

## PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATIONS AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS

**O**ver the past five years I seem to have earned for myself a somewhat schizophrenic—or at least double-voiced—role as an academic cultural critic. On the one hand, I have taken a number of opportunities to defend and explain contemporary theories and practices in the liberal arts and sciences; on the other hand, I have more recently taken a number of opportunities to criticize contemporary academic practices that touch on the structural and economic determinants of the profession of teaching in American higher education. There should be no mystery as to why I began taking more of the latter variety of opportunities *after* being granted tenure in 1993: as I saw it, American academe is in need of defense *and* reform, and if you're going to talk about reform and be

taken seriously, you'd do well to make sure you have someplace to stand before you take your stand. In this sense I am a classical liberal reformist, and I hope and expect to be pilloried in precisely these terms: I believe in the possibility of changing the system from inside, and I believe that among the many reasons we should defend the institution of tenure is that it makes it possible for professors to be critics and reformers of the system that houses them.

My own university, for instance, is currently engaged in a costly and foolish legal battle, trying to deny its graduate students the right to unionize—despite the fact that current case law clearly suggests that graduate students at public universities have all the rights of any other public sector employees, *and* despite the fact that the November 1996 NLRB ruling on Yale suggests that graduate students at *private* universities enjoy those rights as well. I consider myself a loyal employee of the University and the State of Illinois, but I do not believe that my tenure at this university entails my agreement to all the initiatives and legal opinions of my administration and Board of Trustees. So, for instance, when in the fall of 1996 I was asked by Illinois's Graduate Employees Organization to speak at a rally, the purpose of which was to protest outside the Board of Trustees' meeting and draw attention to the Trustees' antiunion position, I agreed to march and speak as the GEO's faculty supporter regardless of the fact that my administration had sent all faculty a memo discouraging them from participating in or supporting GEO union drives.

I have to admit that I was personally pleased to oppose my administration and trustees in a cause the rightness of which I am convinced. I even liked delivering an address via bullhorn for the first time in my life (I was only six years old in 1968 and have had to rely on the *New Criterion* for the story of what really happened in the sixties). But at the same time, after a few years of speaking on the subject, formally and informally, at conferences and in the department halls, to students and to colleagues, I cannot continue this aspect of my double-voiced academic life without feeling a good deal of ambivalence. The pain, anger, disappointment, bitterness, and confusion this crisis has caused us—and by “us” I mean

the students and recent Ph.D.s most affected by it, as well as those faculty who have made it their concern—sometimes produce in me a kind of survivor's guilt. In such moods I begin to hope that in some future decade if not some future life, I will be so fortunate as to see, and be asked to address, a rather different crisis in the profession: The Job Boom: Are Students and Scholars Being Corrupted by All the Money Flowing into the Humanities?

Likewise, serving three years as Illinois's placement director, at a time when a substantial majority of our candidates were not "placed" in any full-time academic position whatsoever, has often made me want to avoid thinking about the crisis in graduate studies even though I am convinced that over the long term, our current graduate placement rates will do more to damage the profession than a trainload of Lynne Cheney and Roger Kimballs. Pundits and politicians have begun to call for the closing of graduate programs *in engineering and the applied sciences*, on the grounds that those programs are producing 25 percent more Ph.D.s than the job market can handle (see Greenberg). Surely most humanities professors would exult over something so utopian as a 75 percent placement rate—and surely the humanities are much more vulnerable to fiscal cost cutting and legislative cynicism than are the sciences. Yet most humanities professors seem less concerned about this than about the possibility that their younger colleagues are not paying enough attention to the beautiful and the sublime.

I say this with a certain bitterness, since until recently, media coverage of American universities, with few exceptions, seemed to suggest that the crisis in higher education was that teachers didn't teach enough, or taught the wrong things to the wrong people. Indeed, in the summer of 1995, George Will and Heather MacDonald, those feisty intellectual lapdogs of the Right, accused university writing instructors of poisoning composition courses with a mixture of deconstruction and politically correct feel-good exercises in self-expression. Never mind the fact that university writing instructors, significant numbers of whom are graduate students, are often the only people in higher education who concern themselves with the quality of student writing; Will and MacDonald are

not about to blame engineering and commerce schools for their inattention to undergraduate prose. No, what was most remarkably offensive about this latest offensive was Will's conclusion, which proved that conservatives do care about economic inequity after all: "The smugly self-absorbed professoriate that perpetrates all this academic malpractice is often tenured, and always comfortable. The students on the receiving end are always cheated and often unemployable" (A22). It is a curious world Will describes here, where business majors hunger desperately for the ministrations of English teachers, the powerful caste charged with the sole and terrible responsibility of fixing these students' prose and rendering them employable. Makes you want to start a petition calling for term limits on smug, wealthy Beltway pundits, does it not?

Thankfully, a few major newspapers have begun to call attention to the downsizing of university faculty and academe's increasing reliance on adjuncts and part-timers. But I feel safe in saying that the employment patterns in American universities have still not drawn sufficient public notice or outrage. For example, I draw your attention to an article entitled "The Crisis in the Ph.D.," by Cedric Fowler. It tells a story of rising student enrollments in graduate and undergraduate education; rising job requirements for tenure-track faculty and composition instructors; pay cuts; doubling and tripling of class sizes; and most of all, a drastic oversupply of new Ph.D.s:

Unfortunately the graduate student enrollment has not shrunk in any way comparable to the shrinkage in college jobs. Teachers who have lost their positions and find themselves with a little money turn to further training in the interval of waiting for another appointment. People who have not completed the Ph.D. decide that now is the best time to finish, in the optimistic faith that more training will help them when the colleges get on their feet again. . . . It is more than likely that a further two thousand Ph.D.s will be released on the nation this year.

