

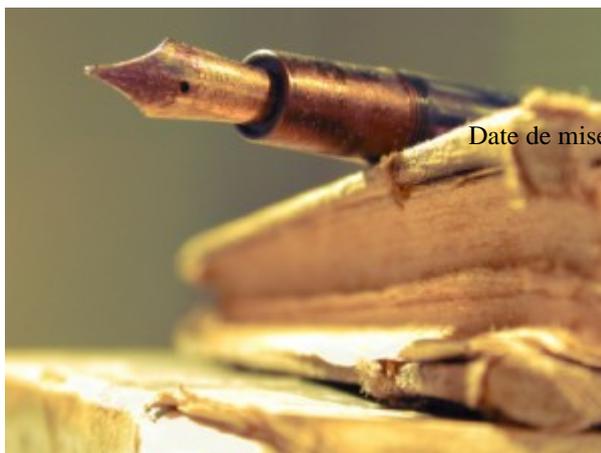


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The Radical New Humanities Ph.D.

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Description :

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Collectif PAPERA

The [warning](http://www.mla.org/blog?topic=143) [http://www.mla.org/blog?topic=143] last year from Russell Berman, who at the time was president of the Modern Language Association, was apocalyptic : If doctoral programs in the humanities do not reduce the time taken to graduate, they will become unaffordable and face extinction.

Now, Berman has taken his ideas home. At Stanford University, where he is a professor of comparative literature and directs the German studies program, he and five other professors at the university have produced [a paper](https://www.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/cgi-bin/web/events/humanities-education-focal-group-discussion-future-humanities-phd-stanford) [https://www.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/cgi-bin/web/events/humanities-education-focal-group-discussion-future-humanities-phd-stanford] that calls for a major rethinking at Stanford — a reduction in the time taken to graduate by Ph.D. candidates in the humanities, and preparing them for careers within and beyond the academy. The professors at Stanford aren't just talking about shaving a year or so off doctoral education, but cutting it down to four or five years — roughly half the current time for many humanities students.

The Stanford professors aren't alone in pushing this kind of thinking. The Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, for example, is already testing some ideas, and so is the University of Minnesota. The initiatives at all three places, whether proposed or in its infancy, involve changing academic culture and university policies to refashion the humanities Ph.D. The University of Colorado at Boulder recently announced a four-year Ph.D. in German studies, consistent with the principles being discussed at Stanford, although the Colorado effort applies to one small program while the Stanford and Minnesota initiatives are much broader.

The Stanford document proposes a scenario where students decide on a career plan — academic or nonacademic — they want to embark on by the end of their second-year of graduate study, file the plan with their department, and then prepare projects and dissertation work that would support that career. Similarly, departments have to help students make realistic career choices at the end of the second year of graduate study, and advise students regularly. "...[T]hey should aim to balance academic training in a particular discipline and field with the provision of broader professional perspectives that may extend beyond the traditional academic setting," the document said.

This would represent a dramatic shift from the current norm, whereby many humanities grad students say that their entire program is designed for an academic career, and that they only start to consider other options when they are going on the job market — a bit late to shape their preparation for nonacademic options.

According to the document, one way to speed up time to degree would be to include "four-quarter" support for students instead of unfunded summers, currently the standard for many humanities Ph.D. programs. Gabriella Safran, a professor of Slavic languages and literature at Stanford, who also worked with Berman to create the proposal, said the key might be to anticipate when Ph.D. candidates are getting bogged down and respond to the issue earlier. "A better use of time might be to use the summers more effectively. Right now, I think there are too many unfunded summers when students don't make progress," she said.

Berman, who said that the recent document was mostly an effort directed at administrators to "reform degree trajectories," believes that time to degree can be reduced to four or five years. "The study of the humanities need to be accessible and cheap. And we have to become more transparent about our placement records," he said.

The document said that departments should have suitable plans in terms of curriculum, examination schedule, and dissertation that will help speed up time to degree. "Scholarly fields have widened, and added a lot of expectations," Berman said.

He emphasized the need to amplify success stories of students who have ventured beyond the academic world. "We

should be telling all their stories," said Berman, who is also chairing a MLA task-force on the future of the doctorate in the languages and literature.

