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We Need to Acknowledge the Realities of Employment in the Humanities

By Peter Conn

Predictions are always perilous. Many of us recall the hearty enthusiasm of the Bowen report of 1989, which assured prospective graduate students that they would find "a substantial excess demand for faculty in the arts and sciences" when they earned their degrees in the mid-1990s. Of course, they did not.

Moral: Avoid confident assertions about the future of the academic job market in the humanities (or in any other field). It may be that our current dilemma is another episode in a longish cyclical history. It may also be, as I rather pessimistically suspect, that something more serious is going on.

My reason is that just about all of the key drivers are simultaneously pointed in the wrong direction. Full-time tenured and tenure-track jobs in the humanities are endangered by half a dozen trends, most of them long-term.

The casualization of academic labor is probably the most serious threat. According to a 2003 American Association of University Professors report, "The proportion of faculty who are appointed each year to tenure-line positions is declining at an alarming rate." Three out of four new hires in the 1990s were appointed to nontenurable jobs. It is reasonable to infer from this that the number of non-tenure-track jobs, which accounted for 58 percent of faculty positions in 1993, will continue to rise.

A more recent AAUP report, the "Contingent Faculty Index" (2006), found that in just under three decades, from 1975 to 2003, the share of faculty positions occupied by tenured and tenure-track faculty members fell from a combined 56.8 percent to 35.1 percent.

It is important to emphasize that this is not a new development. According to a February 2010 report of the Academic Coalition on

the Academic Workforce: "Over the last 40 years, there has been a dramatic shift in the instructional staff at U.S. colleges and universities. ... In 1970 faculty members in part-time positions represented only 22.0 percent of all faculty members teaching in U.S. colleges and universities; in 2007 they represented 48.7 percent." Taking into account the portion of instructors who prefer part-time employment makes this situation less grim, though only slightly.

Keep in mind that something like three-quarters of all undergraduates are enrolled at public institutions. State support for those institutions has been declining for years—in some cases decades—which is to say, long before the current financial meltdown. In other words, the institutions most at financial risk enroll by far the majority of students. As budgets at those colleges are put under increasing pressure, the number of tenured and tenurable faculty openings will inevitably shrink further.

As for private institutions: Consider the cuts and freezes at Harvard, Yale, and Penn. To be sure, those wealthy universities will recover and flourish. For one thing, the favorable ratio of demand to supply guarantees a ceaseless flow of students. Nonetheless, the Council for Aid to Education's recent report that contributions to colleges and universities (both public and private) declined by 12 percent last year—the steepest decline in the half-century of record keeping—bodes financial trouble in the future.

The growth of the so-called contingent faculty has been stimulated by the emergence of for-profit higher education. The University of Phoenix, founded in 1976, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Apollo Group, pioneered this dubious innovation in entrepreneurship. As of this writing, Phoenix has the largest enrollment of any American university: well over 400,000 undergraduate and 78,000 graduate students, mainly U.S. nationals but also including foreign matriculants. Located on more than 200 sites in the United States and Canada, Phoenix offers associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in more than 100 subjects.

Two points about Phoenix and its ilk are most relevant for purposes of this discussion. First, the students it enrolls are taught by a faculty numbering 20,000—most of whom are part timers, receive no benefits, and have no access to tenure. To be sure, many of

them have other jobs, as journalists, doctors, lawyers, business professionals, and so forth. However, an indeterminate but presumably large number, including women and men with Ph.D.'s in the humanities, are trying to make a living working for Phoenix. In any case, students taking degrees at places like Phoenix represent a net loss in enrollment at traditional colleges where tenure-track jobs, while shrinking, particularly in English, are still available.

Second, while the for-profit share of the higher-education market remains relatively small, its growth has been rapid over the past decade. According to a report in *The Chronicle* in February, 7 percent of all American postsecondary students attend for-profit institutions. Presumably, like Phoenix, all of those colleges and universities depend mainly on part-time faculty members.

Almost as troubling, the migration of undergraduates from English (and the humanities generally) to other fields is a well-documented trend. To cite one reliable summary (taken from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Resource Center Online): The humanities' share of bachelor's degrees in 2004 was 8 percent, compared with 17.8 percent in the late 1960s.

