

Book Reviews

Dependent Variables, or, Can Graduate Education Be Saved?

Re-Imagining Doctoral Writing, by Cecile Badenhorst, Brittany Amell, and James Burford. WAC Clearinghouse/University Press of Colorado, 2021. 400 pp.

The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education, by Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch. Johns Hopkins UP, 2021. 294 pp.

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For the last four decades, humanities faculty have been in a troubled marriage with graduate education. This relationship has endured many arguments, much counseling, and regular threats of breakup peppered by fraught reconciliations. Stakeholders in grad programs find themselves hoping that maybe this time with the right tweaks and compromises, their programs—and by extension their students' educational and career outcomes—will change. Yet in practice, these hopes are often dashed, since in academia, “everyone believes that it’s someone else who has to change,” and more generally, “academics don’t know how to end things” (Cassuto and Weisbuch 36, 102).

Discourse on graduate education in the humanities mirrors the availability of post-graduate academic employment for degree candidates, as illustrated in historical data plotted by the MLA (“Report”). Though other metrics are important—such as time to degree, and rate of failure or withdrawal, since nationwide, 50% of all PhD candidates do not complete their degree—obtaining an academic position, particularly tenure-track, is the simplest metric by which we measure whether our programs are in crisis. In the early to mid-1990s, job ads for English studies (of all types/ranks) in the *MLA Job List* averaged from 1,000-1,200 a year. In 1997-1998, the year I received my PhD, that number shot up to over 1,121, increasing to a high of 1,826 in 2007-2008, and falling back to 1,100 in 2009-2010. In 2019-2020, the most recent year for which data are available, that number was 828 (“Report”).

When viewed longitudinally, these data chart a volatile line, the dips of which coincide with economic trends (e.g., the 2008 recession) and the general direction of which continues to drop precipitously over the last decade without clear sign of another recovery. Of course, readers know there are many reasons for this, chiefly the disinvestment in higher education (i.e., public colleges and universities) by state governments, which reduces hiring and operational budgets; the impulse by university leadership toward so-called flexibility and

efficiency measures that makes tenure-track positions seem a poor long-term investment, cause the proliferation of non-tenure track faculty in order to facilitate quick programmatic growth with lower costs; overall “workforce reductions” that disproportionately target faculty in humanities, such as those at Emporia State University in Fall 2022 (Moody); and the enrollment trends of undergraduate students away from liberal arts and toward engineering, business, and computer science, which affects humanities department course offerings and, in turn, who is hired to teach them.

Something, we know, has to change. And faculty—being the good researchers we are—understand discovery and change involves research. We spend years reading and note-taking for writing projects. We rely on peer review to tell us whether our hypotheses and conclusions are sound. And we test our theories at conferences and workshops before we publish them. Yet where graduate education is concerned, many of us at institutions where PhD programs are the fabric of department workloads are inherently resistant to such diligent processes toward change. Moreover, we often focus on “the pragmatics of ‘what works’ in doctoral writing policies, practice, and pedagogy” rather than what needs to change for the future (Badenhorst et al. 6). More pointedly, we are afraid of what would happen if the research indicated that graduate programs should be dramatically altered, or even eliminated. As a tenured faculty member and current school chair who has taught at five universities, four of which have doctoral programs, I have yet to be part of a department that wants to dismantle or reinvent its graduate programs, regardless of how dismal the various data points. I doubt I ever will be. Indeed, the work of what we might call academic entrepreneurs (for example, Karen Kelsky’s *The Professor Is In*) is predicated on graduate faculty being frozen in this fear-motivated inertia. Such inertia creates an external business opportunity to address the problem from without, rather than within, and does little to help change what caused the systemic problems in the first place.

All of this is not to say that our problems with graduate education in the humanities have gone unnoticed by those involved in decision-making processes on our campuses. A sea of strong critiques and immodest proposals embedded in articles, essays, and books on educating, training, and mentoring graduate students began to manifest just before and after Y2K, particularly regarding English department practices. These were part and parcel of recognition of the so-called nationwide humanities crisis and responses to it, from specific career advice for graduate students facing disciplines under attack (i.e., Semanza’s *Graduate Study for the Twenty-First Century*) to the corporatization of the university and humanities’ fate within it (i.e., Donoghue’s *The Last Professors*). Such critiques were baseline assumptions in the emergence of a new field, Critical University Studies (see Newfield’s *Unmaking the Public University* and *How We*

Wrecked Public Universities). Yet such work often has been difficult to accomplish on the local level, as Andrew Hoberek's early critique of English graduate program design in "What Graduate Students Need" presciently observed. In his estimation, "the profession operates under a falsely constrained notion of what constitutes its work" (53) and therefore, for graduate faculty, "our major pedagogical role becomes letting our students alone" (58). I see little change on either of these fronts in the two decades since Hoberek's article appeared.