What will become of most of them nobody knows, for there are almost no college positions available. . . . Over-supply will only grow greater, even after the return of prosperity to higher education, if the present flood continues to pour out of the graduate schools. (41–42)



What's striking about this article, I think, is that it was published in June 1933. That fact alone might lead us to believe, as so many contemporary commentators seem to do, that the employment crisis in American universities is nothing new: 'twas always thus, that Ph.D.s flipped burgers and composition instructors worked for scrip. But I think this conclusion suffers from misplaced emphasis: the point should be that we are justified in referring to the current era of college employment as a Great Depression, and if we remember that the previous Great Depression was resolved only by massive federal action and a global conflagration, then perhaps we can cure ourselves of the wishful thinking that tells us we are merely weathering a downturn in the latest business cycle.

Now that I've established that the prospects are horrible for the profession of literary study and unlikely to improve substantially, what remains to be said? I'll concentrate on two areas, neither of which offers much in the way of a "solution" to what is probably, for new Ph.D.s, an intractable structural problem of underemployment. First, what kind of obligations must faculty and their professional organizations assume in such a crisis? Second, what kind of standards must graduate programs maintain in their curricula, their admissions procedures, and their goals for professional training? In what follows, I don't mean to sound peremptory by saying that such standards and obligations *must* be upheld; every one of my suggestions is open to further challenge and revision. But I want to stress the ethically binding nature of these obligations: however we construe them, they should—I mean, they *must*—be understood as part of the conditions under which departments in the humanities will hereafter operate. For among the things the profession of college teaching needs most urgently at the moment is a working—and, when need be, enforceable—definition of "professionalism."

I'll start by addressing the role of professional organizations. In 1994, when Cary Nelson and I published our brief essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Graduate Education Is Losing Its Moral Base," we included in it the suggestion that professional organizations needed to get involved in the process of making difficult recommendations for shrinking—and, in some cases, closing—graduate programs, on the

grounds that “neither departments nor their own institutions can be counted on to do so” (B3). In the past few years I have repeatedly been told that such language dangerously suggests that legislators and other external meddlers should be given control over graduate education because we academics cannot manage our internal affairs; I have also been told that Cary and I are unreasonably asking the MLA to police the size and viability of graduate programs. But since the MLA already gathers a great deal of information on the academic job market and the size of graduate programs, I do not see why it cannot make recommendations based on its findings. As Stephen Watt has pointed out, we cannot expect (and should not want) the MLA to maintain the kind of extraordinary professional control over wages and working conditions that the AMA has achieved over the supply of physicians in the United States (Watt 33). Nevertheless, it is possible to say that the MLA can be more aggressive in the broader sense of advancing the interests of the profession and in the narrower sense of censuring those departments that ignore the MLA’s standards for job searches.

I want to distinguish this claim from the claim that the MLA itself is a major player in the job crisis. There is no point, I believe, in attributing blame to the MLA for not immediately ameliorating conditions it did not bring about. Be that as it may, I have—I should say Cary Nelson and I have, since these are part of our ongoing conversation—two small, practical suggestions for the near future. Both, we think, would enhance the MLA’s image within and outside its membership, and both would make the most of the MLA’s already formidable information-gathering apparatus.

First, the MLA should try to ascertain, as closely as possible, the number of job seekers each year. Currently we have a system that tells us how many jobs are advertised annually in the MLA Job List, but no reliable figures for the “supply” end of the equation. When, in 1994, the MLA released statistics that indicated that 51.1 percent of new Ph.D.s had found full-time, tenure-track employment in 1991–92, it wound up publishing a figure that no one in the profession could believe; and the reason for this is that the MLA only took stock of job seekers who had received their Ph.D.s in that year (see Huber). No mention was made of

job candidates who had earned their Ph.D.s in earlier years—and in the light of the past few years, it is easy to imagine that the largest and most desperate group of job candidates would be composed of people who had been on the market more than once, and who are now either unemployed or underemployed in part-time adjunct positions. In future years, as this pool of Ph.D.s swells (partly because of the decline in jobs, partly because of the dramatic increase in graduate enrollments between 1985 and 1990), it will become all the more imperative for the MLA to have a more reliable estimate of how many Ph.D.s are actually searching for jobs. All that would be required is for the MLA to include, in each Job List, a self-addressed postcard; students with photocopied lists could submit a facsimile card, announcing their intention to attend the convention and secure academic employment. I can think of no cheaper and easier way of determining that most important number of all, the annual number of job candidates. The complaint that such a system is open to “fraud” seems to me too bizarre to entertain.