Given the growth in college enrollment over those years, the number of humanities majors has remained relatively constant. But as a share of the total, the humanities have experienced a substantial decline. Using figures from the National Center for Educational Statistics—roughly 18 million students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions—every percentage-point rise or fall indicates the movement of literally tens of thousands of students.

The slowing of retirement since the end of mandatory retirement under federal law, in 1994, has added another growing problem to the job-market mix. At the University of Pennsylvania—the only place for which I can get more or less exact and timely data—we have gone from having no faculty members over 70 in the School of Arts and Sciences, 15 years ago, to 28, or 7.3 percent of the 383 tenured faculty members, in 2010. And the median age of tenured faculty members has risen to 55.

Seven-plus percent is a substantial proportion, especially since

each of those senior citizens is arguably blocking at least two assistant-professor slots. Penn could probably add upward of 40 new assistant professors in the School of Arts and Sciences, without significantly increasing its instructional budget, if everyone over 70 retired. (Whether Penn's administrators would actually do that much hiring is, of course, an entirely different matter.)

Penn is a flawed benchmark, since every study of retirement demonstrates that faculty members in research-intensive universities retire less frequently than do those in other sorts of institutions. (Robert Louis Clark and P. Brett Hammond's 2001 *To Retire or Not?* is now somewhat out of date, but the shape of their conclusions—that a relationship exists between the tier of the institution and the rate of retirement—has been supported in subsequent surveys.) So the national figure, while hard to ferret out, is probably more like 3 to 4 percent: still a disheartening number. (The provost of a distinguished private university reports confidentially that his post-70 colleagues make up 8.7 percent of the tenured faculty, higher than Penn's figure.)

Furthermore, academic economists suggest that in a time of recession, professors are even less inclined to retire. Many faculty members are also concerned about anticipated reductions in university-financed health care for retirees; at least some of them will decide to keep working in order to protect their health-insurance arrangements. A number of university administrators are studying the presumptively negative impact of slowed retirement on efforts to diversify faculties.

The end of mandatory retirement, by the way, is one concrete and probably permanent example of the difference between our current situation and earlier downturns in the job market (at least those before the mid-1990s).

How have humanities faculty members and their administrators responded to this cluster of threats? They haven't. In 1987, the first year for which tallies of humanities doctorates were computed according to the preferred CIP (Classification of Instructional Programs) methodology, humanities departments graduated 2,991 doctoral students. In 2007, the most recent year for which CIP data are available, that number had risen to 4,366, an increase of 1,375, or 46 percent, over 20 years in a flat or declining job market.

To cite only the most recent data, the latest jobs report from the Modern Language Association indicates that the number of positions on offer in English has dropped 44 percent in just the past two years, from 1,800 to 1,000—the lowest number in 35 years.

In addition, attrition in humanities Ph.D. programs amounts to academic carnage. According to estimates from the Council of Graduate Schools, something like 43 percent of the nation's graduate matriculants never earn Ph.D.'s. To be sure, attrition requires more interpretation than job placement: It is not self-defining as a quality indicator. Not all attrition is bad. We should encourage programs to make judgments about students who are not making satisfactory progress. However, that sort of attrition is exceptionally rare, at least at Penn and the other places I know something about. Most attrition represents a vast group of unsupervised students who spend as long as a decade enrolled in doctoral programs before resigning (or simply disappearing). In the years before their eventual departure, these students provide a pool of cheap and disposable labor that administrators at all levels can use to subsidize the salaries of more-expensive, long-term staff members.

Perhaps, in the absence of jobs, our national 40-plus-percent attrition rate might be considered—rather ironically—a good thing. In most other respects, it bespeaks negligence and indifference on the part of both faculty members and administrators.

The obvious conclusions, though many senior faculty members in the humanities seem reluctant to admit it, are these: As a profession, we are enrolling too many Ph.D. students, we have been doing so for decades, we spend far too long in guiding them to their degrees, and we then consign them to a dysfunctional job market.

