



The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It

Cassuto, Leonard
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Book Review

Tags: graduate education | mentoring graduate students | teaching graduate students



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I could not put this book down, and I strongly recommend that anyone concerned about higher education in America take it up.

In this volume, Leonard Cassuto expands on topics he explores in his *Chronicle of Higher Education* column (“The Graduate Advisor”) and integrates them into an argument to reconceive the role and nature of teaching in graduate schools for the benefit of graduate students and higher education in general.

What Cassuto means by “reconceiving” teaching at the graduate school level is something more fundamental than changing styles or methods of pedagogy. He wants faculty to help students succeed, personally and professionally, by seeing careers outside academia as worthy of professional pursuit. This is not, Cassuto repeats, a betrayal of graduate training, rather it is the retrieval of an earlier model of graduate education that envisioned doctorates serving in a broad variety of professional positions.

In this, Cassuto differs from common approaches to “fix the mess,” such as calls to expand the ranks of professionally preferred and economically sustainable positions by converting part-time, non-tenurable ones to full-time, tenurable ones (for example, American Association of University Professors 2015-16 Annual Report on “The Economic Status of the Profession”). Cassuto argues, persuasively, that this will not come to pass. The days of every freshly minted PhD stepping into a full-time, tenure-track job belongs to the past; specifically, the period between the end of WWII and the close of the 1960s. In the history of American higher education woven throughout the book, Cassuto establishes that the unique circumstances of

that period led to those halcyon days for those aspiring to the professorship. Changes in demographics and policies (educational and public) force us to abandon hope of this returning and instead imagine, again, a more expansive job market for those with doctorates.

Towards this end, Cassuto recommends that from first contact with a prospective student through every stage of advising, faculty speak openly of the dismal academic market and approvingly of “alt-ac” careers. The chapters are arranged around the “life-cycle” of a graduate student (Admissions, Classwork, The Comprehensive Exams, Advising, Degrees, Professionalism, and The Job Market Reconceived) and offer concrete recommendations on how to adjust each of these phases in ways that will serve graduate students, graduate education, and by extension, undergraduate education and public life. The discrete changes he advocates (such as ways to reduce time to degree completion and alternate models of comprehensive exams and dissertations) are not original, but situating them within an enlarged concept of the possible uses of a doctorate is.

An expanded concept of the potential purposes of the doctoral degree requires a significant change of attitude among graduate school faculty; they must sincerely support, and at times initiate, student embrace of career paths that do not resemble their own. Jobs in high schools, in business, in government, and so forth, must be accorded the same respect as full-time, tenure-track positions. This attitude shift will be, I venture, more challenging than Cassuto acknowledges.

Cassuto is correct that this shift requires faculty to grasp, and leverage, the oversized role they play in their students’ lives. Interviews and anecdotes poignantly remind readers that the trust and admiration graduate students extend to their advisors may result in students shying from decisions that are in their own personal and professional interests for fear of disappointing their advisors. The prejudice that only a career in academia is worthy of doctorates exacts a tremendous toll on students. They sacrifice years, foregoing earnings and retirement savings, while accumulating debt and enduring personal and professional limbo. Cassuto rightly characterizes this as a “moral” crisis demanding action.

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