**Why We Need Ph.D. Career Fairs**



Kevin Van Aelst - The Chronicle

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Across academe, the conversation about career diversity for Ph.D.s has cracked wide open up in just a few years. That’s equivalent to the blink of an eye in academic (read: glacial) time. The proposition that graduate programs should prepare students for the actual jobs that they’ll get — not just for professorships — no longer receives the fierce pushback that it did even five years ago. We’ve gone from "Why should we?" to "How should we?" in a remarkably short time.

The question has two sides: how to prepare students for diverse career paths and how to prepare employers. Most of the attention up to now has gone to the former — debating and adopting reforms to train graduate students (and their teachers) for what amounts to a new reality. We’ve got to change graduate school so that doctoral education can support students who pursue a range of careers. That’s a big job, and it’s still under way.

Now it’s time to pay more attention to the employers who will provide those outcomes. One place for universities and disciplinary societies to start is by organizing graduate-career fairs.

When undergraduates look for work, their institution brings potential employers to the campus for students to meet with, formally and informally. Why can’t we do that for graduate students, too?

Professors in classics are taking a first step in that direction. In January, the next annual meeting of the Society for Classical Studies (SCS) will include a "networking session" featuring 15 people who earned Ph.D.s in classics but are now employed outside of academe.

The session’s organizer, Jason Pedicone, recruited the participants from a database that his company, the Paideia Institute, has been building for some years. The [Paideia Institute](http://www.paideiainstitute.org), which Pedicone calls a "humanities start-up," promotes the classics through different kinds of outreach, including study abroad. The company aims to broaden the foundation for classics outside of higher education.

One of the most important parts of this work is the "[Legion Project,](http://www.paideiainstitute.org/legion)" to "connect classicists working outside of academia." It’s a website of personal narratives written by people who have done different sorts of things with their classics training. There are lawyers and Latin teachers to be found, of course, but also data scientists and even a professional quilter. They explain the role of classics in their nonfaculty lives.

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The 15 Ph.D.s at the SCS’s networking session were culled from Paideia’s database. At the annual meeting in January, Pedicone said, they’ll sit at separate tables and "have conversations" with interested comers.

One of the conversants will be Michael Zimm, a creative strategist at Digital Surgeons, a small digital strategy company in Connecticut. Zimm entered graduate school in classics at Yale University with the goal of becoming a professor but got no interviews when he went on the faculty job market. By time he got his Ph.D. in 2016, he had already "crunched the numbers," he said, and faced "the ongoing collapse of the tenure-track job market." He decided to leave academe for technology.

How did Zimm take his humanities Ph.D. into the technology business? Through research. He burrowed in and learned about the tech field. Ph.D.s are researchers, Zimm says. "We don’t realize how good we are at it. I simply applied my research skills to tech."

Now, as a digital strategist for a technology company, Zimm maintains that he’s "still an academic. I’m just *their* academic." He uses his knowledge of ancient rhetoric to help 21st-century clients. "Data needs to be analyzed," Zimm says. "Someone needs to synthesize it, and tell a story based on the evidence. I’m pretty good at that."

Zimm’s skill at his job arises directly from his graduate training. But his faith in the wide applicability of the Ph.D. skill set is not exactly widespread right now. Alfredo Cumerma, a Gilman Research Fellow and graduate student in Romance languages and literature at the Johns Hopkins University, recently summed up the problem: "Employers simply do not know what a Ph.D. means, or how it can contribute to their organization."

Instead, stereotypes proliferate. Some employers wonder, as Pedicone put it, "Why would I want some egghead around here?"

Zimm knows better. Ph.D.s, he says, "are like beautiful blank slates. We think about things in a new and fresh way." And companies "like the way we analyze things." Plenty of executives know this, and hire Ph.D.’s, but not enough. When Zimm’s company hired him, his company became what technologists call an "early adopter."

How might we spread the news about graduate students’ abilities to the rest of the employment world? The SCS networking session marks a good beginning, but recruiters — the people who actually do the hiring — aren’t yet in the room. Graduate schools have to become recognizable players in multiple employment markets — just like undergraduate programs are.

So how do we get from a networking session to a full-fledged career fair?

There is no single answer. In addition to organizing the SCS networking session, Pedicone has been talking to corporate executives about establishing postdocs — but in industry, not academe. The American Council of Learned Societies has a similar project under way, its [Public Fellows program](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Teaching-in-the-Postdoc-Space/127150), about which I’ve written previously. Those worthy initiatives plant a seed but so far the work is being done by professional organizations, not graduate schools themselves.

Rainmaking has to start at the source — with graduate schools. "Hiring managers," Cumerma says, "need to be invited to campus, wined and dined." Doing so builds relationships, but more important, it educates. Specifically, it allows employers "to see the kinds of skills and projects our humanist professionals are working on."

Graduate schools also need to exploit their alumni networks. Many doctoral programs are doing a better job these days of tracking students’ career outcomes — and not just the faculty ones. Ph.D.s working outside of academe are a resource to draw on: After all, every one of them was hired by a company or organization that hires Ph.D.s.

Doctoral students and Ph.D.s can certainly sell the work they’re doing, but that’s much harder to do if they have to make every contact themselves. Zimm got support and advice from Yale’s career office, but he wound up cold-calling technology companies and assembling his professional network on his own. That’s greatly to his credit, but his solution also points to the extent of the problem.

Graduate schools have to bring the students and the employers together. We are working to get our institutional houses in order and better prepare students for new employment markets. Now we have to reach out of our houses and into those markets.

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*Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space. His latest book is* [The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It](https://www.amazon.com/Graduate-School-Mess-What-Caused/dp/067472898X), *published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at lcassuto@erols.com. Twitter handle: @LCassuto.*