a generation of humanists to be change agents for the humanities, the academy needs flexible, imaginative, and rigorous doctoral programs, ones that encompass all kinds of experiences in and out of the classroom, that provide opportunities to develop expanded repertoires of skills and competencies, that prepare future faculty for the new scholarly and teaching life, that nurture the pleasures of long attention, that foster openness to new possibilities for scholarly communication to multiple audiences and via multiple forms and vehicles, that prepare the way for success in as-yet-unimagined professions inside and outside the academy. A 20th-century doctoral education will not meet these goals. A 21st-century doctoral education will.