Once upon a time, probably in the early 1970s, the ratio of earned doctorates to academic placements presented graduate students with quite promising job prospects. We mistook a bubble for the way things ought to be (and therefore the way they would be, if we just crossed our fingers and waited long enough). I conclude from my observations of the market over those decades that we have

lived so long with a dismal situation that it has come to seem normal. Yes, there have been worse and better years, and there will undoubtedly be better years in the future. However, bad and better here represent, in my view, data points on a generally downward curve. It is long past time to confront these issues dispassionately, equipped with as much of the relevant evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, as we can quarry.

Pending that inquiry, I offer five recommendations, the first four of which follow from the analysis I've just sketched.

1. Graduate programs recruit students in the honorable hope that at least some of them will carry on the research and teaching that have served the nation so well over many years. While some minimum number of students is required to sustain a pipeline of new scholarship, we need to initiate a national conversation about the appropriate size of Ph.D. cohorts. Recently in *The New Republic*, Anthony Grafton offered a passionate and eloquent defense of the rigors and satisfactions of traditional graduate education, but he couples it with the recognition that many doctoral students "stick it out—and finish—only to find that the completed quest leads into Rats' Alley."

Having made clear that, in my own view, graduate programs across the country should admit fewer students, let me comment on five objections to substantial reductions in the numbers of graduate students.

First, the nourishment of scholarship to one side, we all know that another of the principal reasons for the continued overadmission of students is to serve the perceived preferences and alleged needs of graduate-school faculty members. They enjoy teaching graduate students, and a glance at the courses they choose to teach indicates that they do not equally enjoy teaching undergraduate service courses, especially freshman composition. Admitting students to graduate programs nicely satisfies both preferences. I do not find this to be a defensible objection to reducing graduate students' numbers.

Second, reductions in graduate-student cohorts would make it increasingly difficult to staff large lecture courses with teaching assistants and graders. I simply acknowledge that this is true. And

given the teaching loads and the prevailing faculty-student ratios at research-intensive universities, I have no remedy.

Third, some faculty members will insist that they "need" graduate students to assist in their research. I view that claim with a good deal of skepticism. In the first place, the consequences in truncated or ruined careers wouldn't be justified even if this assertion were true. But it isn't true. In 2010, one Internet-connected computer can do the work of half a dozen graduate students. It may be that graduate students are, in fact, vital to research programs in science, but it is simply not the case in the humanities.

Fourth, reducing the number of graduate students would supposedly make it more difficult to recruit the most desirable faculty talent. I would respectfully suggest that such a position, in which the reputational ranking of a department is given higher priority than the welfare of flesh-and-blood students, is morally dubious at best. And insofar as that high faculty profile is justified as essential to the placement of graduate students in jobs, it appears that the strategy isn't working very well, since such placements are happening less and less frequently.

Beyond that, how much longer shall we choose to maintain an expensive and debilitating "star" system, in which marketable faculty members receive exceptionally high salaries, research budgets, and other benefits, while adjuncts and lecturers work for a pittance, and many young scholars are denied any jobs at all? And while I'm on this subject, let me also observe that the annual million-dollar-plus compensation packages that many university presidents now receive may have little overall impact on campus budgets, but they send their own crude message about the large and growing distance between academe's haves and have-nots.

Fifth, if graduate-student enrollments were reduced, many young men and women would be denied the education they want—and to which they are entitled by virtue of their talent and commitment. I concede this to be the case.

2. Every graduate program in the humanities should include a truthful statement on its Web site about the realities of academic employment. Every program should also include a required (presumably noncredit) first-semester course aimed at introducing

students to the professional facts of life. Such a course would review local and national information on attrition, time-to-degree, placement, prospects for tenure-accruing jobs, salaries, and the workings of professional organizations.

3. Every graduate program should also be required to maintain an accurate and current job-placement Web page. At a minimum, these pages would record the name of each student who has completed the doctorate, the year of completion, the date, type, and year of first placement and each subsequent placement, and the percentage of each cohort that has completed the degree within 10 years. At the moment, there is a troubling variability in the scope, accessibility, and accuracy of placement information from one program to another. In particular, a number of such pages do not distinguish clearly between tenure-track and non-tenure-track placements. And most do not include nonacademic employment.

4. The core mission of graduate programs in the humanities is to prepare the teachers and scholars of the next generation. I accept that statement of purpose. At the same time, we have now accumulated a generation of experience on the relative success of Ph.D. (and A.B.D.) students who have found and enjoyed successful careers outside the academy.

