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The Long-Haul Degree

By [PATRICIA COHEN](#)

Law students get a diploma in three years. Medical students receive an M.D. in four. But for graduate students in the humanities, it takes, on average, more than nine years to complete a degree. What some of those Ph.D. recipients may not realize is that they could spend another nine years, or more, looking for a tenure-track teaching job at a college or university — without ever finding one.

As the recession has downsized university endowments and departments, the sense of crisis that has surrounded graduate education for more than a decade has sharpened. “What’s worse than desperate?” asks William Pannacker, an associate professor of English at Hope College, in Michigan, who writes a column for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* under the name Thomas H. Benton.

A graduate-school Cassandra, Dr. Pannacker calls the graduate apprenticeship system bankrupt and warns students against the heartbreak of pursuing a Ph.D. While finishing his own degree in American civilization at [Harvard](#) in 1999 (another difficult job year), he helped organize a protest at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, an organization of scholars and professors of language and literature.

On a large reproduction of [Goya](#)’s bloody painting “Saturn Devouring His Son,” he wrote, “Enjoying your apprenticeship yet?”

First- and second-year Ph.D. students in, say, English literature may not face the same aching course load or backstabbing competition as their friends in medical and law schools, but they have a longer haul ahead. Doctoral students are expected not only to master a wide swath of material to pass general and oral exams, but to produce a nearly book-length dissertation of original research that, depending on the subject, may ultimately sit on a shelf as undisturbed as the Epsom salts at the back of the medicine chest. These students must earn their keep by patching together a mix of grants and wages for helping to teach undergraduate courses — a job that eats into research time. Third-year medical students may be bleary eyed from hospital rotations, but at least the work goes toward their degree.

This system of financing is partly responsible for the absurdly long time it can take to get a degree in the humanities, says Debra W. Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools. In many countries, the government pays students to complete Ph.D.’s within a certain time frame, perhaps three or four years.

In the United States, given that most students take time off, nearly a dozen years can pass between receiving a B.A. and Ph.D. About half who enter a humanities doctoral program drop out along the way. The average student receiving a Ph.D. today is 35 years old,

\$23,000 in debt and facing a historically bad job market. Adjunct jobs — with year-to-year contracts, no benefits and no security — may be the only option.

[Louis Menand](#), an English professor at Harvard and another longtime critic of the Ph.D. production process, notes: “Lives are warped because of the length and uncertainty of the doctoral education process.” In his new book, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” he writes, “Put in less personal terms, there is a huge social inefficiency in taking people of high intelligence and devoting resources to training them in programs that half will never complete and for jobs that most will not get.”

In the spring issue of the Modern Language Association’s newsletter, Sidonie Smith, an English professor at the [University of Michigan](#) and president of the organization, resuscitated a proposal that had been swirling around blue-ribbon task forces and educational panels for years: to broaden the range of research options beyond the classic dissertation to include already-published peer-reviewed essays, research portfolios and digital publications and presentations. Aside from shortening the Ph.D. process, she argues, this would make scholarship less arcane and more relevant.

Despite high-level support for reform, educators say that wholesale change is not likely any time soon. For one, any meaningful transformation in doctoral requirements must be adopted universally, says Richard Wheeler, interim vice chancellor for academic affairs and former dean of the graduate college at the [University of Illinois](#), Urbana-Champaign. Who would want to attend a program that another university — and potential employer — doesn’t recognize as valid? “It hasn’t reached enough of a crisis point yet,” Dr. Wheeler says.

“It’s very hard to get through the graduate student experience,” he adds.

The union of graduate students at Illinois staged a brief strike in November over guarantees that their tuition would be waived. Dr. Wheeler attributes the protest to general discontent as much as specific employment issues. “There’s despair, anger, frustration,” he says. “A lot of people are unhappy.”

Dr. Wheeler, who received his English Ph.D. in 1969, took four years to finish. Graduate programs have since added more stringent requirements, he says, and expectations for what a degree holder is supposed to have accomplished have radically increased. He had not published anything when he was hired; today, applicants are expected to have a list of published research on their résumés.

