

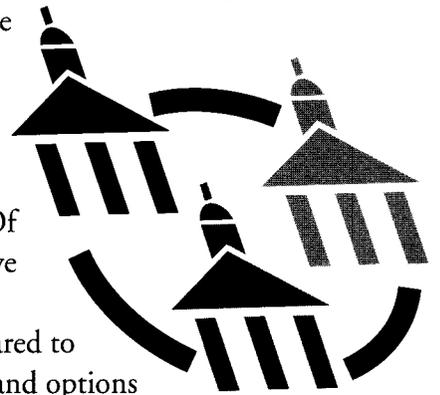
THE PUBLIC SCHOLAR WHO NEVER WAS

By James Norment

Earlier editions of the *Exchange* argue that the relationship between the public and the academy is in serious disrepair. I propose that we cannot begin to understand and repair the public/academy relationship until we consider more thoroughly the sort of graduate education scholars provide to graduate students. My aim in this essay is to draw attention to a small but vitally important slice of that relationship: how graduate education neglects the development of what is called in this *Exchange* a “public scholar.”

I argue in this article that the process of applying to and matriculating in graduate school lacks an internal integrity that allows admissions committees and applicants to confront the issues of public scholarship. I conclude with a personal observation that should prompt you to ask of yourself, your colleagues, and — perhaps most important — your students: How was I prepared in graduate school to engage with the public? How can professional academics collaborate with graduate students or junior faculty in ways that encourage public problem solving, engagement, and deliberation? Am I willing to admit that universities belong in the public life of my community and that we professors must be willing to be shaped by our public engagement? These are serious questions. In the final analysis, for me at least, they help judge the value of graduate education and the degree of honesty we exercise when we claim a public-civic mission for colleges and universities.

It is not easy for me to turn my back on graduate study in the social sciences. Of the three sorts of graduate education I have seriously considered — theology, law, and political science — the latter always appeared to offer me the most excitement, challenge, and options in choosing how and where I might continue my life’s journey.



The powerful and awesome notions of research, teaching, intellectual discovery, and adding value to society have drawn me toward advanced graduate study and an academic career.

Yet graduate programs consistently avoid encouraging applicants and students from considering their future relationship with the public. If applications are designed to assess aptitude, intelligence, and commitment to a particular field, then they should also ask tough questions about how future scholars see their future as responsible members of a democratic society.

Most college catalogs contain a statement similar to this one: Higher education seeks to “nourish habits, understandings, and aspirations essential to a full and satisfying and estimable human life. . . .” Yet these words appear stale, tired, and foreign to many of us who pursue a career in higher education. Instead, we focus almost exclusively on the high-minded notions of research, appropriate methodology, and theory, as well as the day-to-day struggle for funding, to produce top-ranked literature, and departmental parlaying of power and privilege. Some academics suggest graduate students should be trained exclusively in such a marketplace of ideas. It is, after all, the predominate culture of academic life.

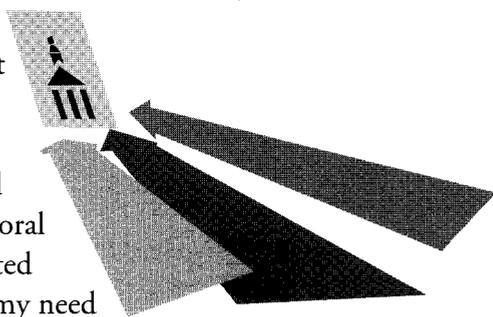
I demur. Instead, we should bundle the critical and analytical spirit of intellectual life with a training that is at least as rigorous in pushing graduate students to confront their future as members of the public. University life holds a special position in training for life, a position we can call “civic” or “liberal” education. Colleges and universities do not simply have a civic mission, instead the “university *is* a civic mission”.¹ This civic mission is rooted in the creation of a “democracy of words (knowledge) and a democracy of deeds (the democratic state).” College life, therefore, is not one limited to the self-referential world of scholarship, nor is it limited to vocational teaching. These notions might be true of traditional undergraduate education, but they are afforded few corners in many doctoral graduate programs.

I am not suggesting that graduate programs should confer Ph.D.s in the liberal arts instead of degrees symbolizing expertise grounded in original, often highly specialized, research. I am, however, arguing that graduate programs should consider the implications of an educational experience that emphasizes an unhealthy initiation into the realms of departmental politics,

sequestered literature production, and a divorce from the collaborative spirit of liberal education. What good does intellectual discovery do when students are caught in the mire of esoteric and internal preoccupations of, for instance, tenure and methodology? In an age when the disconnected public regularly and seriously advocates major changes in higher education, what good are indecipherable “academic” discussions held not in *conjunction with* but *instead of* public engagement?

We need only a cursory review of any academic journal collection in a university library to see that most academic scholarship is for academics only. This is not news. But what is often forgotten is that the roots of the academic mind-set lie in the graduate training. The socialization process of graduate school reproduces scholars. Thus, if scholars aren't producing public-minded scholarship, it is doubtful that their advanced students will be. The essentially medieval practice of apprenticeship to an expert mentor may — when it works — produce another expert or even a great teacher. However, such a system cannot regularly produce scholars who are interested in and even committed to being engaged with the public.