I have some personal experience in this area. From 1979 to 1984, during what we thought might be a temporary slump, I devised and ran (pro bono, I hasten to add) a project called Wharton Alternative Careers. Staffed by faculty members from the Wharton School in such areas as marketing, finance, and management, the program enrolled about 40 Ph.D.'s each year from all over the country for a six-week, residential, summer institute combining a micro-M.B.A. curriculum with intensive counseling in résumé-writing and interview preparation.

Above all, my associates and I worked assiduously to bring corporate (and a few not-for-profit) recruiters to the campus, persuading them that our participants had unusual profiles but were eminently employable in all sorts of fields. We had an excellent placement rate (consultancies, management training, human-resources groups), and we stayed in touch with as many of the roughly 190 "graduates" as we could, a somewhat hit-or-miss proposition since we had no budget or post-1984 staff.

Conclusions (comparable to those reached by the managers of the few similar programs, such as one at NYU, though all of our data were pretty soft): These women and men found somewhat more job satisfaction than did members of their cohorts who continued in academic careers, in part because they ended up in locations of their choice, and in part because they tended to make more money. The American Historical Association recently reported similar findings for historians in nonacademic careers.

At a minimum, even if graduate faculty members themselves refuse to engage in training or advising students toward alternatives, they should destigmatize such decisions on the part of students and should support those who choose to explore careers outside the academy. Information about nonacademic careers should be included on placement Web sites. Among other outcomes, broadening postdoctoral career opportunities would serve the interest of departments eager to maintain higher rather than lower levels of graduate-student enrollments.

My own conversations with graduate students over several decades indicate that most of them do not find the idea of nonacademic careers particularly appealing. Perhaps if the question were rephrased—an alternative career or none—the results would be different. And perhaps, over time, a more spacious conception of postdoctoral employment might attract a different cadre of students.

Reimagining graduate education might also respond to the ambivalence that many students have expressed about their careers. In an important survey conducted at the University of California by Mary Ann Mason and her collaborators, the researchers concluded, "Neither men nor women consider tenure-track faculty positions in research-intensive universities to be family-friendly career choices. Less than half the men (46 percent) and only a third of women (29 percent) imagine jobs in these settings to be somewhat or very family friendly." Many students report that "they did not want lifestyles like those of their advisers or other faculty in their departments." In Mason's opinion, "the structure of academia at all levels is turning people away from the profession."

5. While we must face the facts of the job market realistically, we should also do everything we can to strengthen the place of the humanities in American education and, indeed, in American life. The disciplines that make up the study of the humanities offer students and citizens unique access to the multiform ways in which women and men have explored and expressed their intellectual and emotional experiences over many centuries. Whatever careers we ultimately pursue, all of us face the fundamental struggles and anxieties that adult lives entail. The humanities don't solve such problems, but they permit us to learn from the shared humanness that unites us across time and distance.

Collectively, those of us who profess the humanities must make a sustained effort to explain to our various constituencies—students, parents, legislators, journalists, even our own university trustees (I speak from personal experience of that latter group)—that these disciplines, and the traditions they represent, are not merely ornamental and dispensable. They lie near the heart of mankind's restless efforts to make sense of the world. Debates over war and peace, justice and equity: From the uses of scientific knowledge to the formulation of social policy, the humanities provide a necessary dimension of insight and meaning.

Despite the trends in enrollment and financial support that I have described, I am confident that the humanities can find the recognition they deserve. But it is our obligation to articulate our contribution if we hope to find increasing levels of support for the work we do. This is no simple assignment, as I can attest from having served on two of the dozens (scores?) of panels, committees, and task forces that have attempted this task in recent decades. Simple or not, we have no choice.

I would much prefer to define our current job-market difficulties as a problem in underdemand rather than oversupply. The facts, however, cannot be denied. After a generation of dithering, we need to act decisively to minimize the damage that our practices are inflicting on thousands of talented young women and men whose aspirations and idealism are jeopardized by our institutional inertia as well as by our laissez-faire, wishful thinking that the job market will simply take care of itself. If we should have learned one lesson from the current financial crisis, it is that all markets need

vigilant oversight.

Peter Conn is a professor of English and of education at the University of Pennsylvania.

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