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## Two Cheers for Professionalizing Graduate Students

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WHAT IS MY VIEW OF THE INCREASING professionalizing of graduate students? It depends on what we mean by the phrase. If we have in mind the ruthless productivity speedup that has resulted from the job crisis, in which graduate students must increasingly have publications to hope to get an interview, much less a job, how can anyone not deplore it?

Not that it's a completely bad thing that grad students are now expected to publish, as they were not in my day (PhD class of 1963). I suspect I would have matured more quickly as a scholar and writer if I had been encouraged to try to publish one or two of my course papers. Even at the graduate level, writing only for your teachers is infantilizing. There's nothing like a real audience (even if only of journal editors who send rejection notices) to force students to consider readers who don't share the pet assumptions of their teachers.

But it's one thing for graduate students to be encouraged to publish and quite another for them to be pressured to do so, with the feeling that unless they do, they have no chance for a job. I try to reassure my own students that the scare stories they hear are exaggerated, that hiring committees care more about the quality of their writing than whether it's in print or not, and this is true for any department that has its own interest at heart. But there's no doubt that without a list of publications on the c.v. candidates may not get far enough for the quality of their writing to become a factor. So if professionalizing graduate students means upping crudely quantitative measures of professional production, we need to resist this kind of professionalizing.

I think we throw out the baby with the bathwater, however, if we oppose the profes-

sionalizing of grad study in a more categorical and sweeping way. My own view is that our graduate programs generally don't do *enough* to professionalize students, in the sense of socializing them into the confusing and intimidating mysteries about how you get ahead in this business. Too often, the alternative to professionalizing graduate students is to leave them in the dark about what they are supposed to do and afraid to ask out of fear of looking unsophisticated or naive. The message they get is that if you are any good, you will *already know* the essential secrets, such as what methodology is all about, why theory is good (or bad), what's in and what's out.

Our discomfort with our own professionalism intensifies this tendency to hide our secrets, as if to unpack them would be crass and vulgar. So graduate students often get little or no guidance on essential matters: how to write a professional paper that will be published (you probably must enter the conversations and debates of other scholars), how to develop a dissertation topic that doesn't condemn you to career failure from the start, how to compose a job letter that has a chance to be read beyond the first paragraph. When I got my doctorate in the early sixties, jobs were so plentiful that my utter lack of savvy about all these matters didn't matter, whereas today it would disqualify me.

As Bruce Robbins has eloquently argued in *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture*, we need to rethink our habit of using "professionalization" as a synonym for corruption, aridity, selling out, being co-opted, and so forth. There's bad and good professionalism, and we need more discussion of how to distinguish between the two. Ironically, blanket antiprofessionalism leads to the bad professionalism that declines to explain itself and turns graduate study into a guessing game.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> I have developed these arguments further in an essay with Andrew Hoberek.

I BEGIN WITH A SHORT ANECDOTE. LIKE many of you, I go regularly to the gym to work out and thereby try to forestall the inevitable. This is invariably a humiliating experience, since at the University of Texas gym I always find myself surrounded by svelte young bodies who have yet to experience life's dirty little secret: namely, that about the time you get your life together, your body falls apart. Recently at the gym, however, I overheard a conversation that was even more depressing than the state of my declining body. Two English graduate students, both women, were trashing their department, and one waxed particularly eloquent in discussing her doctoral orals. I can't imitate the inflections, but the substance went something like this: "So, like, there I was in this room, where there were, like, five professors sitting around this table, and like, each one of them represented, like, a different worn-out fad."

This experience in eavesdropping brought home two points: first, I felt even older as I wondered whether my scholarly orientation was wearing as badly as my body. But, second, I was struck by the fact that eavesdropping is not the best way to obtain usable graduate student opinion.

Which brings me to the question of preparation. Discussions about graduate student education can be quite heated. In Spanish departments, professors, like good professors everywhere, can argue about anything, but recurring topics concern the shape of the curriculum, for example, how much peninsular as opposed to Spanish American literature should be required

## WORKS CITED

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## Preparing Graduate Students to Teach in the Major: Two Modest Proposals

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or whether United States Latino literature belongs in departments of Spanish, English, or American studies. Most of our graduate programs begin with a curriculum tailored to traditional notions of what a PhD in our field should look like—traditional being what was in vogue twenty or thirty years ago when the senior faculty members completed their doctoral degrees. In other words, we form our programs in dialogue with the past. And even when we push the envelope a bit by introducing notions of gender, sexuality, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, or whatever, we do so with the traditional curriculum clearly visible in the rearview mirror.

Innovation lies at the heart of our endeavors. As humanists, we have always pursued new knowledge, or at least new ways of looking at the old. This constant influx of new ideas can make our profession particularly stimulating. Problems arise, however, when recent PhDs face the inevitable tensions between an innovative graduate program, which is constantly changing, and the job responsibilities of their first position. It is all to the good that our new professor has written a cutting-edge dissertation on the social construction of the transgendered body in