Still, the right questions are being asked: Are we admitting more students than we can place in teaching positions? Are we being appropriately inclusive about who we admit, and are we using the right measures to construct our graduate student cohorts? Are we designing our programming to be intellectually rigorous and relevant to twenty-first century socioeconomic realities? Are we evaluating the structure and import of long-standing core requirements, such as the comprehensive exam and the dissertation? And finally, are we moving dynamically with the changing shape of our discipline(s), or are we reproducing our individual, historical conceptions of the PhD, developed in the proverbial salad days of our own graduate student youth?

These make up the controlling questions that drive Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch's inquiries in *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education* and Cecile Badenhorst, Brittany Amell, and James Burford's *Re-Imagining Doctoral Writing*. Cassuto and Weisbuch's study—the more comprehensive and probing of these two books, and a useful primer for the era of disciplinary panic that I glossed above—is a detailed examination of how graduate education in the United States has been built as a system of benign neglect, a sedimentary bedrock of layered assumptions and practices, which we must take apart and reassemble into something more useful. Badenhorst, Amell, and Burford's collection is comparatively a set of micro-examinations from twenty-four contributors who illustrate how graduate writing, as the center of graduate education itself, is taught, produced, and disseminated, and how it has been re-interpreted to positive ends in programs across the globe. (The book gives significant attention to non-US programs, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, but also in Canada, England, Japan, Bangladesh, and Denmark.) Its focus is both theoretical and pragmatic, as it hones in on graduate writing as means and opportunity for graduate students to construct a creative and forward-facing scholarly identity.

I see three possible ways to read these two books as a set. If one sees the books as a complementary pairing of investigations into graduate training, one might read *The New PhD* first, in order to fully consider its recommendations for programmatic components common to most humanities programs, and then move to *Re-Imagining Doctoral Writing* for more specific examples of how central writing tasks (exams, dissertation) might be viewed more capaciously.

One might also read these two books by first asking how the various formations of graduate writing—given the anxiety-producing notion of publish or perish—are employed to productive ends in programs outside the United States, and how those formations might inform what is possible in US graduate programs. Yet another way of reading these books in tandem would be to ask: What is uniquely problematic about graduate education in the US, and how do those problems define our limitations as well as possibilities when taken against the diversity of international program design and goals, and other bold undertakings, described in *Re-Imagining*?

Regardless of how these books may be paired, both make clear that change is a slow process, but is in many cases possible. However, change relies on recognizing the intersecting agents that cause dysfunction in the first place. The title of my review thus references not only the wise advice column of *Ladies Home Journal*, but also a key scientific concept employed in Cassuto and Weisbuch's larger argument. By definition, a dependent variable is one whose value is dependent upon the value of another. It cannot stand on its own; it will be altered and will morph based on the change in relation to it, or following others' interaction with it. Cassuto and Weisbuch use this concept to describe graduate teaching which, in their estimation, "has been viewed as. . . an offshoot of faculty research rather than a pursuit in its own right" (205). They raise this argument to illustrate the problem at the root of graduate education, namely that we don't teach seminars or engage in other pedagogical moments with intentionality, but instead, treat such occasions as a conveyance of our own scholarly interests and pursuits. Thus, both of these books ask (though *Re-Imagining* far more specifically): if we cannot take seriously the need to diversify and scaffold how graduate students are taught to write, research, critique, and engage with their field—something readers here know is at least a central feature of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies programs (RCWS)—how can we say that we are training them at all?

Cassuto and Weisbuch are acutely aware of the various attempts at national and local reform that have occurred by virtue of their past local and national leadership roles involving graduate education. Indeed, their book is chiefly organized by establishing the relative successes and failures of a slew of past reform efforts, followed by a closer, advisory examination of how micro or macro future reforms might focus on key aspects of graduate education that avoid myopic and nostalgic renderings of the past, in order to focus on pressing futures. *The New PhD* is divided into ten reader-friendly chapters plus a conclusion, postscript, and notes. The authors move readers through recent large-scale reforms to broad areas for future reform backed by a "practical guide" to getting started (chapter two). They focus on admissions and attrition, student support and time to degree, curricular revision and the comprehensive exam,

advising, teaching and pedagogy, degree configurations and purposes, public scholarship, and finally, a call to action that avoids prescription.

