

A Review of

EDUCATING SCHOLARS: DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN THE HUMANITIES

L'Ehrenberg, Ronald G, Harriet Zuckerman, Jeffrey A. Groen, and Sharon M. Brucker
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by Christian B. Long

Educating Scholars: Doctoral Education in the Humanities presents a readable and compelling account of the many problems facing postgraduate education in the twenty-first century. Based on the book's quantitative and qualitative data, the humanities can be cautiously hopeful and optimistic. If they adapt. *Educating Scholars* avoids the usual plodding, passive-heavy approach of sociological studies while retaining the genre's benefits, most especially consistent and careful attention to the evidence. The authors spell out specific, desirable changes to the system that have proven their worth in the subject departments. Consistent organizational signposts guide humanities readers through the quantitative material, and generous use of the narrative material provided by their research subjects acts as a qualitative supplement and complement to the number-crunching. The book is part of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Graduate Education Initiative (GEI), which aims to find ways to increase completion rates while also reducing attrition and time-to-degree. *Educating Scholars* makes the case that significant changes and improvements in the quality of graduate instruction need to begin at the department level. College- and university-level support can then add to and solidify these improvements, but departmental control presents a greater array of long- and short-term benefits. The book's main findings — that improvements in doctoral education in the humanities should include improving and increasing communication between faculty and students, performance-based financial incentives, and departmental initiative and self-monitoring — present a workable, clearly stated, and well-sourced template for increasingly under-attack humanities departments to produce the next generations of researchers and teachers.

However, these lessons emerge from a distressingly narrow group of schools. The GEI provided an additional \$70 million in funding to humanities departments at the "Universities of California-Berkeley, Chicago, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, and Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale universities".¹ The three control-group schools — California-Los Angeles, California-San Diego, and North Carolina-Chapel Hill — all of which are public universities, received no additional money. The GEI preferred a system of research-centered performance-based financial incentives — especially for summer and dissertation funding. At a number of moments the authors come across as slightly peeved when departments offer guaranteed funding packages. Linking funding to research competition rather than teaching fits in with the book's dim view of teaching for graduate students. After all, undergraduates in need of teaching consume time and energy that might otherwise be devoted to degree completion. While it is certainly true, as the authors note, that "these 13 institutions graduated 18 percent of all PhDs

¹ Ehrenberg, Zuckerman, Groen and Brucker 8.

awarded in the humanities, far more than their share of the total number of doctoral programs”, it is also true that the schools that enjoyed an additional \$70 million in funding are among the most well-funded in the US.² This research-centered approach to graduate student funding, likely a product of the schools in the study group, shows a marked lack of interest in discussing the role graduate students at the great majority of universities find themselves filling: the just-in-time labor system Marc Bousquet critiques at length in *How the University Works*. Since the book is more descriptive than polemic, at least when it comes to the experience of the graduate student, the authors simply acknowledge that greater TA teaching responsibilities lengthen time to degree – but relegate any serious consideration of student financial concerns to the footnotes, as is plain throughout chapter 5.

On the whole, the fault lies not with *Educating Scholars*, but rather with the system it describes and quite plainly wishes to change. Brian Eno famously noted that only 10,000 people bought the Velvet Underground’s first album, but they all went on to start their own band. Something similar holds for humanities PhDs produced by the GEI schools. While UC-Berkeley’s faculty profile sites do not provide consistent PhD provenance, the other nine GEI schools do. I calculated the frequency of GEI school PhDs (or MFAs) in GEI school English departments: Yale 74%, Chicago 70%, Michigan 66%, Columbia 62%, Harvard 55%, Princeton 54%, Stanford 51%, Penn 51%, Cornell 49%. Improving funding and opportunities at the Ivies and near-Ivies seems little more than academic Reaganomics. The authors flatly admit that the rich got richer off their study, which “had the unintended effect of greatly improving the competitive edge of the participating departments”.³ While the majority of public schools wait for the benefits to trickle down, the elite schools enjoy Mellon Foundation checks that improve their already-advantaged students’ chances of finishing on time and finding a tenure-track appointment. I don’t begrudge the graduate students at the GEI schools their successes because *Educating Scholars* shows just how rigged the system is.

Incredibly telling moments about academic culture appear in the book’s admissions of its necessarily incomplete nature and in the footnotes. For instance, in the chapter “Attrition and Beyond,” the “reasons for attrition” section details the *academic* reasons for choosing and leaving graduate study quite well. But there’s a degree of deliberate obtuseness in the authors’ reluctance to place “health or family” among the “financial” reasons for leaving in a country where access to health care is tied to employment. The footnotes provide some of the book’s great ongoing pleasures. One frustrating example, in an otherwise well-sourced work – “Some argue by contrast that students who leave graduate programs have not “wasted” their time and that such benefits are rarely considered, much less measured” – makes a fairly strong and defensible claim, but neglects to provide citation.⁴ Another footnote highlights the provinciality of tenured academics who look down on non-academic jobs for newly-minted PhDs: “some students expressed frustration that any interest in a different career path was discouraged by their faculty members”.⁵ In the current job market, this borders on malpractice

In the end, graduate school is a job, and much of what *Educating Scholars* prescribes considers how to turn humanities departments into better work places, even if such acts don’t necessarily speed

² Ibid., 8.

³ Ibid., 51.

⁴ Ibid., 169.

⁵ Ibid., 201.

up completion or reduce attrition. The two most obvious and concrete ways the study proposes to make work better is to 1) pay students better for 2) outcomes that are made clear from day one. Graduate school work may be long and difficult, but performance-based funding seems as fair a solution as practicable. Graduate school work need not be lonely, and directors of graduate study would be wise to implement some version of the department-wide research-and-writing seminars and presentations described in *Educating Scholars*. Such an approach can make the dissertation stage a less solitary undertaking and foster an ongoing critical conversation—Christianity minor-leagues version of tenure-track academia. However, beyond encouraging increased interactions between experienced faculty researchers and their apprentice students, *Educating Scholars* never investigates the neither fish nor fowl-ness of graduate student life thoroughly. The inertia of tradition weighs heavily on the dissertation-writing portion of graduate school. During dissertation-writing attrition and languishing take hold quite strongly. While *Educating Scholars* notes the unhelpfulness of a strong attachment to “tradition” — often with terrifically funny direct quotations from research subjects — something along the lines of the MLA’s “reimagining the dissertation” would have strengthened the conclusion beyond the structure-of-study skeleton the authors present. As the authors point out: it’s not a life’s work, it’s a dissertation. *Educating Scholars*, in this light, is quite successful — it’s a useful first draft of the next iteration of doctoral education.