Preface

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This book is a positive call to action rooted in a grim moment for doctoral education in the humanities. A longitudinal view of the field reveals that this moment is nothing new: there have been long-standing fears over placement, completion rates, and just about every other marker by which we've judged success or failure for PhD programs. There are no satisfactory justifications for bloated time-to-degree numbers, or the circuit of postdoctoral fellowships ending in despair, or the adjunctification of faculty positions that erode higher education's mission from the classroom outward. As we write this preface, a global pandemic has disrupted every corner of higher education, and obliterated what was almost always optimistically described as the "market" for academic jobs. In response, we—editors and contributors alike—argue for and demonstrate how the humanities PhD has, can, and must be reimaged.

A central argument of this volume is that we must not expect a return to a previous steady state. Nor should we want such a return. There is no return to the narrow and flawed ways of preparing doctoral candidates in the humanities. Our reimagining must take us forward, not simply reify the status quo. Our response to the current crises we're facing must also include a reckoning with the fact that the humanities PhD has been underutilized for decades. We believe in a more expansive application of the humanities PhD. The competencies and skills acquired during doctoral training equip humanities PhDs for the questions, problems, and opportunities of the twenty-first century in

unparalleled ways. And humanists are needed—now more than ever—in every possible field of endeavor.

We don't hold these beliefs in the abstract: each chapter in this volume focuses on practical ways the value and the applicability of the PhD can be realized, whether you are a PhD student, or whether you work with graduate students as a faculty member or administrator. *The Reimagined PhD* serves up stories of creative professional development programs, meaningful institutional and structural changes, innovative curricular reform, and inspiring digital humanities projects.

This volume builds on previous clarion calls for change in doctoral education.¹ In 2011, for example, James Grossman and Anthony Grafton's "No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History" proposed a cultural shift in graduate education, one that still needs to be fully realized. Noting that a narrow focus on training for tenure-track positions was a "disservice" to students, they pointed to the diverse careers outcomes for history PhDs, including "museum curators, archivists, historians in national parks, investment bankers, international business consultants, high school teachers, community college teachers, foundation officers, editors, journalists, [and] policy analysts at think tanks."² This range of outcomes pointed toward the fact that historians—like all PhDs in the humanities—acquire skills that equip them for a wide range of careers.

As the downward trend in the academic job market continues, more academics, graduate programs, and professional organizations have taken up the cause of reimagining doctoral education. Leonard Cassuto's *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* laid out fundamental flaws in the system and placed them in historical context. Cassuto's opening sentence asks "Is graduate school 'broken'?" The answer is a definitive "yes" if graduate school is meant to prepare students only to become tenure-track professors in jobs that are scarcer each year. As Cassuto noted, there is a profound need for graduate programs to "revamp their curricula, structures, and standards in a way that prepares today's graduate students for a wider range of employment, not just academia."³ In short, we begin to fix the mess when faculty, graduate students, and administrators of graduate programs adopt a revitalized *raison d'être* for twenty-first-century graduate education.

A reimagined PhD cannot be merely a response to the dearth of tenure-track positions. Within the new reality facing doctoral education, one of the more serious shifts that has to continue to occur is the way we judge success and failure. What if we looked at success for humanities PhDs differently? What if we learned to reimagine the ends and means of doctoral preparation so as to allow for more kaleidoscopic outcomes? In a landscape of reimagined PhD training we must attend more carefully to the cultures within higher education (often born and bred within academic departments) that reify the notion that there

is one prescribed path for those in doctoral programs—preparing for a tenure-track job—and that all other outcomes are deviations from this norm.

We are convinced that hewing to this limited view of what constitutes successful outcomes for PhDs subordinates and at times even elides the success stories that we see on a daily basis. Humanities PhDs have—despite being largely ignored by the departments from which they emerged—gone on to remarkable successes beyond the academy. They’ve reimagined themselves and—despite limited institutional support—they’ve found ways to deploy their training in new and exciting ways. Many contributors to this volume recognize this trajectory as their own.

Career diversity has been happening at the margins: now it needs to be mainstreamed. Until recently, with the emergence and growth of the Graduate Career Consortium and the collating of resources on sites like Imagine PhD, graduate students in the humanities prepared for careers beyond the academy in a kind of shadowy, parallel universe to their doctoral preparation. There were conferences, coursework, and dissertation drafting, and then there were the professional development seminars, the career preparation exercises, and alumni panelists discussing careers beyond academia. These worlds didn’t talk to each other, and each suffered because of this disconnect.

As we adopt new metrics for judging success, we must keep in mind that the changes that must come to doctoral education will work best if they make a collective, positive case for the value of the PhD, and do not merely collate a series of responses to the declines we’ve seen in tenure-track lines. It can’t be business as usual, with a few tweaks.