Along the way, their argument remains consistent: The PhD should be a scholarly degree, and it should continue, but it can also be valuable training for non-academic career pursuits. The PhD should not be one-size-fits-all; they advocate in numerous places for program assessment, and for engaging faculty in meaningful, local research into their programs. Notably, the recommendations in the book are not field-specific but instead broadly and generally framed for the humanities, with some spotlights on work in individual disciplines (such as history). Central to their argument is that regardless of where they are or what they require, PhD programs should have clear goals that take into account national landscapes for the work of graduates, generously defined, and that evolve with the times.

As someone who has both taught graduate students, directed dissertations in RCWS, and also helped to create graduate programs across disciplines when I worked as an associate dean, I was impressed by not only the scope of the book's study, but also its attention to the contributing factors to graduate student outcomes that we are often loath to discuss. For example, the problem of limiting admissions to a smaller cohort (and to more elite institutions) may exacerbate the social class divisions already present in PhD programs and in higher education generally (hypothesizing that those who make it to the top of the applicant heap will have the most resources under their belt). I was also persuaded by their extensive examples of how PhD students might employ their teaching skills outside traditional academic settings—in the process subtly emphasizing how history as a field has widened its view of graduate training in ways that eclipse our traditional methodologies in English departments (notable since neither author's field is history). However, Cassuto and Weisbuch structure this book to speak to those already most engaged with graduate education. This means some histories of higher education are partially taken for granted; for example, there is a little discussion of the evolution of US universities mid-20th century, but for readers not educated on that history, perhaps not quite enough. There are also some core assumptions about lack of faculty investment that may not ring true on all campuses. But, in general, this book is an important overview of where we have been, where we are going, and most importantly, the questions we should be asking on the local level in order to improve our programs in meaningful ways.

Speaking of questions, I had some of my own when reading *The New PhD*. First, the authors (rightly) focus on the importance of quality advising and what can be the “Wild West” of graduate student mentorship. While I agree that this is a widespread problem, it raises the issue of actors and agents in the system. Both faculty advisors and graduate directors are significant agents in

how students experience their education. If directors are in charge of change, should we not also be speaking frankly about how faculty come to these roles, how the roles are designed, and—more broadly—what role administrative duties play in faculty life overall? Cassuto and Weisbuch argue that the graduate school or college should be appropriately empowered to effect change (324). I agree with this sentiment, but not every institution has a graduate college. I think further considerations of personnel-based reform are necessary before we even talk about how graduate colleges may be additionally empowered. A weak, unsupported, or uninterested director of graduate studies can damage a program, regardless of checks and balances at the graduate college that might exist above them. Further, we should be focusing more or different efforts on succession planning for chairs and directors who work in PhD-granting departments.

This question of administrative responsibilities is also particularly salient, I think, when considering graduate students in RCWS and their experiences, as readers in this field will likely also recognize. Most of these students will take up an administrative role in a writing program, writing center, or WAC program during their graduate work. While *The New PhD* is meant to be appropriately broad, RCWS does more comprehensively prepare students for academic jobs than other fields via these administrative roles and their service obligations, which occur alongside consistently more robust teacher-training backed by faculty research. Such comprehensive training means a place on the humanities landscape for RCWS that is admittedly different than others, yet not called out *per se* in this book.

A final question that arose for me while reading *The New PhD* is whether graduate programs can effectively change so long as undergraduate programs fail, on a national scale, to do so; this was a secondary question I also had reading *Re-Imagining Doctoral Writing*, as the sometimes-radical rethinking regarding writing in its chapters can only be successful if such creative pedagogies are also a rule at the undergraduate level. I am thinking specifically of English departments in the US that still cling to traditional bachelors' curricula that emphasize literary study and, as a by-product of that, creative writing. (At least two literature-focused departments where I taught used to charitably state, "creative writers make literature, so they are important to us!") The less that undergraduate programs are willing to evolve to include areas of emerging growth and interest, including RCWS, the less we will be able to easily revise our graduate programs in kind. Students will lack the background needed to enter into PhD programs containing these emerging fields, and we will be poorly equipped to staff doctoral seminars in these areas at R1 and R2 universities. All of our curricular decisions reside in an ecosystem, full of those pesky dependent variables.

Indeed, ecosystems of writing within graduate education—from coursework to exams to theses and dissertations—are the singular focus in Badenhorst, Amell, and Burford’s collection on re-imagining doctoral writing as an intellectual and philosophical endeavor and a proving ground for pedagogical theories offered by research in RCWS as well as New Literacy Studies (NLS). On the surface, this collection more squarely fits into the RCWS paradigm, but upon closer reading, it opens up far more widely to reveal proposals for graduate writing from across disciplines and across the globe. *Re-Imagining* also has the benefit of being published in an open access e-book format (whereas *The New PhD* is traditional print format), so it is framed with likely the widest global audience in mind (one that has familiarity with NLS as well as various histories of pedagogical research in higher ed).