The second suggestion, also, I owe in part to Cary Nelson: the MLA could appoint a standing committee, not unlike those operated by the AAUP, to investigate deceptive hiring practices—particularly where schools are in violation of already existing MLA recommendations. I regard this as less a matter of “policing” than of protecting the professional interests of the membership. As for the argument that the MLA has and can have no “enforcement arm” in such matters, my response is that it does not need one. All the AAUP has is a list of censured colleges, places like Appomattox State Bible Seminary and Whiskey-a-Go-Go University of the Sierra Nevada where faculty are hired on a week-by-week basis or are forced to double as bartenders for administration functions. But the AAUP is less concerned with changing practices at such marginal schools than with ensuring professional treatment of faculty at larger places—Harvard, Indiana, Grinnell—that actually do most of the hiring. The idea is that Harvard, Indiana, and Grinnell can be induced to play fair by the threat of having their names added to the list of odd miscreants like Whiskey-a-Go-Go, which most administrators consider fairly bad publicity. And although this is a more “symbolic” gesture, the MLA could in the future refuse to run announcements of

job openings from “censured” schools. The counterargument I have heard from MLA staff is that such schools would merely advertise their jobs elsewhere, but I do not see this as a barrier to taking action that would alert potential candidates to the fact that the school has not met the profession’s criteria for job searches.

I said I had two suggestions for MLA action in the future. I have also a third suggestion, but it is so unlikely to have any impact that I might as well not mention it. Still, here goes: move the convention to March. I have now heard every argument against moving the convention from December—academic schedules, hotel rates, timing for interviews—but I have also seen an alarming growth in the number of academic jobs advertised in October but not funded in February. More than once I have had to console students whose only MLA interview was with a department whose search was eventually shut down in the spring for lack of funding; nothing makes those students, or me, or, for that matter, a school’s search committee, feel more helpless and futile. Having the annual convention *after* most schools receive their funding allocations for the year will not prevent this from happening altogether; it certainly will not prevent search committees from working in the fall to fill a position that does not exist in the spring. But perhaps it will help reduce the number of times this happens, and in times like these that is no small consideration.

It has long been maintained that late December is the only time when all members can meet, since the quarter system and the semester system are otherwise incompatible. However, rethinking the MLA convention is not merely a matter of fiddling with dates. Why should the convention take place over four days at year’s end rather than over a long weekend in the spring? Why, for that matter, should it showcase (if that is the word) the delivery of nearly two thousand fifteen-minute papers? The convention could be an occasion for focused reflection on the state of the profession; as currently conducted it is little more than fodder for ravenous journalists looking for a quick laugh at the expense of teachers in the modern languages. Of course, the convention’s chief *structural* aim is to provide a forum for job interviews—which means that the convention is largely kept afloat by job applicants. And the MLA does well to

structure its registration fees accordingly, charging graduate students less than half the fee paid by professors. But why should we collect any but a nominal ten-dollar fee from job seekers who do not now have full-time tenure-track jobs, so long as they are attending the MLA for job placement? Why should the convention not be held in smaller, less expensive locations? Why should it not be reorganized to serve the interests of interviewees and interviewers above all?

This is only one small area in which we need to recalibrate our professional priorities. If we want our profession to survive the depression more or less intact, we will have to rethink more broadly the entire range of college teachers' obligations to each other and to their student-apprentices. This is the hard part of professional housecleaning; it involves not only a discussion of the invisible work faculty do on graduate, departmental, and campus committees, but a discussion of the politics of curricular design and early retirement as well. Let me deal with the matter of early retirement first, since that has so far proven to be the most incendiary and the least understood of the suggestions Cary and I have made. In our *Chronicle* essay and in *Higher Education under Fire*, Cary and I wrote that "institutions should devise legally sound early-retirement packages for those faculty members who are neither effective teachers nor productive scholars. . . . For we need to confront the fact that we are driving talented new teachers and scholars out of the profession while retaining some incompetent faculty members with tenure" (B2). Though we nested this suggestion in among six or seven more innocuous recommendations, it has not failed to catch the eye of most of our readers; within days after publication of that issue of the *Chronicle*, no less, one of Illinois's most distinguished senior scholars approached me and asked me, tongue firmly in cheek, where faculty over fifty years of age could turn in their badges and resign. (I replied that I could not answer such a question myself and would have to turn it over for review by the Star Chamber.) Oddly, however, some of the most hostile responses we've received to this proposal have come from graduate students, one of whom charged in a letter to the *Chronicle* that we were trying to weed out the field of job seekers and job holders so as to pave

the way for more “superstar” faculty. More recently, Joseph Aimone, the vice president of the MLA’s graduate student caucus, has written in the NCTE’s *Council Chronicle* that “limiting early retirement to faculty who are neither effective teachers nor productive scholars misses the point.” Aimone goes on to say that we should induce *effective* faculty to retire, because the “deadwood” standard is a dangerous one:

Effective teachers and productive scholars need to be induced to retire. Retirement for academics only means that they teach when they want to rather than when the whistle blows and write without care about tenure. . . .

. . . Allowing a standard that looks for “deadwood” is inviting people with no interest in higher education to make the decisions about who should and should not work. Voluntary, systematic retirement of senior professionals, combined with a vigorous effort to ensure hiring tenured people behind them, would make a difference. Is this likely? Ask Nelson and Bérubé—would they retire in midcareer for the good of the profession? (5)

I’m not sure what fuels the antagonism of this response, though I suppose I have a clue. But without announcing my own early retirement date, let me address the question of how we propose to carry out early retirement policies as fairly and as painlessly as possible.