David Damrosch, a professor of comparative literature at Harvard University, said that Ph.D. students and professors in his department have been thinking more carefully about coursework. "Very often, students drift for extended periods," he said. Frequent meetings with dissertation committee members are helpful, he said. "All this result in fewer incompletes in coursework ... and more consistent progress in the dissertations," said Damrosch.

"In anthropological terms, academia is more of a shame culture than a guilt culture : you may feel some private guilt at letting a chapter go unread for two or three months, but a much stronger force would be the public shame you'd feel at coming unprepared to a meeting with two of your colleagues," he said. "It's also ultimately a labor-saving device for the faculty as well as the student, as the dissertation can proceed sooner to completion and with less wasted effort for all concerned...." With frequent meetings, the students doesn't lose time on "unproductive lines of inquiry" or "tangential suggestions tossed out by a single adviser," Damrosch said.

A two-hour oral exam, meetings each semester with "dissertation-stage" students and their committee members, and clearer feedback for students are part of the graduate program in the comparative literature department now. "We also introduced a monthly forum for students to share and discuss their own work ; and an ambitious series of professional development talks, on everything from article submission to dissertation planning to alternative careers," Damrosch said.

The University of Minnesota is also taking a fresh look at its Ph.D. programs. Henning Schroeder, vice provost and dean of the graduate school at the university, said that professors and administrators have been discussing how to give the Ph.D. a narrower focus. "How much coursework do students need before they engage in scholarly research ?" he asked.

Getting students into a "research mode" earlier helps save time, Schroeder said. "The question is also, what can we do at the administrative level ?" he said. The university has promoted discussion on best practices on advising, and also how the "prelim-oral" — a test students take before writing their dissertations - can delay research. The university now lets students get credit for research work before the oral examination, in an effort to allow for more flexibility in curriculums and to reduce time to degree.

Debra Satz, senior associate dean for the humanities at Stanford and a professor of philosophy, said that too many students end up spending six to eight years in the Ph.D. program. "There is no correlation between taking a longer time to degree and getting a job in an academic humanities department," she said. And ultimately, she said, how can the length of time taken by a Ph.D. be justified if the person has to reinvent or retool at the end to be employed ?

The discussions should not only be about new career paths and the time taken to graduate, but about how to implement change without affecting the quality of the programs, Satz said. "Many ideas have been floated : creating paths for our humanities Ph.D.s to high school teaching, creating paths to the high technology industry, thinking about careers in public history, and so on," she said.

And while it is too early to see definite results from these institutions, many believe that the timing is right.

Anaïs Saint-Jude, director of the [BiblioTech](http://bibliotech.stanford.edu/) [http://bibliotech.stanford.edu/] program - which seeks to bridge the gulf between doctoral humanities candidates at Stanford and jobs outside academe, including those in the tech world — believes that all this is happening because this is a pivotal moment in higher education. "It was kindling that was ready to be ignited.... We started talking about it, and it created such momentum that we were able to create a

veritable program," Saint-Jude said, referring to the BiblioTech program that began in 2011. Part of the program's vision includes trying to change the mindset of academics and non-academics alike. "It is about garnering the trust of industry leaders, and trying to break apart and think differently," she said. The program's annual conference last week included venture capitalists as well as executives from Google and Overstock.com.

Jennifer Summit, a professor of English at Stanford who also worked on the document with Berman, said graduate programs have been reluctant to try out new ideas because no one wants to take risks. And that's mainly because the impact on graduate students is unknown. "It has to be part of an effort not isolated to Stanford ; we have to have serious conversations across the spectrum," she said.

These discussions tend to spike whenever the job market is bad, said Robert Townsend, deputy director of the American Historical Association. He agreed with the general ideas outlined in the Stanford document, with the exception of the proposal to reduce time to degree. "That seems to me to run contrary to the notion of creating a more open and diverse set of paths for doctoral students. I also have the sense that expectations for an acceptable dissertation generally require about four years to properly ferment and develop - at least in history," he said.

Post-scriptum :

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