Doctoral education has virtues and flaws that are rooted in institution-specific programs, histories, and experiences. And each doctoral program—and each student—represents a chance to remake it anew. The reimagined PhD thus also requires us to abandon our urge to view flaws in our own graduate programs as solely or primarily the effect of broader systemic issues across higher education—issues that are assumed to be beyond our control. It is time to stop thinking of doctoral programs as cogs in the machine of a discipline and instead view them as distinctive instances that serve their PhD students using the particular resources at their disposal. The work of reimagining the PhD must be systemic and local, worked out in professional associations and particular departments at once, and producing effects that help each PhD find meaningful ways to take their training into the world. Even as we attend to national trends, examine disciplinary data trends, and argue for comprehensive, intra-institutional changes, the reimagined PhD begins at home—in the departments around which so much of the life of a graduate student is centered.

The reimagined PhD recognizes doctoral education as a tool in the hand of the user, not the creation of a tool to be used in a system. PhDs are not created for a specific purpose, namely the tenure track. PhDs must be equipped for a

variety of purposes, which they must have wide leeway to construct for themselves. For them, the PhD is not only training for a career. The experiences in graduate school constitute a small part, the beginning, of a long career. With this in mind we must reframe how we view the role of graduate education. Graduate study is professional experience, whether a student ultimately goes on to be a professor or inhabits the wider professional world.

Another part of this change is to see the divide between the academy and the world beyond the academy for what it is: a nonexistent binary. One seemingly innocuous way this manifests itself is in the way we describe the academy using prepositions that indicate some kind of spatial relation between the academy and other spaces. There are careers “in” academia and those “outside” of academia, while others are “on” or “off” the tenure track. Still others are “beyond”—a much better, but still spatially bound concept—the tenure track or academia itself.⁴

Collectively, the chapters that follow show that a range of collaborating stakeholders is what it takes to prepare the twenty-first-century PhD. *The Reimagined PhD* undercuts the insidious notion that career preparation is a zero-sum game in which time spent preparing for a range of careers detracts from professorial training. In doing so, this volume provides practical advice geared to help PhD students, faculty, and administrators incorporate professional skills into graduate training, build professional networks, and prepare PhDs for a range of careers.

Broadly speaking, this book is divided into two sections. The first five chapters make the case that embracing career diversity is essential: diverse career outcomes are a must if we are to have thriving graduate programs and graduate students.

In chapter 1, Robert Townsend draws on extensive statistical studies of the academic job market, bringing the post-2011 picture into focus. Specifically, he looks at the surplus of humanities PhDs on the market compared to the job openings posted annually. From this, it is clear that the job market has not shown signs of improvement. In fact, academic job prospects are possibly even dimmer since Grossman and Grafton’s initial article. The numbers—each connecting back to a particular doctoral student with a particular lived experience—highlight the necessity of reimagining the PhD.

Robert Weisbuch draws on wide-ranging administrative experience to outline how systemic improvement can become more attractive for students, faculty, and administrators alike. Building upon the vision set forth by Grossman and Grafton, in chapter 2 Weisbuch suggests ways to create consensus among traditionally recalcitrant constituencies. This consensus is possible through a buffet of customized approaches to broadening the professional outcomes of graduate programs, and each option can be aligned to institutional needs and philosophies.

In chapter 3, Michael McGandy—senior editor at Cornell University Press and editorial director of Three Hills Press—examines how academic publishers maintain the old prestige regime and why it is time to reconsider these dynamics. This reification of an influence imbalance happens when a first-year assistant professor at Harvard with a degree from Stanford is always preferred over the University of Michigan PhD working in a think tank or the associate professor at Towson State with a degree from Penn State. McGandy shares practical professional issues that have arisen with the waning (but not death) of the old prestige regime. Most examples are drawn from his experience as an editor, and these anecdotes illuminate trends, showing how gatekeepers assess quality, authority, and relevance, and point a way forward for a reimagined vision of these processes.

Leonard Cassuto and James M. Van Wyck, in chapter 4, envision how relationships between advisers and advisees can be reimagined. Given the abiding importance of the advisor-advisee relationship, these new practices and attitudes represent a key beachhead for changing graduate programs. Graduate program faculty are often anxious about what advice to give a student who wants to prepare for a range of careers. Cassuto and Van Wyck's advice is to create a graduate school experience that centers on graduate students every step of the way.

In the final chapter of the first part, Augusta Rohrbach discusses how to transition field-specific knowledge and activities into the larger research space. She argues that graduate students need to think of themselves as leaders. This important shift in mentality is difficult, she notes, because graduate students often feel disempowered. Drawing on her own career experiences within and beyond academia, Rohrbach shows the ways experiences open to all graduate students can translate in a variety of contexts.

The second section of this book continues to offer concrete suggestions: the last seven chapters highlight ways students, faculty, and administrators can actively cocreate the reimagined PhD and revamp doctoral preparation for the twenty-first century.