The issue for me is not that we should look for “deadwood”; the issue is that we should determine the professional obligations and expectations for all tenured faculty, and then, if certain faculty members are egregiously flouting those obligations, then we ask that they retire to allow more capable and committed people to teach in our place. There are two relevant questions here, and they are both, at bottom, questions of professional ethics. One has to do with the standards to which we hold our senior faculty and our job applicants; the other has to do with how the faculty carries out its own departmental functions.

The job requirements for faculty are notoriously loose—so much so that one enterprising professor recently managed to teach at two universities simultaneously, without attracting notice, for a number of months before he was found out and fired from both. Some of us serve on an array of departmental committees, dissertation committees, campus

committees, editorial boards, and internal review panels; others of us teach their classes and go home. Most of us are working sixty-hour weeks and a small handful of us are working six. Now, I realize how dangerous it is to admit this at a time when most legislators and journalists are all too eager to characterize *all* faculty as tenured, comfortable freeloaders. And I realize that every organization inside and outside academe has these classes of people: workers who foolishly demonstrate their efficiency and competence so often that they are assigned to every important task, and workers to whom meaningful authority is never delegated and by whom it is never desired. Academe, however, has arguably too high a tolerance for the latter group; and when that latter group contains full professors, as it sometimes does, you can wind up with a system that not merely tolerates but *rewards* workers for performing substantially less work than their colleagues. I'm sure I'm not revealing any family secrets in saying this. But it has often seemed to me that academic departments can work very much like dysfunctional families where the parents clean their teenagers' rooms because it's not worth the trouble of asking the kids to do the job themselves. No one asks certain people to contribute to the maintenance work of the department in service and advising, no one talks about *why* those people are never asked to contribute, and the workload imbalance continues by mutual consent even as it worsens.

I'm stressing faculty "service" for a number of reasons. First, I have—and had—no intention of restricting the professoriate to people who want to be one-person publishing houses; that was not what Cary and I meant when we spoke of "unproductive" faculty. Second, I know that effective teaching is very hard to measure, and ineffective teaching equally difficult to spot. And last, because I want as value-neutral a criterion of "professional obligations" as I can get. Here's why: from the perspective of moderately talented faculty who were hired in 1964 when they had their pick of jobs to choose from, the situation I've described so far can look rather different. Why should we retire, these people may say, and let ourselves be mowed down by a horde of Stalinist feminazi ideologues who want to destroy literary study as we know it? For it can't be denied that the profession practiced by senior faculty and the profession envisioned by junior faculty and Ph.D. candidates are often two

radically different things—and as I'll explain in more detail in the next chapter, each generation is thereby tempted to construe the other as the source of all the profession's ills.

The problem here is that if we define "incompetence" to cover faculty who have lost all intellectual interest in the state of their discipline, we let ourselves in for more nastiness than anyone can imagine. One professor refuses even to discuss feminist interpretations of Shakespeare, and dismisses the student who brought up the question; another is unaware that the anthology he's using now includes women writers, none of whom he's assigned to his students. Are these people incompetent? Are they irresponsible? Many of my colleagues would say so. And yet you certainly can't try to retire someone on the grounds that he hasn't kept up with the field, especially when the teacher in question believes that the field basically died in 1970 and has been churning out twaddle ever since. Promoting that kind of criterion for faculty competence, therefore, seems to me to invite a host of intractable political problems, not the least of which is that it violates faculty members' academic freedom to believe that their refusal to keep up with the field, or to discuss feminist readings, is a sign of intestinal fortitude.

So when I bring up the unpleasant topic of early retirement, I don't mean to say that we should consider early retirement policies for people who don't write books every three years or perform in the classroom like Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*. I'm also not saying that we shouldn't trust anyone over fifty. All I'm saying is that many academic departments house one or two faculty members who simply do not meet their professional obligations as scholars, teachers, and colleagues. And in a job crisis as severe as this, it is unconscionable to allow those few people to work their six-hour jobs while overqualified applicants serve their time as adjuncts and freeway fliers. Let me add this: if we do not address this problem—if we do not even admit that there is such a problem, however slight it may seem—we will soon see the dismantling of tenure. We are already witnessing the *de facto* eradication of tenure in the wholesale conversion of full-time positions to adjunct positions; but I fear we may also see the *de jure* elimination of tenure as schools implement more "austerity" policies in hiring and legislators in Texas



and elsewhere demand post-tenure review and punitive or bureaucratic forms of “accountability.” And if tenure is wrongly construed as a protection not of academic freedom but of manifestly incompetent and irresponsible workers the like of whom no other profession would tolerate, then its days are numbered, and the profession will be subject to even more brutal conditions wherein only the wealthiest universities will bother to hire full-time faculty. The best way to preserve tenure, it seems to me, is to create meaningful forms of internal faculty review—and to create them ourselves, rather than waiting to carry out the dictates of state legislators.

I cannot expect to win anything like universal consent for this proposal. It is all too possible that “post-tenure review” will become, for those universities that implement it, a means not of improving the quality of faculty but of dismantling whatever job security remains to the professoriate. I have had to acknowledge the danger of my position on a number of occasions, none more dramatic than the time I spoke on this subject in February 1997 to the Faculty Senate of the City University of New York—an institution that has seen, in the past twenty years, its number of full-time faculty drop from 15,000 to 5,500. But it is crucial in the face of numbers like those, I think, to stress that I am not talking about *firing* faculty—or even about finding rationales for downsizing the professoriate still further. I am talking about early retirement agreements that might help ease the job crisis: this is not an austerity program for academe, but a call for replenishment of the ranks. My proposal, moreover, is meant not to take decision-making power out of the hands of the people most concerned with education, but rather to *give* those people—in this case, department chairs—that kind of decision-making power. Indeed, constructing a professional standard that measures faculty by whether they responsibly meet their professional obligations is, I believe, the only way that faculty can retain the power to determine the composition of their departments.