Each of its thirteen chapters is a case study or, in the more theoretical chapters, an extended thought experiment regarding how to create new paradigms for graduate writing—whether through process-based thinking, applications of theory, or structural tear-downs of requirements and outcomes. The book is divided into three sections that segment these chapters: “The Call to Re-Imagine Doctoral Writing,” “Concepts and Tensions of Doctoral Writing,” and “Re-Imagining Doctoral Writing and Their Others.” Within each, topics range from the purpose and format of the thesis/dissertation, writing in doctoral programs in various areas (the arts, life sciences, cultural rhetorics), identity and context in doctoral writing, and considering reflexivity, systems, and self in the writing process, among others.

As a reader who leads a school of literature, media, and communication that operates within a Western cultural context, and who also has little knowledge of graduate education outside the US, I found the individual chapters informative, but also occasionally difficult to move among and between them, since each national context was quite unique (save the multiple chapters focusing on Australia and New Zealand, which had commonalities of experience). This is, of course, more my own limitation as a reader than a failure of the book. But it does mean that some similarly trained US readers will need to be patient and attentive with the examples presented, in order to consider how they would work in a US context. In addition, the book expands its reach beyond the humanities—most notably Sara Doody’s chapter on meta-genre and life science writing. So while it mostly focuses on humanities (and arts) graduate education, *Re-Imagining* does nod to work outside humanistic fields—which is in itself a valuable lesson for readers, albeit one that will be more easily digested by those with some experience in WAC/WID and/or graduate education in the sciences. Finally in terms of structure, the book moves between proposed applications of theory (e.g., Julia Molinari’s discussion of open systems) to specific individual or programmatic examples (e.g., Sharin-Shajahan Naomi’s

examination of writing in a non-western voice) to those that posit a way of thinking about doctoral writing more generally (e.g., Toni Ingram's chapter on New Materialisms, Susan van Schalkwyk and Cecelia Jacobs' chapter on borders and tensions).

Because I read this book against/with *The New PhD*, I admit to coming to the text wanting more significant how-to examples within the chapters, perhaps some oriented to replicable, aggregable, and data-driven (RAD) research. But again, this is my positionality talking and not necessarily the goal of this book. In the words of the editors, as bookended in the introduction and conclusion, respectively, *Re-Imagining* "serves both as a foundation for understanding the different ways in which we might understand 'doctoral writing' and as a site for envisioning how doctoral writing could be imagined otherwise" (15). They further note that they have "sought to open up doctoral writing as an area of research that would benefit from more questions asked about what the various players involved understand the future of doctoral writing to be" (267). These are important investigations to undertake, especially given how staid and tradition-based graduate education is, at least in the US, as noted in *The New PhD*.

Indeed, I can imagine that Cassuto and Weisbuch would appreciate many of the more creative suggestions voiced in *Re-Imagining* for thinking about purposes and uses for graduate writing outside the immediate institutional moment or requirement. For example, Steven Thurlow's assertion that "creative deviation is often. . . 'tidied up'" by advisors in review of doctoral writing products, given their assertion that advising is viewed as "the private property of the professors who do it" and thus ripe for narrowly constructed counsel (111, 222). Sara Doody's assertion that "rhetorical talk about writing serves to occlude the complex, situated, and deeply social negotiations interdisciplinary writers must engage in to work across disciplinary boundaries" is in conversation with Cassuto and Weisbuch's observation that "graduate education today resembles graduate school in the 1890s much more than undergraduate education resembles its ancestors from that time," as well as their advocacy for curricula such as the PSM (Professional Science Master's), which draws upon many interrelated professional fields of study relevant to the student's training, as well as internships (Cassuto and Weisbuch 125, 271, 286).

Both of these observations, as echoed broadly in the books themselves, point to the rigidity of graduate education and how little it represents "real world" research and cross-disciplinary research and inquiry. Perhaps the most important take-away from these two books, in the end, is that there is much promise for change and growth in our programs, but to embrace it will take dexterity, patience, and some personal and professional discomfort. It will also require true investment in incremental progress, whether regarding individual

programmatic requirements or the slow but steady reification of graduate teaching and advising overall. Regardless of the chosen methodologies, we stakeholders in graduate education must ultimately recognize, as these books both do, that change starts from within ourselves.

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