

California and Career Diversity: Adjusting the Aims of the History PhD

DECADES AFTER THE WIDESPREAD recognition of the crisis of history and the humanities, resolutions continue to elude scholars. Frustration with the academic job market accompanies each successive generation of historians, and every year, university departments confront the threat of slashed budgets and declining student enrollment. The remedies are often equally bleak. Some institutions reduced doctoral admittance rates by half, and newly minted history PhDs often circulate for years through the adjunct labor pool, holding fast to the ever-elusive hope of a tenure track job post. However, there now appears a spark of hope in this otherwise “Dark Age.” The Career Diversity for Historians initiative, facilitated by the American Historical Association, provides the one of the most viable, working solutions to this long-term issue. And it begins with graduate education.

Funded through the Mellon Foundation, this initiative provides support for a number of doctoral-granting history programs to develop and integrate professionalization opportunities into their existing frameworks of graduate education. The success of its initial “pilot phase” at four research universities in 2014 prompted the awarding of additional funding to expand the scope of the initiative. This year, the AHA awarded twenty history departments a two-year Career Diversity Implementation Grant in order to re-examine the culture and application of graduate education at each institution. Among these grant recipients include three University of California campuses – Berkeley, Davis, and Irvine – whose aim of reimagining the professional possibilities of the discipline complements the well-established public history programs at other UC schools. The majority of these twenty institutions will not begin implementing their respective proposals until Fall 2018, and thus details surrounding each university’s specific initiatives will not be available until next year. Nevertheless, the general aims of the implementation grant focus on

developing pedagogical and professionalization seminars and programming, creating internship opportunities for current PhD students, and adjusting graduate curriculum to meet the evolving standards of learning, outreach, and civic engagement.

The support of both the AHA and Mellon Foundation legitimizes the interest in “career diversity” by facilitating conversations that promote broad and diverse applications of the historical profession. These series of initiatives promote the value of historical work through a reassessment of how graduate education endows a wide array of pedagogical and professional skill sets. In his numerous publications on the Career Diversity initiative, AHA Executive Director James Grossman poignantly observes that one should resist viewing the history PhD as “vocational” training for a professorial career in the academy. Instead, he encourages history departments to consider how a reemphasis and expansion of the skills developed throughout a graduate education – such as budgeting, research, oral communication, short and long-term project management, interdisciplinary cooperation – might translate into intellectually satisfying employment both within and beyond the academy.

According to the AHA’s newly released “Where Historians Work,” a 2018 interactive database outlining career outcomes of recent history PhD alumni from 161 research universities, a significant percentage of historians find employment beyond the professoriate. Nearly a quarter of history PhDs work for non-profits, government organizations, higher education administration, and other various positions in the public and private sectors. Still, sixty-six percent of graduates enter into a wide range of teaching careers, tenure track or not, thus prompting senior scholars to consider how to actively integrate innovative approaches to pedagogy into graduate education. Both secondary and higher education are undergoing rapid transformations, and forthcoming generations of historians must be well equipped to meet the challenges of teaching in the modern age.

Arguably, the most valuable aspect of the AHA’s Career Diversity for Historians Initiative is that, for the first time in what feels like ages, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. The conversations surrounding graduate education and the future of our field are transitioning from melancholy musings to hopeful imaginings about what lies in store for the next generation of historians. Though still cautiously optimistic, I readily embrace the AHA’s newfound emphasis of the wide-ranging possibilities and redefinition of what it means to be a historian in the modern age, and I encourage our readers to do the same.