In chapter 6, Leanne M. Horinko and Jordan M. Reed point specifically to the experience of first-generation graduate students for inspiration. Drawing on their own experience as first-generation students, Horinko and Reed examine the nascent body of literature highlighting the isolating nature of this experience for graduate students. As it turns out, the profound challenges first-generation graduate students face are heightened versions of the challenges faced by the general graduate student population. Further, the authors highlight programs for first-generation students at Princeton University and the University of Washington as inspiration for graduate programs across the United States.

Joseph Vukov offers practical tips for jumpstarting (and then maintaining) a professional network in graduate school. In doing so, chapter 7 argues that building professional connections within and beyond the academy is not typically a matter of high-stakes networking. Rather, it is a matter of developing a set of practically oriented habits and social skills. In themselves, these habits and skills may seem inconsequential. But taken together and over time, they can help graduate students build a healthy professional network that will support them through graduate school and beyond.

In chapter 8, Melissa Dalgleish provides students, faculty, and administrators the information they need to find and assess the graduate student and post-doc professional development (GSPPD) programming offered at and outside their university. The chapter helps them make strategic decisions about their GSPPD learning and teaches them how to best advocate for more or different GSPPD when what is on offer is limited or lacking. These programs typically focus on transferable skills that are useful in faculty and careers beyond the academy and career development skills that can help students assess and explore their career preferences and future.

Karen Wilson and Stephen Aron outline the goals and results of a new kind of hybrid graduate seminar/workshop, “The Many Professions of History,” through two iterations and document its reception by (and influence on) graduate students. The bulk of chapter 9 discusses how the course’s focus and organization provide a viable approach for PhD programs in history and other fields to foster career exploration while enhancing students’ understanding of the wide applicability of their skill sets. Offering an example of broadening the horizons and networks of graduate students, the chapter presents what happens when students are asked to engage with actual and potential roles of PhDs in twenty-first-century society while collaborating on an applied research project.

Vernita Burrell compels us to consider the ways that reimagining graduate education—and preparing humanities graduate students for a range of careers—requires a reimagination of the graduate pedagogical training. Incorporating her experiences as a community college professor, she argues in chapter 10 that programs that train PhD students in the humanities to teach should not expect them to end up at similar institutions but should instead create bespoke, student-centered pedagogical tracks that align with individual student goals and alumni outcomes—within and beyond academia. She reminds us that pedagogical training in graduate school need not be a homogenous set of activities that prepare humanities PhDs for university-level classroom but rather can be composed of modules focused on discrete skills needed by each PhD, regardless of career outcome. When we consider graduate pedagogical training in the humanities in this way, she argues, it will best serve our graduate students—and the broad array of audiences they’ll engage post-PhD.

In chapter 11, William Fenton takes stock of the digital humanities (DH) job market and considers how graduate students might best prepare for a career in this evolving space. First, he describes the state of the DH market by canvassing higher education job boards, speaking with higher education experts, and interviewing DH leaders. After, he shows how DH creates candidates with skills transmissible to tenure-track and nonacademic positions within the academy. Fenton further shows how a DH portfolio can enable candidates to translate their academic work for potential careers at think tanks, consulting firms, galleries, libraries, archives, and museums.

Alexandra Lord explores how students can use internships, work for academic organizations, research, and classwork to build both a CV for an academic position and a resume for a careers beyond the academy. The final chapter also explores how students can navigate within academic culture to determine the type of career they, not their advisors or peers, want. This has ramifications for not just the students themselves but also the faculty and administrators who guide the mission and structure of graduate study at their respective universities.

The stakes are high for graduate students professionally and the institution of graduate study more generally. Ultimately, the benefits of a reimagined PhD transcend the academy itself. Cassuto observed in the closing pages of *The Graduate School Mess* that “we can advocate better for our vocation if humanists work throughout society, not just in universities.” He saw a need for “a new higher education ethic.”⁵ That ethic informs the reimagined PhD that we know can and must emerge as career diversity and wide-ranging doctoral preparation become the norm for the twenty-first century. We hope students, faculty, and administrators alike find inspiration in the chapters that follow and then reimagine graduate education both locally and globally. The time is now, and the stakes are high.

Notes

- 1 See American Historical Association, “Career Diversity for Historians” (n.d.), <https://www.historians.org/career-diversity>; Connected Academics (n.d.), <https://connect.mla.hcommons.org/>.
- 2 Anthony T. Grafton and Jim Grossman, “No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History,” *Perspectives on History*, October 2011, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2011/no-more-plan-b>.
- 3 Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 4 James M. Van Wyck, “Academia Is Not a Container.” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 2, 2020.
- 5 Cassuto, *Graduate School Mess*.

The Reimagined PhD