I should repeat as often as possible that very few faculty actually fail to live up to most of their professional obligations, and that the point of my proposal is not only to prune departments of genuine deadwood but also to devise a system, a code of ethics, whereby all faculty know what

their responsibilities are. (Stephen Watt, for instance, informs me that the English department at Indiana has a clause in its bylaws that stipulates that the supervision of a dissertation is part of one's professional teaching load, and should be considered the equivalent of teaching a course. The clause is toothless, of course, but remarkable and enviable nonetheless.) But as long as we're concerned with numbers, let's imagine for a surreal moment that there is only one thoroughly unprofessional faculty member for every five English departments, and let's say we collectively negotiated their early retirement next year. The MLA *Job Information List* would grow by 700 positions. When you recall that the October 1992 *JIL* listed 620 positions and the October 1993 *JIL* listed 624, you'll probably reach the same conclusion I've reached: early retirement packages are the single most powerful means we have for alleviating the current academic depression. The challenge is to contrive legally binding methods for tying one issue to the other, lest a university administration be tempted to replace forty retirees with forty part-time adjuncts. Early retirement packages, in order to be ethically defensible, absolutely must be predicated on the hiring of full-time, tenure-track faculty. Anything less will simply accelerate the dismantling of the profession.

I should also stress that all of us who fondly imagine that we will be passed over by such policies will have to make some sacrifices as well. Many faculty in humanities departments do not make enough money to retire, and if early retirement packages are to work for such people, they might need to be awarded substantial pay raises for a number of years prior to their retirement. Cary Nelson has suggested in the November-December 1995 issue of *Academe* that a humane guideline for such packages should state that no retiring senior faculty member with thirty years of service will be allowed to retire on a fixed annual income smaller than that of a first-year assistant professor in the arts or humanities. As Nelson writes, such a policy

states the problem both baldly and realistically and sets an individual retirement package goal that few are likely to regard as a reward for incompetence. It also acknowledges the real financial

risk some underpaid faculty members face at retirement time, while asserting that universities have no business trying to sustain higher disciplinary salaries after retirement for those faculty who have not performed competently. There is no reason why a retired marginal commerce professor should earn more than a retired marginal philosopher. (25)

This proposal is no idle suggestion: imagine a humanities professor hired in 1970 at a salary of \$10,000 who made \$22,000 in 1985 and makes \$35,000 today. To retire at a decent *entry-level* salary, that professor might require salary increases of 50 percent over a few years. At the very least, that means that everyone else in the department may have to forgo their own piddling raises, or even endure small cuts, so that the department will be able to make new hires in the near future. And the point is not to bar the retiree from the classroom; on the contrary, emeriti should be encouraged to teach a class whenever and however they want. They will simply be officially relieved of the myriad professional obligations they are no longer fulfilling.

Now for unpleasant draconian suggestion number two: we will abrogate one of our chief responsibilities as teachers if we do not discourage more students from pursuing the Ph.D. In the past, I have heard this proposal denounced as “elitist,” as if I were suggesting that everyone close their graduate programs save for the Ivies and Berkeley. On the contrary, I am glad that our profession gives less weight to the prestige of the degree-granting institution than does law or medicine, since high-quality Ph.D.s can literally come from anywhere. With that in mind, I suggest that *all* graduate programs, whatever their rank in the collective professional imaginary, decrease the number of students they admit to the Ph.D.

I noted above that I anticipate criticism of my early retirement suggestions; I have already gotten many earfuls of criticism with regard to my position on the size of graduate programs—most of it, interestingly, from my colleagues on the academic Left. The harshest response Cary Nelson and I have received has come from a pair of Marxists, Jim Neilson and Gregory Meyerson, who, in a 1996 issue of the *minnesota review*, painted us as corporate stooges in progressives’ clothing:

Most troubling are their suggestions to limit graduate admissions and to close marginal programs. If this proposal had been made by a right-wing politician about undergraduate education—that is, if in order to address the problem of unemployed university graduates it was proposed that fewer students be admitted into college and that marginal schools (i.e., community colleges, poor private institutions, and inferior branches of state universities) be closed—this politician would rightly be accused of denying educational opportunity to poor, minority, and non-traditional students and of increasing elite advantage. But since it's been made by academic leftists, this proposal has been greeted as a pragmatic attempt to lessen the exploitation of graduate students. (270)

Neilson and Meyerson go on, in a footnote, to claim that “although we don’t mean to impugn their motives, it’s worth noting that this proposal requires no sacrifice of Bérubé and Nelson.” Indeed, they claim, Nelson and I stand to profit by our proposal: “with fewer graduate programs, their status (both in professional reputation and financial reward) is likely to be enhanced” (272). That’s a nice touch, coming from people who don’t mean to impugn my motives. But it doesn’t make sense. Under the current dispensation of rank and reward, Illinois does not become more prestigious when North Dakota or Valparaiso closes a program, and Illinois is not so lofty a location as to be exempt from the sacrifices attendant on an austerity economy. As a matter of fact, Illinois’s English department has drastically cut back on the number of graduate students it admits (while maintaining a diverse student population that gives the lie to the “younger, whiter, wealthier” line); at around one hundred, ours is the smallest graduate program in the Big Ten—half the size of places like Indiana or Michigan, and less than one-third of the size of the Virginia program from which I graduated in 1989. Most of our recent Ph.D.s, for their part, are quite bitter about their lousy job prospects, and some have emphatically suggested closing the program altogether. Neither Cary Nelson nor I have “benefited” from this development, and we sure as hell haven’t pocketed any spare change by it, either.