Such graduate program practices lack an internal integrity when it comes to fostering public scholars. That is, my search for a graduate program has revealed that professors consistently fail to systematically reflect and act on the what is right and what is wrong about their practice of training future teacher-scholars. In my own experience, I have applied, interviewed, and been accepted at a wide range of doctoral programs. During my search, I expected potential professors to resonate with my need to participate in the public life of my new community. Some I interviewed misinterpreted my intentions, indicating that departmental politics should be left to “second or third years.” Others were surprised to find such notions in someone who, they thought, should be entering a period of deep isolation from the “real world.” Others were more insightful, but brutally honest. They saw no place for such dalliances in public decision making, politics, whatever the circumstance might be, because the stan-



dards of academic integrity and freedom were — once and for all — the overriding concerns of a professional academic. I found one experience especially disorienting. While visiting a large private school in a large university city, I was enthralled with the kind demeanor of the faculty and their concern for theoretical issues surrounding politics and society. Yet I found no evidence that their ideas met action. Indeed, if action did come, one graduate student told me, then it would be clearly subordinated to theory and exercised at your own risk.

Some professional academics might think me somewhat naive for entering the fiercely competitive graduate application process expecting to see the “good” and “civic” side of specialized education. Such an observation, however, misses my point. Instead, my point is that graduate training from the very beginning creates an inconsistency in our logic and avoids essential tensions in personal and public reflection on why graduate students want to become teacher-researchers and what they should do with their privileged positions as scholars. Such reflection is a vital part of graduate education if a start is made to fuse expertise with public purpose. If we cannot agree, then my hopes of deliberating with thoughtful people on how we can each combine our life’s work with our community cannot be addressed in advanced graduate training.

My concern, however, moves beyond a graduate student’s failure to wrestle with issues of purpose and value beyond the discipline. I see a growing number of potential graduate students, including myself, who are actually driven away from an academic career because graduate programs foreclose early on opportunities to develop a relationship with the public that allows us to be simultaneously part of a discipline yet also shaped by deliberation with others outside the college walls.

For example, in my own chosen field of political science, I have had both passable and excellent courses from a wide range of professors. From the perspective of public engagement, the worst of these professors has openly derided the ability of the public to inform debate, much less worth the trouble to become involved in, either personally or professionally. The best of these professors has struggled with how to become involved. The trouble is that the conscientious professors I know at graduate training schools must

work to overcome their own biases formed in graduate school. In addition, their disciplines stymie efforts to build a deliberative relationship with the public. One of my professors remarked that it is unfortunate, but probably true, that if an entire conference of social scientists were blown up, the public, which academics claim to strengthen, would hardly notice. Novice scholars like myself, who are excited by both the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of a genuine relationship with the public, are not asked to produce public-minded scholarship, participate in public discourse, or explore how the academic realm can contribute to a healthy deliberative public.

I consider myself very fortunate to have found an unusual graduate program in which to begin my advanced academic training. This graduate program offered only a master's degree in government. The faculty hoped to provide a few students the opportunity to explore graduate work without the long-term commitment to a doctoral program while also providing, over one or two years, the grounding necessary for the highest performance in fine Ph.D. programs. Having completed that program, I now know it was a safe haven for determining how I might judge doctoral programs. I am now able to ask, with some disciplinary competence, the usual questions about courses, theories, and placement. More important, though, are the questions I can ask of the scholars with whom I will learn: How serious are you in working to fuse your life's work with your community? How does your graduate training system discourage students from integrating their course work and original research with public concerns, relationships, or information? To ignore questions like these seems a waste for the very few individuals privileged enough to work with their minds and have some influence over the minds of others, not the least of which are students and the public.

I began this essay by saying it was difficult for me to turn my back on graduate work. In reality it appears that the system of graduate education has turned its back on me and my fellow graduate students who search for the richer notion of specialized training and public engagement.

Will the academic status quo prevail or will university "civic learning centers," redirected graduate advisors, and a constant dissatisfaction among graduate students shape the future of

public-scholar training? Ultimately, of course, colleges and universities can successfully enter a public life only with scholars who are not content with the academic status quo. The current socializing orientation of graduate education discourages those students who want to enhance and extend their relationships with the public. If such like-minded graduate students continue to be driven away from academic life, is there any hope or reason to expect public scholars to develop and survive in our colleges and universities?

References

1 Benjamin Barber. "The Civic Mission of the University," in *Higher Education and the Practice of Democratic Politics*. Edited by Bernard Murchland. Dayton, Ohio: The Kettering Foundation, 1991.

ACADEMIC PROFESSIONALISM AND THE NEW PUBLIC MINDEDNESS

By Maria M. Farland

My department at Johns Hopkins University is conducting a job search for an open-rank, interdisciplinary position in the humanities. Because the position is broadly defined, we have received nearly 700 applications, in fields ranging from history of medicine to sociology, from persons as diverse as department chairs at UC Berkeley to insurance adjusters in Florida. The sheer number and diversity of these applications is staggering. To some readers, the plethora of applications is evidence of a stagnant job market. As professional organizations like the Modern Language Association convene special forums on the crisis in the job market, and many educators call for a reduction in graduate programs, job searches in which there are five, six, even seven hundred applicants, are no longer unusual.

But as a reader of these applications, what has impressed me most is the overwhelming number of applicants who stress their interest in the public. For example, one applicant, who is completing a Ph.D. in French history at Columbia, writes: "My commitment to liberal education in public life is evident in my participation in a new group of scholars, Educators for the Public Sector. Our work stresses the importance of the public sphere for educators involved in higher education." He wrote enthusiastically of the group's work in New York City raising awareness about the public in area colleges and universities. Another applicant for the job, a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy, writes of her involvement in convening public forums and emphasizes its relevance and importance to her involvement with the public to her role as scholar and teacher. Viewing her professional scholarship and her role as a citizen as compatible pursuits, this young woman urged the committee to consider the importance of preparing undergraduates for their future roles in public life. Across a wide range of disciplines, young scholars in particular have a renewed interest in