

COMPLETING PHDS: THE PERIL AND ENDURING PROMISE OF DEEP STUDY

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Biographical Note

Jon Butler is Howard R. Lamar Professor of American Studies, History, and Religious Studies at Yale University, where he served as Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 2004 to 2010. He received his BA and PhD from the University of Minnesota. His books include *Power, Authority, and the Origins of American Denominational Order* (1978; new ed. 2009); *The Huguenots in America: A Refugee People in New World Society* (1983); *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (1990); *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (2000); and *Religion in American Life: A Short History*, with Grant Wacker and Randall Balmer (2003), as well as many articles. He is writing a book entitled *God in Gotham*, which focuses on religion's fate in Manhattan, the capital of American secularism, between the Gilded Age and the 1960 Kennedy election.



Note: As this session was not recorded, the following is a short summary of the paper that was delivered.

INTRODUCTION

What is a PhD? We answer this question too often by succumbing to the bureaucratic lure. We describe formal processes, 'outcomes', time to degree, funding, training in teaching - indeed, almost everything except central intellectual attraction and personal focus of the PhD enterprise: deep study.

Isaac Newton understood the heart of deep study when he acknowledged how Cambridge University gave special leeway for the 'silence and meditation' that was the foundation for all his great discoveries. It was through deep study that Newton found the ranging space that let his mind roam. As he described it, "*I keep the subject [I am studying] constantly before me and wait 'till the first dawns open slowly, by little and little, into a full and clear light'*" (Gleick, p. 38).

What a wonderful phrase: "*into a full and clear light'*". But this "*full and clear light'*" represents success. More important is the process that got Newton there, the process of "*keep[ing] the subject constantly before me and wait[ing] 'til the first dawns open slowly.'*" This is the hard work part, the part that requires financial support for the time and materials to research, the part that requires the freedom to study and to consider alternatives that frequently fail, often by design and definition, and the part that requires the most patience, the ability to overcome discouragement, and the fortitude to push on.

Certainly in United States PhD programs, the peril of time to degree, PhD funding, and lax faculty attention to students confronts the promise of deep study all too fully. We are not doing as well as we should and must do. Our record across the past forty years actually threatens deep study and the PhD that results from it. And if we do not change it, the robust PhD enterprise rightly praised between the end of World War II and the 1970s may become an unrecoverable past.

Hyperbole? I think not. At least three very simple numerical measures graphically portray the dimensions of the problem: time to degree, attrition, and admissions.

TIME TO DEGREE

The length of time it takes to earn one of the nearly 50,000 PhD degrees awarded each year in the United States simply has become scandalously and depressingly long. Although the median time in graduate school from start to degree was a seemingly acceptable 7.7 years (2008 data), half of those individuals studied much longer, and in some fields, like humanities and education, even the median time ranged from nine years to twelve years. (As is well known, national US figures reflect one feature of US PhD programs often not found in Europe: that most American institutions do not require a Master's degree to begin a PhD program and that institutions count the time to degree from the BA, or the start of graduate school, even if Master's degrees are awarded en route) (*Doctorate Recipients*, p. 14).

Some of this appalling length of US PhD programs can be attributed to poor financial support, forcing PhD students to work more than study. But time to degree is too long even at the top US research universities. At Yale, for example, which provides full tuition support, stipends ranging from \$25,500 to \$30,000 per year, and paid health insurance, the median time to complete a PhD in the humanities is 6.7 years and 5.7 years in both the social sciences and sciences (Yale Graduate School Statistics, 2009). No wonder parents of US PhD students frequently ask their children, 'When will you finish?'

ATTRITION

Attrition is equally high. Between 20% and 25% of entering PhD students drop out at some point in their study, roughly 15% in the social sciences, 18% in the humanities, and almost 25% in mathematics and the physical sciences. Occasionally, the dropout rate in some fields may represent a strong job market with incomplete graduate study, such as for computer science students. But most attrition derives from the sense of failure, fatigue, and desire to move on toward 'real life'. One single figure is sobering: only 57% percent of entering PhD students in all fields had received their degree by the tenth year of their program. No undergraduate program in a US university or college, or law, business, or medical school program, could survive with attrition rates between 15% and 25% and with over 40% percent of its students not finishing by their tenth year (Jaschik, 2007).

ADMISSIONS

Finally, anecdotal and numerical evidence suggests that a smaller and smaller proportion of students in the top quarter of US undergraduate schools seek admission to PhD programs over the past forty years. At Yale, the percentage of all graduating seniors entering graduate and professional study one year after commencement has fallen from 51% in 1960 to 23% in 2008, and the proportion who have entered PhD study has fallen from 16% in 1970 to 7% in 2008 (Yale Graduates Entering Graduate and Professional Study). Only 8% of 2008 University of New Mexico seniors indicated that they intended to pursue any kind of graduate or professional study, suggesting that only 2-3% of New Mexico seniors would intend to pursue PhD programs (College Senior Survey, 2008). Declining PhD admissions prospects compromise efforts to increase graduate student diversity. Families of struggling and underrepresented minorities ask why their sons and daughters should enter seemingly endless, high attrition PhD programs when they could be earning high income after shorter, more successful post-baccalaureate study to become doctors, lawyers, and business men and women (*Broadening Participation*, 2009).

REFORM EFFORTS

Is there help? The superb programs of the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) in Washington, D.C., such as the PhD Completion Project and the Preparing Future Faculty Project have offered

excellent models for PhD reform. And several recent books have probed ways to foster reform in PhD programs. These include *Educating Scholars* (Ehernberg *et al*, 2009), the most comprehensive study of humanities PhD education ever published; a Carnegie Foundation book, *The Formation of Scholars* (Walker *et al*, 2008), which emphasises a more collaborative approach in all PhD fields; and *Three Magic Letters* (Nettles and Millett, 2006) a wide-ranging general study of the American PhD experience.

At Yale, we have focused reform efforts in a 2006-2007 effort called the "2-4 Project" that is being renewed for 2009-2010. This is an internally focused program emphasising collaboration between faculty and students to sort out difficulties commonly occurring between the end of course work in the second year of US PhD study to the start of serious dissertation research by at least the fourth year of graduate study. Many, if not all, programs restructured course work, PhD qualifying examinations, and preliminary dissertation colloquia to help students move past bottlenecks that slowed their entrance into dissertation research, the place where all the preliminaries are swept away and they can finally follow Newton's aim to "keep the subject constantly before me and wait 'till the first dawns open slowly".

CONCLUSION

A long time ago, a kid from a rural Minnesota high school class of forty-four had the unlikely fortune to begin PhD study in history. There I was, sitting on the floor in the book stacks at the University of Minnesota Library, hunched up for hours without interruption, reading seventeenth-century Virginia records that unrolled fateful changes overtaking Europeans and American Indians at what then must have seemed the edge of the earth. For me, the experience seemed like heaven.

Forty years later, perhaps we cannot make PhD study heaven. But we can do better to recover the deep study that a university in the seventeenth-century - already complex, overly bureaucratic, and often unhelpfully idiosyncratic - allowed Newton to pursue. The reason centers not only on the creative creations and discoveries that deep study produce, but on the thoughtfulness, advance of learning, and emphasis on reasoned dialogue that are implicit in deep study. Our times require these virtues in greater quantity than in less. We have an opportunity to think about the virtues of deep study in all aspects of our lives and society. And we have the obligation to reform the PhD programs we oversee to protect and advance the single feature that we know to be their heart: deep study. In the end, deep study is why we all were drawn to graduate school. Ideally, it will be the principal reason new students matriculate every year. We cannot fail them.

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