But Neilson and Meyerson’s critique involves some crucial switching of the dice—in this case, a shaky and mistaken analogy between under-

graduate and graduate education. Nelson and I have actually argued for *expanded* access to the B.A. and M.A. degrees, but when it comes to large Ph.D. programs in the humanities, we advocate more central planning in place of the laissez-faire, let-the-student-beware economy we have now. We believe in expanding the educational franchise, but we don't believe in expanding cheap labor pools. *That*, of course, is why the Bérubé/Nelson proposals have been understood as a means of opposing the economic exploitation of graduate students; it's certainly not because Nelson and I have been mollycoddled by the liberal media.

Neilson and Meyerson have one more important criticism of my proposal to shrink doctoral programs, and this criticism, I believe, speaks for itself:

Especially in recent years a graduate education in the humanities may equally be a political education, a means by which students learn to read the historical, social, and economic truths hidden and distorted by capitalist culture. Bérubé and Nelson's proposal ignores this important justification for maintaining the wide availability of graduate studies in the humanities. Bérubé and Nelson propose to reduce enrollments in graduate programs, making the demystifying and consciousness-raising potential of these programs available to a privileged few; ironically, their solution to the crisis in higher education is, in effect, to *limit* public access. (271)

I hope it will be clear why I did not anticipate this argument when I first began to think about whether the country needed dozens of graduate programs in English with two hundred or more students. At the moment, English departments may be placing fewer than 20 percent of their Ph.D.s in tenure-track jobs; the other 80-plus percent are unemployed or employed in temporary positions at starvation wages without benefits, and because they're on the job market year after year, the MLA job placement statistics don't count them as job seekers. But in this rotten economy, according to Neilson and Meyerson, we should "maintain the wide availability of graduate studies in the humanities": we should admit students to programs of study in which they will devote seven to ten years of their lives, during which they will teach introductory undergrad-

uate courses at about \$2,500 per course (without benefits), so that, after a decade, they can have about an 80 percent chance of teaching piece-work courses at local colleges for about \$1,250 per course (without benefits). And the reason we should continue, and even expand, this organization of pedagogical labor is that *it will teach graduate students about capitalism.*

For my part, I fear that the Neilson/Meyerson plan will work only too well. Graduate students will learn about capitalism, all right—not by having their collective consciousness raised in the Marxist graduate seminar, but by working in academe’s salt mines until middle age or thereabouts, whereupon they will find they are the owners of a postgraduate degree that is practically useless.

However much it may outrage one particularly befuddled wing of the academic Left, then, my rationale for cutting doctoral programs is both simple and reasonable: the M.A. degree does not offer students the kind of long-term exploitation, disappointment, and highly specialized training now associated with the Ph.D. It is one thing to put in anywhere from one to three years in postgraduate study, and then pursue a career in publishing, journalism, advertising, law, or teaching secondary school; it is another thing to devote a decade or more to professional training for a profession in which there are no jobs. Not only is it easier to change career directions at age twenty-five than at thirty-five or forty; it is also easier to apply for jobs outside the modern languages with an M.A. than with a Ph.D. It should go without saying that it is also easier to pay off two years’ worth of loans than ten, or endure two years of starvation wages rather than ten.

The problem with this advice is that it is so hard to give. I have not yet met the student who could contemplate being told to stop after the M.A. without hearing the suggestion as a wholesale rejection of his or her very person. Faculty can try to say, “you had best not pursue this—it’s highly unlikely to result in anything like a rewarding career,” but few students will hear this as anything but “you had best not pursue this—you’re not smart enough to make it.” And since faculty and graduate students tend to have a tremendous emotional investment in having their intellectual talents validated by people they respect, it is often impossible

to hear a discouraging word about one's prospects in the profession without taking it as a judgment on your net worth as a conscious being. Add to this the fact that at many schools, the M.A. degree has no function whatsoever save as a qualification for the Ph.D., and you have a system that strongly discourages faculty from giving students honest advice. I am not asking faculty to shout "fire" in a packed theater so as to thin out the crowd; rather, I am asking faculty to tell students not to enter burning buildings—and I am asking graduate students to take the advice in good faith.

