

The School for Civil Society: A Canadian leader in preparing community-engaged and community-based scholars

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THE CHALLENGE

Less than 20% of Canadian PhD students will obtain a faculty position after graduation (Charbonneau, 2011). More tangibly, over 80% of doctoral students specifically trained to be academics will take a different path, whether due to a lack of faculty positions, disillusionment with the available options, and/or a desire for a different career path. Despite this evidence of a powerful disconnect between the postgraduate occupational realities and the focus and opportunities currently offered through doctoral programs, many Universities have been slow to respond in a meaningful way (Kaplan, 2012; "Doctoral degrees," 2010). Immersed within the academic structure, mentoring faculty are often ill equipped to offer guidance on non-academic career paths and at many institutions there is a culture prioritizing a faculty role as the most valid and appropriate pursuit of a PhD graduate. As Grafton and Grossman (2012) argued, "graduate programs have proved achingly reluctant to see the world as it is." Despite a plethora of disciplinary innovations, the "goal of the training remains the same: to produce more professors." Students are encouraged to have a "plan B" or consider "alternatives," they continue, but these other paths are marginalized: "the very words in which we couch this useful advice make clear how much we hope they will not have to follow it - and suggest [...] that if they do have to settle for employment outside the academy, they should crawl off home and gnaw their arms off (p. 1).

Even as most graduates will travel 'alternative' paths, students face a blinding lack of "transparency" regarding their options, receiving little support from Universities when entering programs, in the course of education, and post-graduation (Wendler et al., 2012). As many endeavour to find their own way, discontent is palpable on Internet forums and LinkedIn groups as graduates commiserate and solicit peer support to work out next steps. Consultants have also stepped in as surrogate guides (e.g., phdcareerclinic.com; www.dougsguides.com). These networks have value amid a scarcity of formal support, but can be sporadic, decontextualized, and arrive too late in the journey. More critically, as graduates piece together individual solutions to a common challenge, the systemic problem continues on, unabated. This inefficient process delays the impact graduates have in their community and leads some to set aside hard earned training and critical skills as they struggle to access relevant work.

We must adapt PhD training to align with the current reality faced by graduates. This is an ethical obligation of universities (Kaplan, 2012), a shift important to the economic and social vibrancy of academic institutions and the broader society (Wendler et al., 2012), and a differentiator for Universities willing to take on this challenge.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Although some have argued for a reduction in the number of PhD students trained, an alternative approach is to enhance the relevance of training offered. As Dr. Suzanne Fortier, president of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, noted: the challenge is less *how* students are trained, but *to what end*: "If you asked me, are we training too many people to become university professors, I think the answer is yes. Are we training too many highly educated people who are encouraged to be creative and to push the advancement of knowledge, I'd say definitely not" (in Charbonneau, 2011). Rather than devising a new style of doctoral education, universities can broaden existing programs to facilitate access to career counseling and professional development opportunities. As detailed by doctoral graduates ("What would you add," 2012), the relevance of a PhD education can be enhanced through training on public speaking and non-academic presentations, communication across functions of an institution, financial literacy, business writing, skill development related to negotiation, conflict resolution, and leadership, and broader business acumen (i.e., understanding the

unwritten 'rules' of business). From early in their education students need to learn about potential career paths and to be coached to tell their "value story" in a range of settings.

This training can be delivered through courses, workshops, seminars, and symposia. However, off-campus internships can be of particular value in delivering an enhanced curriculum, as these opportunities socialize students into community-based organizations, prepare them for practical requirements in these environments, and enhance networks (Charbonneau, 2011; "What would you add," 2012; Wendler, et al., 2012). In establishing a more comprehensive and relevant training system, universities can learn from Canadian programs, including the MITACS program Accelerate that creates industry-based research opportunities for doctoral students and post-docs, and draw on models in other countries, including the Netherlands where two-thirds of doctoral students complete internships (Charbonneau, 2011). Fundamentally, universities and employers must collaborate to build context-specific solutions to ensure that doctoral students are informed, prepared, and guided forward (Wendler et al., 2012). Similar to the work being done to better support community-engaged scholarship at Canadian Universities, this shift must be accompanied by revisions in current practices (offerings and recognition) and a broader culture change effort aimed at fostering student, faculty, and institutional recognition of non-academic paths as legitimate and valuable pursuits. The goal is to neither produce a two-track PhD program nor increase student or faculty burden, but to ensure doctoral students have access to programs and training opportunities relevant to academic and 'alternative' career trajectories.

The School for Civil Society (SFCS) is ideally positioned to take on this challenge. As the SFCS forges productive partnerships between the university and civil society there is a natural opportunity to nurture both community-engaged scholars *and* community-based scholars. Specifically, the SFCS can be a leader in providing PhD training designed and delivered to prepare doctoral level researchers to move into research positions within industry, government, and the non-profit sector, as well as academia. Drawing on relationships the school will already be building in the community, the SFCS can enable meaningful internships for doctoral students and can draw on the capacities of partner organizations to ensure that students are receiving the practical skills required. In stepping forward to accept this challenge, the SFCS can further demonstrate its accountability to the greater society as it prepares students who are committed to not only working with the community, but also within the community; scholars prepared to address community-led challenges and build strategic partnerships with academic colleagues. In addition to emphasizing the value of a non-academic post-graduate path, this program can help advance the profile of the University of Guelph, positioning the University and the SFCS as a destination for graduate students eager to develop advanced research skills applicable to a range of institutional realities. This is a responsible shift in an environment of scarce academic positions and a strategy that can enable powerful cross-sector solutions in a society facing complicated challenges.

References

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