The job problem has been brewing for years. In 1989, [William G. Bowen](#) and Julie Ann Sosa issued a widely publicized report that forecast a huge turnover in faculty and suggested the creation of a federal program to increase humanities and social sciences Ph.D.’s. Many students — Dr. Pannacker included — took that advice to heart. Ph.D. production in English and American language and literature grew 61 percent between 1987 and 1995; history Ph.D.’s rose by 51 percent.

By the late 1990s, though, the spanking-new degree candidates discovered just how mistaken the Bowen-Sosa report was. The end of mandatory retirement and the increase in the use of part-time and adjunct faculty meant there were many more exceptionally qualified job seekers than jobs. The current recession has only exacerbated the problem, with many institutions imposing hiring freezes or layoffs. The M.L.A., for example, reported that its total job listings dropped by a quarter in the 2008-2009 academic year, the largest single-year decline in the 34 years that the organization has been doing job counts. And these numbers don't include postings that were subsequently canceled because of budget cuts.

At the same time, the practice of hiring off-tenure teachers is growing. According to a new survey of humanities departments by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, half of the faculty members in English and foreign languages — more than any other department — are not on a tenure track. Part of the reason for the large number is that freshman composition classes, which are often required, are taught by those departments, and adjuncts.

Unlike in life science or engineering, the number of doctoral degrees awarded in the humanities — the pool of fields that generally include languages, history, philosophy, music, drama and archeology — has actually dipped in the last few years, with 4,722 recipients in 2008 (down from 5,112 in 2007), according to the [National Science Foundation](#).

But more than a third of those degree-holders had no definite job (part or full time, off or on a tenure track) or any postdoctoral study commitment.

The number of degrees may dip further. Some major universities, including Harvard, Princeton, the [University of Chicago](#), Emory and Northwestern, reduced the number of doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences they admitted this past year. Much more radical cuts would be required to bring the supply of graduates and the demand for them into balance, and that would be a solution that stirs up its own problems. If enrollment drops too low, there may not be enough students to justify courses in specialized areas.

Other practical reasons exist for resisting reductions. Doctoral programs bring prestige to a university and help retain faculty members who want to mentor the next generation of scholars. They also provide the staff for courses offered to first- and second-year undergraduates — a task many tenured faculty members resist. Even graduate students on full scholarships are cheap labor if they are teaching enough tuition-paying undergraduates.

Dr. Wheeler would like to reverse that practice, at least. “Putting as many faculty in front of undergraduates as possible,” he says, would not only improve the quality of education but would also increase the demand for more tenured faculty members over time.

Funding to hire the professors in the first place has to be there, however.

Dr. Pannacker has rebuked graduate schools for perpetuating a culture in which unattainable academic careers are portrayed as the only worthwhile goal, and for failing to level with students about their true prospects. With more transparency — if every graduate program published its attrition rate, average debt of its students, time to completion, and what kind of job its graduates got — undergraduates, he says, could make more-informed choices.

“Academe encourages students to think of what they’re doing as a special kind of calling or vocation which is exempt from the rules of the marketplace,” he says. Those who look to work outside the scholarly world are seen as rejecting the academy’s core values. “They socialize students into believing they can’t leave academe or shouldn’t, which is why they hang on year after year as adjuncts, rather than pursue alternative careers.”

A bad job market, too, tempts graduate students to stay even longer, since being out on the job circuit for more than a year tends to taint candidates.

As the number of tenure-track jobs shrink, Ms. Stewart of the Council of Graduate Schools says, the profession needs to address these failings.

“Humanities Ph.D.’s have focused exclusively on the academic job market,” Ms. Stewart says. “They don’t have anyplace else to go, or they don’t perceive that they have anyplace else to go.”

Patricia Cohen is a culture reporter for The Times

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 25, 2010

An article in the special Education Life section last Sunday about the long road to a Ph.D. misstated the title of Richard Wheeler, who said doctoral requirements should be adopted universally. He is interim vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He is not interim chancellor.