But if our goal is to restrict access to the Ph.D. while maintaining or expanding access to the M.A., then we have some problems to face. First of all, it is not clear what the M.A. means; in some states it counts toward certification for high school teaching, in some states it does not. In some states it exists as an incentive for current high school teachers to get extra professional training in their disciplines, and, maybe, a raise. Second, we run the risk of making the first years of graduate school even more tense than they already are, by fostering a competition for slots to the doctoral program; schools that do not already work this way may well be loath to try it. Third, we run the risk of creating a shortage in the cheap labor pool every sizable university needs to survive: as Cary Nelson writes in a recent issue of *Social Text*, it would cost our own English department over \$4.5 million to staff all our courses with teachers who were paid the average department salary for faculty, \$3.5 million to replace all graduate students with entry-level assistant professors (131). As Illinois's fledgling Graduate Employees' Organization rightly says, the university works because *they* do. And last but not least, we threaten the very existence of M.A. programs who hope to send their best students to doctoral programs elsewhere.

All these problems are then compounded by the fact that any responsible teacher who cares about the state of literary and cultural study in the United States is inevitably a personal advertisement for the discipline: we believe that this is among the most intellectually challenging fields in the contemporary college curriculum; we think the kind of intellectual work we do is fundamental to what it means, socially, politically, and psychologically, to be human; and we therefore think this kind of study is

valuable even if the vast majority of our fellow Americans do not agree—and even if we don't believe there is such a thing as "intrinsic" value. There is a sense in which every good teacher *wants* to recruit his or her most promising students for the field; simply think for a moment of what it would be like if we asked our colleagues to behave in the classroom as if they thought literary study were a vain and pointless exercise.

So we need graduate instructors, but the apprentice system that justifies their status as cheap labor is in deep crisis; we promote the extraordinary elasticity and interdisciplinarity of intellectual work in the humanities, but we need to discourage many of our brightest students from hoping to join the field; and the only plausible solution to this impasse lies in redefining an M.A. degree that at the moment has almost no definition at all.

Our hope, I hope, lies in strengthening the ties between the M.A. and high school teaching—not only in the sense that we should try to offer the degree to more high school English teachers, but also in the sense that we should try to imagine the teaching of high school English as a worthy and appropriate career for midlevel graduate students. In my experience, suggesting to students that they might teach in secondary schools has been a little like nominating one's colleagues for early retirement: *here's the M.A.*, students hear, *and here's the map out of town. Don't bother thinking about the power and prestige of being a college professor—here's your free pass to Central High.* To students who regard high school teaching as something unspeakably worse than college teaching, I have shown the following job announcements, all of which, happily enough, appeared in the same issue of our departmental newsletter one fine spring day:

College of Lake County. Tenure track position to teach English composition and literature. Course load is 5 sections per semester. Position begins fall 1995.

Gustavus Adolphus College. Seeking a person to teach from September to February as a replacement for a professor on leave. The individual will teach three courses (Creative Writing and Ethnic American Literature) in the fall (Sept. to Dec.) and one course in the January term.



Lincoln Land Community College. Full-time tenure-track position to teach five classes. Should have experience teaching the writing process at different levels to both traditional and non-traditional students and should be able to teach the full range of the lower division curriculum.

These cheery notices were soon bested by another local school, which advertised a position that would carry tenure without promotion for a salary in the low twenties: to the lucky candidate, a lifetime instructorship without hope of further professional reward. I show students these notices not merely to frighten and depress them (though this works like a charm), but also to make a more important point, namely, that some opportunities in high school teaching can offer greater professional autonomy, more substantial intellectual rewards, and better pay than teaching at the college level. As Alison T. Smith, a 1994 Ph.D., writes in the 1996 issue of *Profession*, secondary school teaching is “still an ignored market”: even though her own experience teaching high school “proved one of the most rewarding I ever had,” still, her colleagues warned her “not to stay there too long lest I be labeled a high school teacher, which would forever destroy my prospects of getting a serious job at the college level” (69–70). Smith now teaches at the Hill Center in Durham, North Carolina, a high school for students with identified learning disabilities, and reports that “the salary, benefits, and level of respect I receive from colleagues are better than what I found at the university level” (72).

Alison Smith’s experience, as former Illinois graduate students can attest, is not unique. Indeed, for every student who resents the advice to seek a high school job, I wager, there are ten more who wish they’d heard that kind of advice six or seven years ago. Nor is this strategy merely a matter of cutting our losses; on the contrary, it could be a strategy for dramatically expanding our potential public constituency. The profession as it now operates seems much more interested in producing volume after volume of criticism and theory for faculty and graduate students than in disseminating some of that criticism and theory to undergraduates and high school students. Well-trained, unembittered, comparatively unexploited M.A.s might perform a crucial function in

serving as liaisons between graduate programs and public and private secondary education.

Finally, there is the question of how to conceive graduate study itself: how should we design programs of professional training in a profession with no self-description and very few job openings? Should we try to teach to the market, whether that means training students in mastering the details of the counterhegemonic post-excremental sublime, or training them to teach writing across the curriculum? Even if we knew what the market would be like in the year 2005—a surplus of Victorianists! Postmodernists down 1½!—would we be justified in redesigning graduate study so as best to allow the tail to wag the dog? Some of my students and colleagues look around and say, what we need here, if we are to survive into the twenty-first century, is queer theory and cultural studies. Others propose a greater emphasis on the traditional periods of literary history, on the grounds that new Ph.D.s will likely have to be broad generalists. Still others recommend that students carry at least a subspecialty in rhetoric and composition.

I did not save this question for last because I find it easiest to answer. I want to argue that graduate programs should recognize that theory is now an integral part of the regime of professional training, so much so that search committees no longer have to stipulate that they want an Americanist who does theory: the theory part, it could be said, goes without saying. And yet relatively few graduate programs offer broad introductory courses in interpretive theory. All too often, the result is that students encounter specialized graduate-level courses in theory without having taken the equivalent of survey courses in theory; “when,” my students have asked me, “was I supposed to have read Lacan? Was I absent the day they assigned Bakhtin and everybody moved on to *In the Wake of Bakhtin*?” In my own department, then, the pattern is that theory-laden courses are most plentiful at the opposite ends of the curriculum: at the 400 level, where they are taught exclusively to graduate students, and at the 100 level, where they are taught exclusively by graduate students. We have not yet devised an intermediary program by which we would determine what it is that we expect our graduate

students to know before they develop their own courses, and in this respect, I will hazard, we are not alone.

To put this point another way, if we conceive of cultural studies, for instance, as something that can be taught only by specialists to specialists, then cultural studies will become just another item in the theory-survey curriculum alongside deconstruction and new historicism, structuralism and psychoanalysis. But if we conceive of cultural studies—and theory more generally—as something that is potentially as relevant to freshman writing as it is to graduate seminars, then perhaps we can begin to make productive use of the multiple theoretical paradigms currently operating in the profession without overspecializing or underpreparing those graduate students who do choose to seek the Ph.D. We can, in other words, escape the illogic of the current system that asks job candidates to be brilliant, original researchers up until they receive an MLA interview, and then to be all-purpose generalists who can teach writing, Shakespeare, and the History of the English Language once they arrive on campus. But we can do this only if we recognize that Ph.D. programs are designed for specific professional training. This means that we need to stop behaving as if advanced graduate study is self-justified, as the pursuit of knowledge and the enhancement of the life of the mind, and that we need to plan to train students for a profession in which theoretical specialists are most often marketable only if they can present the principles of advanced literary and cultural theory in the full range of the lower division curriculum.

In the meantime, one pedestrian point about unions, wages, and benefits. I have already admitted that in most universities, it is impossible for English departments—or most other academic departments—to function without a large pool of exploited student labor. Regardless of what happens to the job market, schools will never be willing or able to pay graduate teaching assistants a living wage for their work. Cary Nelson and I have floated the less expensive but equally quixotic proposal that they be paid enough to live on through the summer, but on the whole, we realize that no one is going to pump a few million dollars into English departments merely because it might make for tolerable working

conditions among the teachers who do the bulk of writing instruction for incoming undergraduates. Many faculty, accordingly, do not see the value of graduate student unions, and cannot be persuaded to support their formation, particularly at schools where the faculty themselves are averse to unions and therefore have no capacity for collective bargaining. Indeed, it would even be possible to imagine a critical mass of antiunion faculty at an Ivy League university. But except in such cases of deliberate malice, most faculty are uninvolved in graduate students' efforts to unionize because they do not see the point: graduate students have been eloquent and threadbare since the days of Raskolnikov. 'Twas always thus.

But few older faculty, I wager, have any idea what it is like to live for the better part of a decade without adequate health insurance. Cary Nelson and I have argued that graduate teaching assistants with five years of service should be vested in their universities' retirement plans; we would like to see universities develop sane child care policies as well, but since so few have done so even for faculty, we despair of seeing the day when graduate students are entitled to university child care as well. Health insurance, however, is very much a negotiable item, particularly since most graduate students are relatively young and most universities buy insurance packages for large groups. The faculty who received their Ph.D.s back when health care and carfare cost thirty-five cents cannot be expected to understand the plight of students paying \$1,200 for swiss-cheese coverage, but they must be made to. Time and again I have shocked my colleagues by informing them that after I was no longer covered under my parents' dental plan, I waited four years before seeing a dentist in 1985, right before my wedding, and then waited another five until 1990, when I was hired at Illinois. Or by informing them that Janet and I were so thrilled to find in 1986 that our student policy would cover the cost of a hospital maternity room that we neglected to realize that the insurance company would pay only for *Janet's* stay in the hospital—which was no great burden for our insurers, as it turned out, since they billed the room to our newborn baby Nicholas instead. Too late, we realized that if we had given birth to a nonbillable entity such as a cat, we would have been in the clear; but because we had a *child*, we

were therefore liable for as much of our hospital costs as could be assigned to a human being.

It took us five years to retire that debt, but that's not the point. Part of the point is that just before Nick was born, I agreed to take Virginia's M.A. exam so that I would qualify as a Virginia alumnus and become eligible for special rates on life insurance available through the Virginia Alumni Association. That, for me, was the function of the M.A. in English: it gave me membership in a group that could buy life insurance. But the larger point is that the profession of English is an increasingly dehumanizing and dispiriting affair for even (or especially) the most ardent lovers of literature and literary study. If the unionization of our graduate students can make our collective enterprise less dehumanizing—and it can—then we are bound to support it. For the still larger point is that a profession that tolerates and perpetuates such conditions is neither professional nor defensible. If you add the working conditions of graduate students to the figure I've cited earlier—namely, that 45 percent of the professoriate consists of part-time laborers—you'll realize that in structural terms, the job of teaching college, for the majority of recent Ph.D.s trying to get that job, has more in common with the job of picking oranges than with the job of practicing law. Whatever our academic standards—be we new historicists or new critics, multiculturalists or Eurocentrists, young turks or old guard—it is our professional obligation to do whatever we can to change that for the better.